

Priority Messages Related to COVID-19 in Aomori

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Abstract

本稿では青森県内6市の新型コロナウイルス（COVID-19）関連の情報の中で、どんなメッセージが優先的に公式ウェブサイト上に掲載されているか調査した。調査の結果、各市は地域の特性と感染状況に応じて独自の優先順位でメッセージ配信がなされていることが判明した。この結果を多様な背景を持つ市民を受け入れることができる点、危機管理上における自治体の情報提供のあり方の点から考察した。結論として青森県各市はこのメッセージ配信が成功していることをもっと強調してよいと提案する。地元住民は安心でき、青森への旅行者や長期滞在、移住を検討する人には、コロナ禍という危機的な状況でも広汎な情報を手に入れることができる点が強い魅力になると考えるからである。

1. Introduction

This study aims to shed light on the differences in the COVID-19 messages delivered to citizens by the six local governments in Aomori: Aomori City, Hirosaki City, Goshogawara City, Towada City, Mutsu City, and Hachinohe City. Citizens receive various types of messages on COVID-19, such as those on preventative measures, typical symptoms, vaccine reservations, and financial aid. This study examines the prioritization of these messages based on their placement on government websites. From the findings, the study then formulates suggestions for properly publishing COVID-19 messages. The appropriate provision of information by local governments will help bolster the reliability of the government, which can reassure citizens and tourists and even encourage relocation to Aomori.

2. Background

Ezure (2022) investigated prioritized messages related to COVID-19 in six cities and villages in the eastern Aomori area. Among these communities, explicit written messages on the third shot of the COVID-19 vaccine were first released in Hiranai City which is a relatively small community in Aomori. The other larger cities in Aomori eventually offered the same information. In recognition of the need to investigate whether each city in Aomori can set their own priority for delivering different messages, this study focused on which COVID-19 messages were prioritized in larger cities in Aomori.

3. Research

3.1 Target Cities

This study targeted the following cities in Aomori: Aomori City, Hirosaki City, Goshogawara City, Towada City, Mutsu City, Hachinohe City. They are regarded as capital cities in their respective area in Aomori Prefecture; for instance, Aomori City is the capital of Aomori and the eastern Aomori area. The messages in this study were collected from December 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022.

3.2 Methodology

The study collected the daily messages related to COVID-19 cited at the top section of the homepage of official websites in each city. The more important messages were determined to be those presented on the top section of the webpage, as this placement highlighted the crucial information. From the viewpoint of listing items on logical documents, Shinoda, Mathes, and Stevenson (2008, p.90), Kintoku (2012, p.119), and Huckin and Olsen (1991, p.418) suggest the descending order of importance should be used. For acquiring a rhetorical thinking, Corbett and Connors (1999, p.257) indicate it is crucial for us to firstly find out what we should say. Based on these previous discussions, the study assessed the messages placed on the upper side to have more priority among the other messages. In addition, messages with a special banner link designed on the upper part of the websites were regarded as priority messages, because the banners were used for local communities to encourage their citizens to notice the messages. The top three messages of each city were collected for analysis. The dates of the message were based on those cited on the webpages.

3.3 Results

Table 1 shows the top three prioritized messages posted on the official websites of the local governments in Aomori.

Table 1. Top three prioritized messages of the six cities in Aomori

Cities	First message	Second message	Third message
Aomori City	On the third shot of the vaccine	On the PCR test center for citizens without symptoms	On vaccine reservation
Hirosaki City	On the latest vaccination situation	On requests based on the semi-emergency measures	Message of the mayor
Goshogawara City	Messages to citizens not having vaccine shots	On semi-emergency measures	On restrictions for activities in elementary and junior high schools

Towada City	On the latest vaccination situation	On the PCR test center for citizens without symptoms	On the vaccination certificate and closed institutions in Towada
Mutsu City	Press conference materials	On the latest vaccination situation	On financial aid for families with children aged under 18 years
Hachinohe City	On the third shot of the vaccine, the latest vaccination situation	On the vaccination certificate, Message of the mayor	On closed institutions in Hachinohe

In Aomori City, from December 23, 2021, to January 6, 2022, the news cited that several new PCR test venues in the city were open to local citizens and tourists, for preventing the spread of the infection in the whole areas of Aomori.^{1 2} The next priority message was on the third shot of the COVID-19 vaccine and the announcement of slot reservation. This indicated that vaccines were regarded as paramount for preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Aomori City.

In Hirosaki City, the latest update regarding the vaccination was announced first. The situation reported here included the percentages of people who received the vaccine and provided encouragement for those citizens who had not yet received their shot to seek vaccination as soon as possible. In addition, they requested the citizens to observe preventative measures, such as wearing a mask and washing their hands. The third priority was given to the message of the mayor. It contained the same requests to the citizens as mentioned above. This repeated messaging may have been effective in urging citizens to notice the crisis in Hirosaki City. Since larger clusters and positive cases were reported there, the government announced restrictions on around 1,000 restaurants, diners, and bars. Judging from this messaging, the mayor and the staff of the Hirosaki government emphasized the need to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the city.³

Goshogawara City set a priority on the message to citizens who had not received their vaccine shots. The government thought the shots were crucial for the prevention of the spread of the virus, as evident by the prioritization of this message on their website⁴. The second priority message consisted semi-emergency measures. It was released for the purpose of appealing to the citizens to observe preventative measures in case the semi-emergency measures needed to be applied in the city. In the end, the measures were not introduced, although the local government expressed their policy to address the citizens' demands.⁵ The third message was regarding the restrictions on activities at elementary and junior high schools. Elementary pupils and junior high school students experienced difficulties in observing preventative measures at school. For instance, they were instructed to remain

silent when eating lunch to avoid spreading droplets and to maintain a safe distance from one another during ground exercises. These restrictions were found to be effective for the prevention of the spread of the virus from schools to homes. This message was especially emphasized during March and April since the new academic year starts on April 1 in Japan. The term of restrictions at school was extended until April 8, after which the restrictions were relaxed to some extent.

Towada City initially focused on the latest vaccination situation and encouraged citizens to receive a shot as soon as possible. However, on December 20, they announced the opening of new PCR test venues and the release of vaccination certificates for travel purposes. These new messages were posted to coincide with the New Year holidays in Japan. The local government intended to use the new test venues and certificates to investigate the number of positive cases during the holiday season accurately and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, Towada City widely provided closed facilities such as conference rooms and recreation spaces to citizens. The city often posted messages about closed institutions and events as well as financial aid for restaurants and stores in the city at the top position. Therefore, the city can be thought to more focus on these kinds of the messages although the other cities here often offered the financial aid, and sometimes announced close institutions and events with the lower priority.

Mutsu City had various channels for delivering public information. They released the latest news via an official city Twitter account and the mayor's official account, as well as their websites and YouTube official channel, "Mutsu-channel." In addition to the daily news summary of the city and COVID-19, materials offering detailed information were provided on the top section of their website. The positive cases in Mutsu and percentage of vaccinated citizens were given second priority in the positioning of messages. Finally, the procedure of applying for financial aid for families with children aged under 18 years was posted on their website, given the third priority based on website placement. In addition, Mutsu City posted a message on the event "Seijin-shiki." This event was crucial to young citizens aged 20 years and their family to celebrate their growth into adults. After the widespread vaccination across Japan, some cities, including Mutsu City, strongly recommended the practice of preventive measures (e.g., wearing a mask, bringing a vaccination certificate, and keeping distance) at venues of large events to avoid the spread of COVID-19 among young citizens.

Hachinohe City provided top priority to information on the third shot and the latest situation regarding positive cases. Offering these messages encouraged the citizens to take the shot and practice the preventative measures. During the holiday season in December, the government delivered information on the publication of vaccination certificates for people returning to their homes. Since Hachinohe area has some traffic networks to larger cities such as Tokyo, and a lot of visitors easily access to the city in a short period, the messages can be prioritized. When the positive cases were reported to be increasing, a message from the mayor was posted on the official website. The message urged the citizens to practice preventative measures as well as introduced several financial aid

protocol including what kind of messages and to whom we deliver in the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Casto (2023, p.90) mention that "...if a leader can identify the elements of the crisis, they can tailor their strategy to best respond." From these viewpoints, it can be thought successful that covering the wide range of the measures against COVID-19 in Aomori cities and announcing them on the top section of homepage based on the policies and leadership of each city's mayors. Furthermore, this successful messaging can be attractive for local citizens and potential ones because of an easy access to the information they need without being at the mercy of third party websites' content prioritization (Hargittai 2004, p.73).

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the prioritized messages related to COVID-19 in six cities in Aomori. Each city set their own priority based on their local situation, and their respective methodologies can be deemed successful. However, the scope of this research is limited. Also, the assessment of delivering messages might be changed if the COVID-19 situation is dramatically changed. Further research on the other cities and villages in Aomori should be conducted in the future.

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Notes

¹ In Japan, the period between December 20 and January 3 of the next year is a major holiday season for families to celebrate the new year. Many people return to their hometowns across Japan. Aomori City is a central traffic network in Aomori with hub railway stations, airports, and ferry ports. This means a lot of passengers are visiting at Aomori and going outside. These passengers may spread COVID-19 virus around Japan and the world. Therefore, Aomori Prefecture set new temporary PCR test venues in railway stations, airports, and other government buildings for preventing the spread.

² People with clear symptoms, such as high fever and severe cough, were prohibited to go to these temporary test venues in Japan. Instead, they were guided to call a reception or a hospital first and go to the institution for people potentially infected with COVID-19.

³ The Sankei News posted an article on October 20, 2020, which told that large cluster cases were spreading in Hirosaki City and the city asked aid to the Aomori Prefecture Government. A prefecture means a larger administrative unit in Japan.

⁴ Goshogawara City had announced the reservation of the vaccine shot and the vaccination rate of the citizens in Aomori at the top section of their webpage from August 26 to November 16 in 2021. The

next day, On November 17, “messages to citizens not having vaccine shot” was started to post at the cite. In addition, the city clearly has stated that it encourages as many citizens as possible to vaccinate. Therefore, it can be thought that Goshogawara City emphasized the vaccination and prevention against COVID-19.

⁵ The local chamber of commerce filed a requisition to the mayor on October 20, 2021. The requisition stipulated the provision of financial aid for continually running stores, introducing a computer network for teleworking, publishing coupons for purchasing items at local stores, and holding events, for the purpose of stimulating the local economy after the pandemic.

⁶ “Integrated Regional Information in Hachinohe City” (<https://www.hachinohe.jp/>) announces various events in Hachinohe. This website showed that there were three to four events on weekdays and more than five events on weekends planned in December 2021.

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programs. In addition, closed institutions in Hachinohe were announced. Given that Hachinohe is one of the cities where large-scale events are often held and has many institutions in Aomori, messages on canceled events and pending services about recreation rooms were deemed important.⁶

Each city set their own priorities for delivering messages related to COVID-19 based on their own facilities and situations. During the holiday season in December and January, the local governments introduced new PCR test venues and a vaccination certificate system for preventing the spread of COVID-19 in their areas (Aomori City, Towada City, and Hachinohe City). These cities predicted that more residents and visitors moved and tried to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Hirosaki City, Goshogawara City, Towada City, and Hachinohe City encouraged people to observe preventative measures with messages from mayors and some cities announced the closure of institutions. Mutsu City positively offered their messages with their Twitter and YouTube accounts. Then, the materials were used in media conferences broadcasted by the channels posted on their website. Since January 2021, the local governments in Aomori have promoted various preventative measures and financial aid programs. They have highly improved their methodology of properly delivering a wide variety of messages to their citizens.

4. Discussion

From the findings, this study formulates some suggestions. For one, local governments should leverage their successful provision of COVID-19 messages in attracting migrants and tourists as well as residents. Day and Schuler (2004, p.14) advocate that community policy aims to valorize and celebrate cultural diversity, and community practice is a method of promoting policies that encourage the planning and building, and sustainability of healthy community. To develop Aomori areas sustainably, messages should be delivered for citizens with various backgrounds. Based on keeping this policy, citizens can form a good impression of the local government and feel that they live more safely. For domestic and international tourists, proper messaging can alleviate the uneasiness of having no access to COVID-19 information in Aomori. From the viewpoint of encouraging people to stay longer or even relocate to Aomori, receiving as many messages as they would in other large cities is crucial. It is because, along with keeping the deliver of messages to a wide variety of audience including visitors who stay there contemporary or longer, the cities can positively define themselves as that they welcome visitors and migrants to flourish Aomori.

Furthermore, local governments in this study can provide a wide range of messages against COVID-19, from the vaccination to economical aid for stores and families. This wide variety identifies the features and policy of each area. this situation can be differentiated from smaller councils of England in a normal situation, which primarily focus on social housing and waste collection (Wilson 2005, p.157). Hence, as Cappozi and Rucci (2013, p.121) point out, we need to establish our crisis

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