SOCIAL NETWORKS AS STUDY OBJECT: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE VACCINE PASSPORT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article aims to analyze the response of the academic community and the general population of the municipality of Dourados, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, to the demands imposed by public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on vaccination strategies.

Theoretical framework: The research problematizes the community-vaccine relationship in the context of the beginning of the vaccination process against COVID-19.

Method/design/approach: Involved collecting comments on publications related to the topic on social network websites, such as Instagram and Facebook, from the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD) and the City Hall of Dourados.

Results and discussion: 75 publications were selected, totaling 824 comments, and the data were categorized into different types of comments, such as favorable or contrary to the measures to combat COVID-19, doubts, criticism not related to the vaccine, among others. Results reveal the existence of different positions and opinions in relation to vaccination and measures to combat the pandemic, highlighting the polarization and influence of factors such as trust, risk perception and individual freedom.

Research implications: No social network analyzes were found in the Dourados region, therefore a pioneering study.

Originality value: The study underscores the importance of promoting open dialogue, combating misinformation, and promoting science as a basis for decision-making in public health.

Keywords: Science, COVID-19, Public Health Communication.

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AS REDES SOCIAIS COMO OBJETO DE ESTUDO: CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE O PASSAPORTE DE VACINA

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a resposta da comunidade acadêmica e da população em geral do município de Dourados, no estado de Mato Grosso do Sul, às demandas impostas pelas medidas de saúde pública durante a pandemia de COVID-19, com foco nas estratégias de vacinação.

Referencial teórico: A pesquisa problematiza a relação comunidade-vacina no contexto do início do processo de vacinação contra COVID-19.

Metodologia: A coleta de comentários em publicações relacionados ao tema em redes sociais, como Instagram e Facebook, da Universidade Federal da Grande Dourados (UFGD) e da Prefeitura Municipal de Dourados.

Resultados e discussão: Foram selecionadas 75 publicações, totalizando 824 comentários, e os dados foram categorizados em diferentes tipos de comentários, como favoráveis ou contrários às medidas de combate à COVID-19, dúvidas, críticas não relacionadas à vacina, entre outros. Os resultados revelam a existência de diferentes posições e opiniões em relação à vacinação e às medidas de combate à pandemia, destacando-se a polarização e a influência de fatores como confiança, percepção de risco e liberdade individual.

Implicações da pesquisa: Não foram encontradas análises de redes sociais na região de Dourados, portanto um estudo pioneiro.

Originalidade/valor: O estudo ressalta a importância de promover o diálogo aberto, combater a desinformação e promover a ciência como base para a tomada de decisões em saúde pública.


1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, the evolution of society is marked by the passage of epidemics and pandemics, which impacted/impact on different social scales (Salvador, Souza, & Alves, 2020). In recent years, humanity has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a disease caused by the coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2, which presents a clinical spectrum ranging from asymptomatic infections to severe conditions. This virus has been circulating around the world since the end of 2019, but in March 2020, it was declared a pandemic (Souza, Souza, Furcin & Franco, 2022).

Given the negative impact of the pandemic, during 2020, the development of the stages of scientific studies of vaccines against the new coronavirus was closely monitored. It is noteworthy that four of these studies were carried out in Brazil (Castro, 2021). With the development of vaccines, many uncertainties and fears were created in the population (Matos, 2020; Neto et al., 2020). In this context, the dissemination of fake news has become an adversary of public health, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to coin the term infodemic due to the exponential volume of fake news regarding the Sars-CoV-2 virus (Galhardi, 2022).

Regarding vaccines, distortions and slander were widespread. According to Silva et al. (2023), such diffusion may have contributed to generating, in Brazil, desires and significantly interfered in the acceptability of vaccination by the population, who choose not to be vaccinated...
or to adhere to ineffective treatments without scientific evidence that can bring serious risks to individual and collective health.

Considering the anti-vaccine movements that are structured around the vaccination campaign against the coronavirus; This article aims to analyze how the academic community and the general population of the municipality of Dourados - Mato Grosso do Sul, dealt with the demands imposed by public health measures to combat COVID-19.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, a new variant of the so-called coronavirus emerged, and there was much debate and still debate about the origin of this new variant, SARS-CoV-2. The fact is that the health emergency that in March 2020 would be declared a pandemic emerged in China. Three years later, on May 5, 2023, the same WHO that had declared the pandemic also declared the end of the Public Health Emergency of International Importance (PHEII), a classification it had received in January 2020 (OPAS, 2023).

Throughout this period, there were many social, political, governmental and economic changes across the planet. Some of these changes had already been tested in previous historical circumstances, and others found in the pandemic context an opportune moment to spread more strongly, just like the virus. Among these changes, we can mention remote work (Araújo, Cardoso, Catânio, Andreatta & Paula, 2023) and e-learning (Sukendro, Riyanto, Karwanto & Hartono, 2023), online shopping and services, as well as changes in discourses and narratives, such as the return of geopolitical arguments about national sovereignty and industrial autonomy in sensitive areas, and, especially in Brazil and the United States, debates about mandatory vaccination, the quality of vaccines and a general conspiracism regarding safety and health measures (Furcin & Souza, 2022).

The Brazilian case of reluctance towards vaccination is one that deserves special attention because, according to Carvalho, Massarani and Macedo-Rouet (2021), Brazil is a very different country from countries with more well-established and popular anti-vaccine movements. Analyzing the case of France, the authors realized that one in three French people is reluctant to take vaccinations and sees them as “unsafe”, while in Brazil, around 97% of the population believes in the importance of vaccination for children.

In France, there have been movements related to vaccines and vaccination policies since the 19th century. But more recently, in the 1990s, anti-vaccine groups began to protest the “suspension of vaccination against hepatitis B for adolescents, alleging that such a vaccine generated side effects” (Carvalho, Massarani, & Macedo-Rouet, 2021, p. 500). Later, BCG against tuberculosis was also the target of protests. Currently, mandatory vaccination for the French population is different for those born before and after 2018, due to this resistance to vaccination on the part of a significant portion of the population, and their political mobilization against mandatory vaccinations.

In the Brazilian case, despite the Vaccine Revolt, there are few moments and movements of resistance to vaccination in history. We went from a country that was largely weakened from a social point of view and with a hygienist health policy in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, with all the consequences of slavery and the republican coup, to a country with practically universal acceptance of the vaccine and Immunization culture was not only accepted but widely valued, creating a true “immunological civilization” that was capable of vaccinating more than 80 million people and eradicating smallpox in 1973 (Hochman, 2011).

However, the pandemic context exacerbated certain political stances, linking them to broader political forces within the existing polarization in contemporary Brazilian society. Already at the first signs of COVID-19 as an epidemic with pandemic potential, the then federal government of Brazil began to build a narrative based on the low real impact of the coming
health crisis and the accusation of catastrophism and lies from the media, entities of health and political opponents about the risk of COVID-19, culminating in the resignation of the then Minister of Health, Henrique Mandetta, on April 16, 2020, just over a month after the first death from COVID-19 in the country.

Before, during and after the fall of the Minister of Health, perhaps the first major clash in the long process of politicization of the pandemic by the Brazilian government, other fronts of argument were constructed mobilizing the government's political base, mainly in opposition to social distancing/isolation x economy, use of cocktails and medicines without scientific proof as an incentive not to adhere to distancing measures and reduce the population's perception of risk (Marins, Adorno & Lopes, 2020).

This opposition between the government's position and the position of civil society entities, mainly technical and scientific entities, soon resulted in a dispute of narratives that exacerbated polarization and radicalized the denialist and anti-science discourse of government supporters. The discussion about chloroquine anticipated the big problem that still lay ahead at the end of 2020 and throughout 2021: vaccination. Discussions about vaccination took on the typical contours of the French anti-vaccine movements described by Carvalho, Massarani and Macedo-Rouet (2021), involving questions about civil liberties, questions about the side effects of the vaccine, the mandatory vaccination and sensationalism and misinformation about respect for the entities that research and manufacture vaccines, as well as false cases of adverse reactions.

Trying to define vaccine refusal behavior, MacDonald et al. (2015) present the concept of vaccine hesitancy, as a delay in accepting or refusing vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services. Vaccine hesitancy is complex and context-dependent, varying across time, place and vaccines. It is influenced by factors such as trust, complacency and convenience. In relation to these three factors, the author defines trust as the reliability in three aspects of vaccines, namely: efficacy and safety, the system that delivers and applies them (including health professionals), and the motivations of policy makers. Complacency concerns the perception of risk of diseases prevented by vaccines. If the risk is low and vaccination is not mandatory, complacency tends to be more significant in hesitancy. Convenience is defined as the ease, comfort and low cost of the vaccination service. If access (bureaucratic, geographic, real or perceived) is easy, the cost is low or free, the quality of the service is good, convenience tends to have more influence on low vaccine hesitancy. Furthermore, another issue involving vaccine hesitancy involves a wide spectrum that ranges from the perception of the need for the vaccine and its high demand by society, to the other extreme where there is not a demand, but an absolute refusal of vaccination. Between one end and the other there are a myriad of groups of people who accept some vaccines but not others, or accept a specific type of vaccine but not another type for the same disease, etc.

Without getting too close to the other determinations of this model developed by the SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy, it is possible to identify that in the three main points that involve the determination of vaccine hesitancy (which are also mediated by a) contextual, b) individual and group influences , and c) in relation to the characteristics of the vaccine itself and the specific vaccination, according to MacDonald et al. (2015), there was extensive narrative-building work by the Brazilian federal government in 2020-2022 to undermine confidence in vaccines and vaccination. Questions were asked daily about the effectiveness of vaccines, the supposed adverse effects, the country of origin of the vaccine, the honor of politicians involved in the negotiations to make the vaccine available, the perceived risk of infection and disease, the quality of health services provided, the competence of professionals, etc. (O Globo, 2021).

Even so, compared to the rest of the world, Brazil maintained a relatively low rate of vaccine hesitancy, around 10.5%, with the associated risk factors confirming the model...
presented previously, namely: attaching importance to the effectiveness of the vaccine, fear of adverse reactions, attaching importance to the country of origin of the vaccine, male gender, having children, 9 years or less of schooling, living in the Central-West region, being 40 years old or over and monthly income below US$788.68 (Moore et al., 2021). The risk factor “living in the Central-West region” is of special importance as the case study reported here was carried out in Dourados, in the interior of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, in the Central-West region of Brazil.

The objective of this research was to analyze how the academic community and the general population of the city of Dourados - Mato Grosso do Sul, dealt with the demands imposed by public health measures to combat COVID-19, focused mainly on vaccination strategies. Observe what these responses were and whether there are differences between the groups observed.

2 METHOD

To answer this question, we used the same methodology presented in another article with a similar objective. The first step was to collect comments on posts about the basic theme of the research and then carry out their content analysis (Carvalho, Massarani & Macedo-Rouet, 2021).

To collect the information, the Instagram and Facebook platforms of the Federal University of Grande Dourados6 and the City of Dourados7 were chosen. The posts collected would be from 2021, where vaccination plans began in Brazil. On Facebook and Instagram, a manual search was carried out for posts that aimed to direct the population towards vaccination or mandatory demands such as vaccine passports (control measure taken by bodies, to resume normal activities through the presentation vaccination card, action taken by UFGD).

Based on the previous description, 75 posts were selected, two from UFGD's Instagram, three from UFGD's Facebook, 40 from Dourados City Hall's Instagram, 30 from Dourados City Hall's Facebook, totaling 824 comments. To analyze this data, the content was subjected to a content analysis, the technique underwent modifications over the years, what in the beginning was just an analysis, a systematic and quantitative analysis of the content, is now considered a “study of both content in figures of speech, ellipsis, between the lines, as well as in manifestos” (Campos, 2004, p. 612).

In this sense, the content of the comments was separated into categories, or types that came closest - 1) Comments favorable to measures to combat Covid vaccination; (2) Comments opposing measures to combat Covid vaccination; (3) Questions or guidance regarding the publication; (4) Insufficient content for analysis; (5) Critical unrelated measures to combat Covid vaccination; (6) Comments not related to measures to combat Covid vaccination. In this way, it was possible to quantify the content of the messages and their quantity according to the audience of the posts, thus answering the question opened in the article.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the post located on the official Facebook address of the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD), the post with the theme “Use of the Mask” was selected, published on March 15, 2022, which accompanied the following text:

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6 Instagram UFGD (@ufgdoficial); Facebook https://www.facebook.com/ufgdoficial/
7 Instagram https://www.instagram.com/prefsdourados/; Facebook https://www.facebook.com/prefeituradedourados

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“Regarding municipal decree 1,119 of March 14, 2022, in which the city of Dourados makes the use of facial protection masks optional, the Federal University of Grande Dourados informs that, until an internal study is carried out and published by the media UFGD officials, we will maintain the institution’s current regulations in force. The decision was also taken in accordance with the latest edition of the Epidemiological Surveillance Guide of the Ministry of Health and joint decree No. 20, of June 18, 2020, of the Ministries of Economy and Health. Students and employees: more details about the decision, as well as the links to the Guide and Ordinance, were sent to the institutional email.”

The post received a total of 36 comments, 9 of which were the main comments and another 25 comments in response to the main comments, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Comments analyzed in publications dated March 15, 2022, present on the official UFGD addresses on Facebook and Instagram platforms.
Source: Prepared by the authors.

The classification revealed that 8 of the 9 comments were contrary to the post defending the use of masks. Regarding the official addresses of the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD), on the Facebook and Instagram platforms, four publications were selected with the theme “Vaccination Passport”, two of which were published on January 15, 2022 in a synchronous and identical manner in both platforms and two publications made on January 28, 2022, also synchronously and identically on both platforms.

Publications made on January 15, 2022 were accompanied by the following text:

“Yesterday the members of the Teaching, Research, Extension and Culture Council (CEPEC/UFGD) participated in a meeting lasting more than eight hours, and reached the consensus that teachers, administrative technicians and students who are not immunized against Covid-19 should be prohibited from participating in in-person didactic-pedagogical activities at the University. To enable the identification and survey of the number of employees and students who are not yet immunized, CEPEC also approved the postponement of in-person undergraduate teaching activities. Classes, which would start on February 1st, will resume on February 15th.”
The publication made on the Facebook platform received a total of 15 comments, while the publication made on Instagram received a total of 34 comments. The comments are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comments analyzed in publications from January 15, 2022 present on the official UFGD addresses on Facebook and Instagram platforms. 
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Publications made on January 28, 2022 were accompanied by the following text:

“UFGD supports vaccination against Covid-19. Immunization helps in the fight against the virus. Getting vaccinated is an act of love and respect for others. In a meeting held on 27/01, the members of the Teaching, Research, Extension and Culture Council of the Federal University of Grande Dourados (CEPEC/UFGD) reached the consensus that teachers, administrative technicians and students who are not immunized against covid-19 should be prohibited from participating in in-person didactic-pedagogical activities at the University. Therefore, to participate in in-person classes starting on February 15th, all UFGD students must prove that they are immunized. Students have until 02/04 to fill out the online form, inserting proof of vaccination.”

The publication made on the Facebook platform received a total of four comments, while the publication made on Instagram obtained a total of 19 comments. The analyzed comments are presented in Figure 3.
Figure 3. Comments analyzed in publications from January 28, 2022, present on the official UFGD addresses on Facebook and Instagram platforms. 
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Considering the five publications selected on the official addresses of the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD), on Facebook and Instagram platforms with the theme “vaccination passport”, 72 comments were analyzed, of which the classification revealed that 41.67% (30) were unfavorable to the vaccine passport or vaccination in general, 28.83% (15) were considered favorable and 37.5% (27) belonging to the other classification categories that did not express an opinion. The content analysis of the publications suggests that the majority of individuals engaged in the publications aimed to express an opinion regarding the vaccination passport, of which the majority expressed themselves against it.

All publications were selected for analysis, present at the official addresses of the city hall of Dourados Mato Grosso do Sul, on Facebook and Instagram platforms, which had content directly linked to promotion and awareness regarding vaccination for Covid-19, throughout the period From January 2022 to June 2023, publications that did not contain comments were not analyzed.

Consisting of 30 publications on Facebook with 159 comments and 40 publications on Instagram with 557 comments, totaling 70 publications and 716 comments, of which 4.88% (35) are in favor, 7.26% (52) are against, 89.39% (640) are comments belonging to other classification categories that do not express a direct opinion about the vaccine.

Among the non-opinionated categories, doubts and guidelines stood out, representing 55.31% (396) of the total sample, along with criticisms not related to the vaccine, 14.25% (102). The content analysis of the publications suggests that the majority of individuals engaged in the publications aimed to receive guidance about the municipal vaccination process or report problems experienced throughout the process. However, it was possible to observe a significant contingent of opinionated comments, of which there was a greater incidence of opinions against the vaccine.
Figure 4. Comments in favor of vaccination, analyzed in publications from 01/01/2022 to 06/01/2023, present on the official UFGD addresses on the Facebook and Instagram platforms.
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Considering all selected posts, 75 publications were analyzed, which totaled 824 comments, of which 6.07% (50) were in favor of vaccination, as shown in Figure 4, 9.95% (82) considered against vaccination and 83.98% belonging to other classification categories that do not express direct opinion.

Before starting the discussion, it is necessary to think, a priori, about the space in which the data were obtained. Social networks are open and public communication spaces in which each user has the freedom to express themselves within the permitted fields. In the case of Facebook and Instagram posts, the clipping of a social network that does not necessarily faithfully represent the opinion of the majority of followers of the City Hall and Federal University of Grande Dourados pages. Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that social networks are a place where there is a high incidence of the spread of hate, discord, intolerant and critical positions, where the subject has the advantage of feeling validated in their positions (Quadrado & Ferreira, 2020). Therefore, criticism, hatred and questioning are characteristic of social networks, as can be seen in the highlighted comments. Therefore, the discussion of the data refers to the comments on the selected posts and does not necessarily represent the general opinion of people who follow the pages.

The posts show that on the Facebook and Instagram platforms, comments were more contrary than in favor of policies and decisions regarding the vaccine and prevention of Covid-19. There were more comments against vaccination (9.95%) than in favor (6.07%). These findings can be analyzed through the concept of vaccine hesitancy, in which hesitancy to take the vaccine involves complex factors, especially cultural, social, heuristic thoughts, philosophical and religious issues, distrust of the vaccine and the government, among others (Succi, 2018). When analyzing the content of the posts, it is clear that not only the vaccine is questioned, but also the actions of the Public Authorities. The city hall and the Federal University of Grande Dourados represent Government institutions, and in the comments, there is questioning about the decisions taken by these institutions, as if they were exaggerated or unnecessary.

It was also common in the comments to question each person’s individual freedom about getting vaccinated or following the regulations against Covid-19. Abud and Souza (2020) point out, for example, that in the case of using masks there is a collision of rights: the right to freedom of individual choice and the State on the other, with the collective duty and responsibility for collective health guaranteed by the constitution according to articles 196 and 197 of the
Brazilian Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1989). This collision can also be seen in terms of the vaccination passport requirement and how users responded to this requirement.

The spread of false information and anti-vaccine movements also contributed to the questions. According to Beltrão et al. (2020), the context of the pandemic contributed to a flow of information and accelerated communication promoted by the internet, which allowed the sharing of information and opinions without requiring any scientific proof, in addition to the organization of groups and political activism focused on these issues, such as the of the anti-vaccine. In this sense, Siebert and Pereira (2020) bring the concept of “post-truth” to demonstrate how the context of the pandemic contributed to the strengthening of truths characterized by “political gestures”, linked to well-being and admitting as true information that “confer discursive reinforcement to their ideological-historical position” (p.2). Thus, the decision whether or not to take the vaccine and follow the safety protocols adopted by the Public Power was strongly influenced by a political-ideological scenario, in which the scientific vision was left behind.

Not only vaccination, but the severity of the disease caused by Covid-19 and the severity of the pandemic were also questioned by important and influential figures, such as the President of the Republic at the time. Statements by the president himself such as: “It’s just a little flu”, questions about the vaccine “Only those who are idiots get into the vaccine pile” and about the disease “Anyone who catches the disease is immunized”, and the defense of unproven “effective” treatments by science certainly had influence to create a political scenario in which scientific truth was called into question, as well as the severity of the pandemic, the risk to life caused by the disease, and preventive measures.

In addition, the success of vaccination campaigns in Brazil in past decades contributed to the erasure of memory about their reliability and importance. Succi (2018) argues that, historically speaking, successful campaigns in the past against polio, smallpox, diphtheria and meningitis meant that the population did not have to deal with and live with the consequences of these diseases, and had no memory of the severity, sequelae, which made the need to prevent them less, as well as the decision to vaccinate. This logic certainly applies to the Brazilian Covid-19 scenario and can be found in the comments. Finally, the data collected can be read by multiple factors, such as distrust of the government, the vaccine, the effectiveness of security measures, and clashes over “individual freedom”.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Content analysis of comments on social media revealed a diversity of opinions regarding measures to combat COVID-19 and vaccination. We identified different categories of comments, including those in favor, against, doubts/guidance, insufficient content and criticism unrelated to the vaccine. This demonstrates the complexity and polarization that exists around this topic.

Considering the contrary comments regarding the vaccination process, it is important to recognize that vaccine hesitancy can be influenced by a number of factors, including concerns about the vaccine’s side effects, the effectiveness of the vaccine, and trust in the entities responsible for research and manufacturing of vaccines. These doubts must be addressed in a transparent and accessible way, through information and health education campaigns, in order to provide clarification and dispel myths and misinformation.

It is worth highlighting the criticisms regarding the public vaccination structure, including the bureaucracy involved in the process. The slow distribution of vaccines, the lack of organization in some vaccination sites and the difficulty of access for certain population groups are issues that need to be addressed and improved. It is essential that the responsible
authorities adopt measures to speed up the vaccination process, ensuring an efficient and equitable distribution of doses.

Considering that the main comments against the vaccine passport were against the imposition of vaccination in a mandatory manner, valuing individual freedom above collective health, it is important to highlight that the discussion about individual freedom versus collective health is complex and must be approached with care. Although individual freedom is a fundamental right, it is important to remember that in pandemic situations, public health measures may be necessary to protect the population as a whole. The vaccine passport, for example, can be a strategy to guarantee safety in certain environments and contribute to controlling the spread of the virus.

However, it is essential that these measures are implemented in a transparent manner and based on scientific evidence, respecting individual rights and promoting open and inclusive dialogue. It is necessary to consider the concerns and perspectives of individuals, while seeking to protect society as a whole. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that individual freedom should not be used as a justification for the dissemination of false information and conspiracy theories, which can undermine confidence in vaccination and compromise public health efforts. It is necessary to combat misinformation and promote science as a basis for decision-making.

Social media has played a significant role in disseminating information about vaccination and shaping opinions. However, it is also a context where false information and conspiracy theories emerge, which has contributed to misinformation and the spread of anti-vaccination ideas. This highlights the importance of promoting health education and the dissemination of reliable information to combat misinformation and increase confidence in vaccination, highlighting the need to address vaccination reluctance through effective, evidence-based communication strategies scientific. It is essential to promote awareness about the importance of vaccination, clarify doubts and combat misinformation, in order to ensure the population's adherence to measures to combat COVID-19 and, thus, contribute to the protection of public health.

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