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# Laboring to communicate: Use of migrant languages in COVID-19 awareness campaign in Qatar

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**Abstract:** This study examines the communication strategies employed by Qatar’s government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study contributes to a growing body of work on the sociolinguistics of crisis communication. We focus on the use of South and Southeast Asian languages, spoken largely by blue-collar migrant workers, which are often seen as peripheral even though they are spoken by a large segment of the population. The deployment of these languages during Qatar’s COVID-19 awareness campaign assumes further significance against the backdrop of a series of measures taken by the government in the last few years to strengthen the status and use of Arabic. We analyze multilingual printed pamphlets, multilingual audio-visual communication through radio and social media, as well as interviews conducted with key figures who were part of the awareness campaign. Our examination of the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of the multilingual awareness materials reveals that while the different languages and modes of communication were important in spreading awareness, equally critical, if not more, was who carried the information and in what forms. We show the significant roles community and religious leaders and social media influencers played in disseminating the awareness information to the diverse migrant language communities.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, migrant languages, language policy in Qatar, Covid-19, communication and culture, multilingualism

## 1 Introduction

While much recent work in sociolinguistics has focused on the symbolic function of language, the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to swiftly contain it has brought

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into sharp relief the importance of the communicative function of language, as the degree of success depends on the diffusion of preventive information to all sections of society. While everyone can be at risk in a pandemic, minorities, displaced peoples, and migrant worker populations are potentially at greater risk as they, in addition to other factors, face linguistic barriers in communication coupled with social and economic inequalities (Godoy and Wood 2020; Piller et al. 2020; Tan and Said 2015; Uekusa 2019). COVID-19 has shown that the failure of one community is the failure of all, and governments, therefore, must ensure that health awareness information is delivered to everyone.

This study contributes to a relatively underexplored but growing body of work on crisis or disaster communication and what Piller (2020b), with particular reference to COVID-19 has termed “crisis sociolinguistics.” Depending on how multilingualism is perceived and used, it can be both an impediment and a resource for communication in times of crises, like the one created by COVID-19 (McCulloch 2020). Despite the criticality of crisis communication, there are only a few studies that deal with it from a sociolinguistic perspective (Piller et al. 2020). Declercq and Federici (2020: 1) note, “not enough contemporary research in intercultural communication has dedicated debates or publications to intercultural interactions and multilingual communication in emergencies, disasters, and more broadly, *crises*”. Since COVID-19 impacts healthcare, this study is also useful to practitioners in the field of health communication where language, culture, and potential communication barriers they create are contributory factors to the perception of the quality of health care and health disparities (Ali and Watson 2018; Almutairi 2015; de Moissac and Bowen 2019; Wallington 2014).

The danger of miscommunication due to language barriers is quite serious in the State of Qatar, which has a very unusual demographic composition whereby the Arabic-speaking nationals constitute only about 11% of the total population of 2.8 million. Two-thirds of the non-nationals do not speak Arabic, the official language of the country. A vast majority of them are semi-literate, blue-collar workers and do not speak English as a lingua franca either; they speak their own languages as diverse as Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tagalog, Tamil, Sinhalese, and Nepali. Based on an analysis of a variety of data sources that include multilingual awareness material in both oral and written forms, interviews with radio station officials and participants involved in Qatar’s COVID-19 awareness campaign, this study examines the efforts and strategies used by the government ministries in Qatar to overcome language and cultural barriers in delivering awareness information to the linguistically and culturally diverse migrant workers. We further note the significance of the deployment of multilingual resources by Qatar’s government as it came on the heels of major policy changes that strengthen the status and use of Arabic, including the promulgation of the Arabic Language

Protection Law in 2019, which has made the use of Arabic mandatory in many official domains (Amiri Diwan 2019).

We focus on the use of South and Southeast Asian migrant languages, referred to by van Den Hoven and Carroll (2016) as “peripheral languages” in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Speakers of these languages often have less access to information than those proficient in Arabic and English and as Hopkyns (2020) describes within the neighboring context of the United Arab Emirates, they are “vulnerable due to language-based discrimination at multiple levels.” The need for effective communication transcending the existing language barriers is thus critical in a crisis situation such as the one faced during COVID-19 in which lack of information could contribute to the spread of the virus leading to more infections and deaths.

## 2 Crisis communication and sociolinguistics

Communication, as an essential form of intercultural interaction, is crucial during times of disasters, crises, and health emergencies. This type of communication involves the “production of public messages designed to create specific responses by the public” (Reynolds and Seeger 2005: 47) and “seeking to limit, contain, mitigate, and reduce public harm” (p. 48). Haddow and Haddow (2014: 73–74) outline a number of principles of a successful communications strategy during a crisis, such as using clear language, recognizing language and cultural differences, identifying trusted community leaders who can help facilitate communications, and using appropriate media to reach people. Yet, as Declercq and Federici (2020) argue, this area of research remains under-explored, particularly the complexity that multilingualism can potentially create. Similarly, Federici and O’Brien (2020: 4) write, “investigations of the depth, breadth, and duration of the impact that the language barrier has over communication in the different phases of cascading crises remain to be carried out.” Piller et al. (2020) discuss how multilingual crisis information can be evaluated based on availability (available in multiple languages), accessibility (available on multiple platforms and multiple modes in relevant languages), acceptability (information is accurate and appropriate), and adaptability (information can be adapted as situations shift) (see O’Brien et al. 2018; O’Brien and Federici 2019).

Piller (2020a) highlights how COVID-19 “forces us to take linguistic diversity seriously” since there is a need to get eight billion people who speak over 6,000 languages to comply with hygiene and social distancing recommendations and governments often operate in only one or two national languages. She argues that the sociolinguistic issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic around the world

have created an emerging research agenda for a crisis sociolinguistics of the pandemic. Responding to this research agenda, in this study we focus primarily on the availability, acceptability, and accessibility of COVID-19 communication in Qatar, namely (1) choice of language and mode of communication, (2) building trust in the message, and (3) mediums for information dissemination. However, we also consider the adaptability of Qatar's multilingual crisis communication strategy as the country faced challenges with compliance of COVID-19 safety measures.

## 2.1 Language and mode of communication

Studies in crisis communication have shown that not all segments of society understand official languages of countries in spoken and/or written forms (Lha 2020; O'Brien and Cadwell 2018). In a study of disaster signage in Japan, Tan and Said (2015) show that tsunami emergency evacuation signs in English were not sufficient to ensure safety of foreign-born and temporary visitors to Japan who do not read Japanese or English. In a study of the relationship between translation and comprehension of crisis communication in Kenya, O'Brien and Cadwell (2018) tested comprehension levels of both rural and urban Kenyans on an Ebola health-related crisis text, and despite English being an official language of Kenya, their participants understood the text translated into Kiswahili better than the English source text. O'Brien and Cadwell also found that their Kenyan participants had a preference for the spoken mode of communication over the written one. Similarly, Lha (2020) shows that in her Tibetan regions of western Sichuan Province, many people including elders did not understand Mandarin well, and therefore volunteers had to translate COVID-19 awareness information from Mandarin into local languages. Hopkyns (2020) reveals how English is usually the only language used for make-shift or hand-written COVID-19-related messages in the UAE, which excludes a large segment of the population. Mcculloch (2020) further argues that ignoring community languages in favor of only official languages can be counterproductive for spreading health awareness.

In Qatar, what adds to the precarious situation of migrant workers is that a large number of them are barely literate, and therefore the written modes of communication in their own languages are not effective either. Disseminating information in different community languages and in different modes makes it more accessible and also helps to cross cultural barriers and develop trust during times of crisis.

## 2.2 Building trust in the message

In addition to the choice of language in crisis and health communication, studies have further shown that trust impacts people's willingness to receive and comply with the message. Reynolds and Seeger (2005) describe how credibility impacts effectiveness of the messages. They explain that "messages are more effective when they are strategically matched to audience needs, values, background, culture, and experience" (p. 45). Crisis and health communication has to take sociocultural factors into consideration and overcome social and cultural differences (Declercq and Federici 2020; Fairhead 2016; Napier et al. 2014). Haddow and Haddow (2014: xxi) write, "people take information differently, process information differently, and act on information differently." They recommend partnering with community-based organizations and building neighborhood communication networks with activists and volunteers who create digital and social media and actually go door-to-door. For example, Fairhead (2016) argues that there was resistance to Ebola response initiatives in the Upper Guinea forest region, such as isolating the sick and making burials safe, due to an unsettling of social accommodations related to culture and local sense-making. Fairhead (2016) and Anoko (2014) both show this importance of building locally-appropriate interventions during the West African Ebola epidemic. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bai (2020) shows how minoritized Mongolians felt a stronger emotional response to COVID-19 public health messages marred with traditional Mongolian fiddle stories, and Chen (2020) shows how classical Chinese poetry helped facilitate intercultural communication and connectivity during the pandemic.

## 2.3 Mediums for information dissemination

The medium of crisis and health communication is equally important. In today's world, both top-down and bottom-up strategies for getting information out to the public during crises goes beyond traditional press releases and situation reports distributed via television, radio, and printed newspapers, and focuses heavily on digital and social media, particularly since social media use rises during crises. Haddow and Haddow (2014) write that new technology has "profoundly altered the flow of information, undermined the traditional gatekeepers, and replaced the centralized, top-down model used by the government and professional media with a more interactive exchange that empowered citizens and created ad hoc distributive information networks" (p. 55). The government no longer has control over what and when information is shared, and audiences are no longer passive; they

actively participate in creating and disseminating news. For example, Hopkyns (2020) describes how in the UAE, an Indian expatriate teenager, Suchetha Satish, has been spreading COVID-19 awareness online through composing songs in 21 different Indian languages. Zhang and Wu (2020) discuss the role of social media in Wuhan China in terms of crowdsourcing volunteer translators for multilingual COVID-19 communication efforts.

This is critical to the context of Qatar since a study of media consumption behavior in the Arab World by Northwestern University in Qatar (Dennis et al. 2019) found that 99% of Asian expatriates seek health information online and 44% of Asian expatriates get their news from Facebook. The study further showed that different social groups use different social media platforms, such that the use of FB in Qatar is highest among Asian expatriates (86%), followed by Arab expatriates (54%) and Qataris (30%). However, the use of Twitter was very low among Asian expatriates (7%) and Qataris use Twitter only slightly more (10%). The study also showed the popularity of WhatsApp among Asian expats (93%) as a tool of communication. In this study, we show how Qatar galvanized both traditional and new media platforms for dissemination of knowledge about COVID-19.

### 3 Sociolinguistic background of Qatar

Qatar has a population of around 2.8 million<sup>1</sup> people and currently has the highest number of foreign nationals in the GCC states, who constitute 89.5% of the total population of Qatar. Qatar's Planning and Statistics Authority do not publish data on nationality or ethnicity groups of foreign nationals.<sup>2</sup> According to the 2019 report of a private consulting firm company, there are 94 different nationalities currently residing in Qatar. Qatari nationals constitute only 10.5% of the total population, and their percentage of the total population continues to be on a downward trend as the need for labor increases.

Of the non-national population, non-Arabs continue to increase. With a population of 700,000, Indians constitute by far the largest nationality group in Qatar, making up 21.8% of the total, of which 400,000 are estimated to be Malayali speakers from the southern Indian state of Kerala. Bangladeshis and Nepalis also currently surpass the percentage of Qatari nationals, both groups individually making up 12.5% of the total population, and residents from the Philippines, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are the next largest non-Arab expatriate groups in Qatar (see Table 1). When grouped all together, South/Southeast

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1 <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/qatar-population/> (accessed on 8/6/2020).

2 <https://priyadsouza.com/population-of-qatar-by-nationality-in-2017/> (accessed on 8/6/2020).

Asians constitute approximately 65% of the total population of Qatar and form the majority of the workforce, and Arabs around only 28%.

Obtaining Qatari citizenship is not an option for the majority of residents working in Qatar. Those without a Qatari passport are referenced as “non-Qataris”, “non-nationals”, “foreign nationals”, “migrant workers”, “expatriates”, “foreign residents”, “laborers”, or “guest workers, although these terms can index different class and racial meanings (Ahmad 2016; Vora 2012). The vast majority of the non-national workforce are young Asian males who have been recruited by agencies to come and work in temporary positions like construction and reside in shared housing accommodations in areas such as the Industrial Area and the newly developed Asian Town on the outskirts of Doha. Besides the construction sector, blue-collar workers can be found employed as drivers, cooks, gardeners, security, and so forth (Diop et al. 2017).

### 3.1 Languages in Qatar

Arabic is the official language of Qatar, but English acts as a *de facto* second official language and is widely used as a lingua franca. However, as Piller (2017) describes in her sociolinguistic account of Dubai, “the statement ‘Arabic is the official language of the UAE’ hides more than it reveals” and “the statement ‘English is the lingua franca of Dubai’ equally conceals as much as it reveals” (p. 15). Hillman and Ocampo Eibenschutz (2018) describe multiple Arabic(s) and Englishes in Qatar that mix with each other and other expatriate languages. These languages include Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Tamil, Balochi, Urdu, Tagalog, Indonesian,

**Table 1:** Population and percentage of major nationality groups in Qatar in 2019.

	Nationality	Population	% of total
Non-Arab	India	700,000	21.8%
	Bangladesh	400,000	12.5%
	Nepal	400,000	12.5%
	Philippines	236,000	7.35%
	Pakistan	150,000	4.7%
	Sri Lanka	140,000	4.35%
	Others	310,000	8.8%
	Arab	Qatar	333,000
Egypt		300,000	9.35%
Others		257,000	8.15%

Persian, Sinhalese, Amharic, Swahili, French, and Pashto, among others. Hillman (2019: 178) describes that English is the most prestigious lingua franca in Qatar, but other languages such as Hindi and Urdu operate as less prestigious lingua francas even though they have often appeared as “peripheral” (van Den Hoven and Carroll 2016) in terms of language planning and policy in Qatar. Hindi is a significant language across the GCC, and this was the reason the Abu Dhabi court accepted Hindi as the third official language in labor courts, despite the fact that Malayalam speakers are the largest language-group in the UAE (Ahmad 2019). It is worth noting that there is also a spoken form of Urdu-Hindi that is used as a medium of communication between workers speaking different languages. Theodoropoulou (2020) found that blue-collar workers in Qatar who speak languages as diverse as Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Bengali use this Urdu–Hindi lingua franca. The presence of many languages and cultures has, however, contributed to a sense of fear of loss of Arabic across the GCC and among Qatari nationals.

### 3.2 Strengthening the status and use of Arabic

The unprecedented economic boom in the GCC over the last two decades and a spike in the number of different ethnicities and languages due to guest workers has led to dramatic social, economic, demographic, and psychological changes, which have created fears and concerns about preservation of Arabic language and identity (Ghalyoun 2009). Governments and the civil societies in GCC countries have discussed the issue in many seminars, conferences, and media reports (e.g., Al-Daihani and Al-Anazi 2000; Aljazeera 2010; Al-Najjar 2013; Ghalyoun 2009). Baqar (2013) mentions several factors that contribute to the loss of Arabic identity among the future generations including the numerical dominance of expatriates, diminished use of Arabic in the public and private sectors, including education, and the influences of nannies and house-hold workers on language as well as values (p. 11).

Given the growing concerns about the fear of loss of Arabic, Qatar has more recently engaged in a number of Arabization policies. In 2012, an Emiri decree made Arabic mandatory on all public signs, although the use of other languages was permitted (Al-Khidhr 2012). This is similar to Bill 86 of Canada that allowed use of languages other than French on public signs in Quebec (Backhaus 2008). Arabic was also reinstated as the medium of instruction in K-12 education as well as Qatar University in all social science subjects (Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019). This abrupt shift followed an unsuccessful trial of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) following an educational reform launched in 2003. A third major policy change was the Arabization of bills and receipts in 2016. This made it mandatory for



businesses in Qatar to use Arabic as the main language for product labels, service lists, issuing receipts, and call center services for customers. The most comprehensive milestone, however, is the 2019 Arabic Language Protection Law. It requires, among other measures, that ministries, government agencies, and public entities and institutions use Arabic as the primary language in all their functions. A fine of 50,000 Qatari Riyal can be imposed if some of these articles are violated. On the ground though, migrant languages were not completely invisible before COVID-19.

### 3.3 Use of migrant languages prior to COVID-19

Qatar's Primary Health Care Corporation's helpline has been available in Malayalam, Tagalog, Urdu, English, and Arabic (Gulf Times 2015). Similarly, Metrash, a government mobile app that allows online solutions to many issues related to visa, residency, motor registration, and so forth has been available in six languages including Urdu and Malayalam (Chandran 2019). Government ministries and government-owned companies have also occasionally used Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, and Tagalog in various awareness posters. Theodoropoulou (2020) shows the role of language in multilingual blue-collar workplaces and the relationship between policy and practice in Qatar. The construction workers in her study did not speak much Arabic or English, but these were the working languages of their higher management. She found that the everyday communicative practices on the construction site were more complex and creative multilingualism became the norm "for the safety of everybody involved" (p. 21).

Migrant languages have also had some presence on radio in Qatar before COVID-19. Qatar Media Corporation (QMC) is the national broadcasting authority that oversees media operations in Qatar. In addition to the Qatar TV and Al-Kaas Sports TV channels, it directly oversees the six government radio channels, namely Qatar Radio, Quran Radio, *Sawt Al-Khaleej* in Arabic, QBS in English, FM 107 in Urdu, and Oryx Radio in French. It also oversees the private radio stations FM 98.6 and Radio Suno 91.7 in Malayalam, Radio Olive 106.3 and One FM Radio 89.6 in Hindi, and Qabayan 94.3 in Tagalog. It is important to note here that the Urdu station has had listeners not only from Pakistan, but India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Iran (Haroon 2018). Radio Olive, the first private Hindi radio station boasts an audience of over 1.8 million listeners and viewers and caters to Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Nepali expatriate communities (Radio this Month 2020). Radio as a media is quite significant for the migrant population in Qatar as it transcends the boundaries of literacy. Amir Ali, the managing director of Radio Suno argued, "Not many people from the subcontinent are literate, but even

though they can't read or write, they can still understand" (Chaudhary 2018). Moreover, many South Asian workers in Qatar have jobs as drivers, manual laborers and domestic workers, and they can listen while doing their job. While migrant languages have had some presence in the media landscape, we show that their use increased significantly during Qatar's COVID-19 campaign.

## 4 Data collection and analysis

We collected multiple sources of data during the period from March through June 2020. Our data collection consists of over 100 different multilingual communication materials, including printed materials posted on the social media accounts and websites of Qatar's ministries; multilingual oral communication including social media videos and announcements made on migrant language radio stations in Qatar; and messages delivered through cultural, religious, and media personalities in Qatar. The multilingual communication materials were also supplemented with interview data gathered from key figures involved in the COVID-19 awareness campaign, including six officials of the radio stations, two community leaders, and the Assistant Director of the QMC. Drawing on the multilingual crisis communication dimensions of availability, acceptability, accessibility, and adaptability (Piller et al. 2020), we analyzed languages available, modes of language available, carriers of the messages, the medium of the messages, and calculated descriptive statistics of social media postings of multilingual awareness materials and view counts. The following questions guided our analysis:

- 1) Was multilingual crisis information made easily available?
- 2) Was multilingual crisis information delivered on different platforms and in multiple modes, in relevant languages?
- 3) Was multilingual crisis information appropriate? Did it build credibility and trust needed for compliance?
- 4) Was Qatar able to adapt its multilingual crisis communications based on the shifting situation?

In this paper, however, we do not focus on an in-depth analysis of the content of messages or the translation strategies.

## 5 Findings

The data we analyze from Qatar shows that as critical as the language of crisis and health communication is, equally critical if not more is who carries it and in what

form. Below we show that, after some incidents of non-compliance with laws of social distancing came to light, the government quickly realized that it was not enough to create messages in multiple languages. It is important that the message is delivered to the migrant population by the members who carry social and cultural capital. It also became clear that printed words were not sufficient, especially because of the low literacy levels of blue-collar workers, but also because printed words are detached from the speakers and the social trust they create.

## 5.1 Multilingual COVID-19 awareness campaigns in Qatar

On February 29, 2020, Qatar reported its first case of COVID-19; more cases continued to be announced daily, but on March 10, 2020, there was a significant increase of 238 new confirmed cases, bringing the total to 262. Qatar announced that this spike was due to positive cases among three migrant workers in shared accommodations. It was during this time frame when the government ministries along with QMC started various multilingual COVID-19 awareness campaigns in languages beyond just Arabic and English, such as Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, Bengali, Tagalog, Tamil, Sinhalese, Indonesian, and Nepali. QMC launched an awareness campaign on social media to “educate residents of different nationalities about the risks of the coronavirus and the necessary precautions” and it particularly targeted community members who do not know Arabic or English (Qatar Tribune 2020).

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, the Editor-in-Chief of a leading English language newspaper the *Gulf Times* serves as the assistant director of QMC. While discussing the role of foreign language media in Qatar on a local program called Doha 360, al-Mudahka stressed how important it was to partner with the radio stations to fight misinformation and deliver the correct information to people. Soon after Qatar diagnosed its first COVID-19 case, he called a meeting of the directors of all radio stations and stressed the need to work with the community members to ensure that the awareness campaign was successful. The other participant, K. C. Abdul Latheef, the Vice Chairman of FM Malayalam 98.6 was asked about the role that foreign language media in general, and his channel in particular, played in the awareness campaign. He responded by saying that the media received instructions from authorities to help spread awareness messages through all the radio channels. He proudly mentioned how he and his team created a new Bengali language channel on FM 95.3 to assist the campaign as there did not exist any radio stations for Bengali speakers (*Foreign Media in times of Corona* Al-Jamili n.d.).

Additionally, the *Gulf Times* in collaboration with Radio Olive and Suno Network, Qabayano Radio, and FM 107 launched a health awareness campaign,

“Come Together, Overcome Together” in Hindi, Nepali, Tagalog, Malayalam, Sinhalese, and Urdu. Although the stations involved are private and rely on advertisement, the campaign was a non-profit initiative. In an interview with the radio, Kumar of Radio Olive and Suno Network said that they considered this as part of their corporate social responsibility. This helped the radio stations win listenership as well, which plays an important role in attracting advertisements, their main source of revenue.

We also asked Faisal al-Mudahka to tell us more about the multilingual campaign led by QMC. In response to our question, he admitted that when he started to study the demographics of Qatar, he was surprised to learn that Indians alone speak so many languages. He was under the impression that most people understood Urdu. He further added that he learned that English is not really an international language understood by everyone. This led to the realization that there is a communication gap because of linguistic barriers. He provided the example of how there were rumors circulating among blue-collar workers that people with COVID-19 who had their visas expired, would be deported, which made them not report COVID-19 symptoms for fear of deportation. These factors convinced al-Mudahka that an aggressive campaign in the languages of the workers was needed.

In addition to QMC, other government departments involved in the campaign were the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor and Social Affairs (MADLSA), Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, The Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning, and the Government Communication Office (GCO). Various campaigns were launched in collaboration between government ministries. For example, the first video campaign by doctors from HMC was jointly launched by HMC and MoPH. The MoPH and MOI became extremely active on Facebook and MoPH opened its first Instagram page.

A National Volunteering Campaign was also created with over 30,000 volunteers to provide various medical, logistical, and public awareness support during the pandemic, including translation of awareness materials. Other campaigns such as the National Human Rights Committee campaign also showed a commitment “to reaching all expat communities and communicating in the different languages they speak” (QNA 2020b). What was striking about the multilingual campaign was that her excellency Lolwah Alkhater, Assistant Foreign Minister and spokesperson for the Supreme Committee for Crisis Management, began to share slogans of solidarity such as “stronger together” in the languages of the expatriate communities on her Twitter account. In an interview with France 24 English TV channel on May 25, 2020, she attributed Qatar’s low COVID-19 fatality rate due to aggressive campaigning in nine different languages. This clearly shows

that use of migrant languages was a well-planned decision (France 24 2020). On June 11, 2020, she reiterated the role that multilingual campaigns played in keeping the fatality rate low in a webinar with Swiss Business Council, Qatar. She further added that a dedicated hotline was created which was serviced by people who spoke migrant languages.

## 5.2 Using migrant languages in different modes

Shortly after the spread of COVID-19 to Qatar, the government started to create health awareness messages in migrant languages containing precautions against the virus, which included washing hands frequently, covering mouth and nose while sneezing, avoiding touching nose, mouth, and eyes, and staying away from sick people. Some sporadic content notwithstanding, the first COVID-19 awareness content in migrant languages became available on March 13, in which health professionals from HMC provided critical information in Nepali, Tagalog, Hindi, Malayalam, Sinhalese, and Urdu languages. Videos in Tamil, French, and Bengali were soon added (Table 2). Interestingly, HMC made a few videos in sign language as well. It was remarkable to see awareness material by health professionals in 10 migrant languages available in the first stage of the pandemic. These videos were posted on the FB page of HMC and on other social media platforms such as Twitter and FB Pages of MOI, MoPH, Radio Olive, Radio Suno, Urdu Radio, Malayalam Radio, and Tagalog Radio.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these videos, radio stations in Arabic, English, and migrant languages started to educate people.

**Table 2:** Covid-19 awareness videos by HMC health professionals.

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Date posted</b>
1	Dr. Ilder Casmurlo	Tagalog	March 13
2	Rama Uprery	Nepali	March 13
3	Dr. Sanjay Doiphode	Hindi	March 13
4	Dr. Kadavil Chacko	Malayalam	March 13
5	Dr. Hasan Ahmedullah	Urdu	March 13
6	Dr. Fathima Shezoon Mohideen	Sinhalese	March 13
7	Dr. Mohammad Jawahir Marikkar	Tamil	March 18
8	Dr. Amina Bougaila	French	March 21
9	Dr. Mashuk Uddin	Bengali	March 21

<sup>3</sup> These videos are available on HMC's Facebook page. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/hamadmedicalcorporation/videos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/hamadmedicalcorporation/videos/?ref=page_internal).

The first large-scale printed awareness pamphlet entitled, “Protect yourself and others from infection” using the migrant languages Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam, Nepali, Sinhalese, Tagalog, Tamil, and Urdu appeared on March 21, 2020. These posters were bilingual, as seen in Figure 1, in a migrant language and English, except for the pamphlets in Hindi and Malayalam. It is worth noting, however, that the title of the pamphlet was written in a migrant language in the top line with English translation below it. Hindi and Malayalam were created monolingual perhaps because these are the two major migrant languages in Qatar in terms of numbers of speakers. Other languages with smaller numbers of speakers such as Pashto, Bhasha, and Telugu were not used at all or were used sparingly and inconsistently. A possible reason for the inclusion of French could be that there is a significant number of North African bilingual Arabic speakers and that a French speaking doctor is on the HMC staff.

Since COVID-19 also impacted people’s mental health, especially after the implementation of the social distancing law, HMC health professionals released videos in Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tagalog, in addition to Arabic and English, raising awareness about the mental health issues and the available help at HMC. The fact that these video messages were not released in other languages such as Nepali, Tamil, Bengali, and Sinhalese may have to do with the fact that Urdu and Hindi serve as a lingua franca between speakers of other languages not only in Qatar, but the GCC in general (Ahmad 2019). In terms of the use of migrant languages, our analysis also found a lack of coherent policy about which languages were used on social media. In Table 3 we provide all migrant languages that were used for different messages during the COVID-19 campaign period for print for at



Figure 1: Bilingual COVID-19 awareness pamphlet (Bengali and English).

least one pamphlet. It is clear that some languages were used for most communications while others were used for only a few.

The migrant languages that were used for all communications were Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Nepali, and Sinhalese. The languages used for the minimum number of pamphlets were Pashto (one pamphlet) followed by Indonesian (three pamphlets). The situation is not much different for the video messages as seen in Table 4. The reason why religious leaders did not use Hindi and Sinhalese is because in India, North Indian Muslims use Urdu and not Hindi for religious discourses. Similarly, Muslims from Sri Lanka are largely of Tamil ethnicity and therefore their religious discourse is in Tamil, and not Sinhalese, which is the language of ethnic Sinhalese who largely follow Buddhism. Pashto, like the printed material, was used in only one video.

### 5.3 Building trust by partnering with community leaders

As cases of infection began to increase and more information about the importance of social distancing became available, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs

**Table 3:** Languages used in printed pamphlets.

Category	Date	Ur	Hi	Ma	Be	Si	Ta	Ne	Tag	Pa	In	En	Ar
1 Awareness	March 21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓
2 Forms of Gathering-1	March 26	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	×	×	✓	✓
3 Forms of Gathering-2	March 30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓
4 Mask-1	May 16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5 Ehteraz (contact tracing)	May 21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓
6 Car-sharing	May 21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓
7 Mask-2	May 22	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓

Ur = Urdu, Hi = Hindi, Ma = Malayalam, Be = Bengali, Si = Sinhalese, Ta = Tamil, Ne = Nepali, Tag = Tagalog, Pa = Pashto, In = Indonesian (Bhasa), En = English, Ar = Arabic.

**Table 4:** Languages used in video messages.

S No	Category	Date	Ur	Hi	Ma	Be	Si	Ta	Ne	Tag	Pa	In	En	Ar
1	Health Professional	March 13–21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓
2	RJ/Actors	April 20–21	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	×	×	×	×	×	NA
3	Community Leaders	April 3–4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	NA
4	Religious Leaders	April 8	✓	×	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	NA

on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 banned congregational prayers in mosques (The Peninsula 2020). Gatherings in open public places such as beaches and parks were still not banned. On March 21, 2020, his Excellency the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Khaled Al-Thani issued a ban, enforceable by law, on different forms of gathering (QNA 2020a). A pamphlet in multiple languages entitled, “Forms of gathering banned by the power of law” came out between March 24–26, 2020. The prohibition included gatherings on beaches, public parks, courtyards of mosques, *majlis* (a private space where Qataris receive and entertain guests), public celebrations, and condolence meetings. The government also announced that vehicles would patrol different areas to catch violations and that a hotline was established for people to report violations. This pamphlet, however, was posted in fewer languages than the first one; it used Arabic, English, Hindi, Malayalam, Nepali, Sinhalese, and Urdu. Tagalog and Bengali, two major migrant languages spoken by about 20% of the migrant population were conspicuous by their absence. Figure 2 shows a sample pamphlet in Nepali explaining social distancing with some visuals.

Many newspapers and social media, however, reported and shared videos showing violations of the social distancing instructions from beaches, in front of cafeterias, and Friday congregational prayers on rooftops and open public spaces.



Figure 2: Social gathering prohibition pamphlet in Nepali.



On March 30, the MOI informed that they received 846 calls reporting violations of the social distancing law (Abuhajr 2020). This led the MOI to issue a second pamphlet on March 30 in 10 languages that stressed the significance of physical distancing and reiterated that gatherings at beaches, restaurants and cafeterias were banned. It specifically added that *jama'at* 'congregational' prayers on rooftops and any other open spaces were banned too. A critical feature of this pamphlet was that it further stipulated consequences of non-compliance with the law including imprisonment not exceeding three years and/or a fine up to Qatari Riyal 200,000. An Urdu pamphlet is given in Figure 3.

This in many ways was a turning point in the way the government communicated with its migrant population. It realized that, in addition to use of migrant languages, the community leaders could play a critical role not only in delivering health-related information to their people but also creating trust needed for strict



Figure 3: Social gathering prohibition pamphlet in Urdu.

compliance. The government began to partner with prominent cultural and media personalities from different expatriate communities in creating messages in their own languages and delivering them to their people. The messages by the community leaders began to be circulated on different platforms from April 3, 2020.

The MOI reached out to community leaders explaining to them the goal of the campaign, and they recorded short video messages in their languages, highlighting the significance of social distancing, including gatherings at beaches and prayers in open spaces. While the video messages appealed to their audiences to observe the law to protect themselves and others, they also reminded them of the consequences of non-compliance. The people and languages that were chosen to record and deliver the message also showed that the government's perception of Qatar's communities is largely based on language. Indian workers in Qatar in particular and the Gulf at large are organized based on language-affiliations (Vora 2012). To reach out to the Indian nationals, the messages were not only recorded in Hindi and English, the official and the associate official languages of India, but in a number of regional languages that are spoken by significant numbers of Indian migrant workers living in Qatar, which included Malayalam, Tamil, Urdu, and Bengali. Before the video began to play, the MOI logo appeared briefly, followed by the name of the speaker at the bottom, their social and cultural affiliation, and the language of the message (Figure 4). The fact that languages were officially marked along with the speakers shows that perceptions of community are predicated upon language.

Another interesting fact about the relationship between language and community could be gleaned from the fact that two messages were recorded in Urdu—one by an Indian leader and the other by a Pakistani. This was clearly done to make sure that the political rivalry between Indian and Pakistan does not impact the reception of the message and that the Urdu speakers from India and Pakistan receive the message from one of their own leaders. This also shows that the issue of trust in the message is linked to who the carrier of the message is, despite the fact that the language of the message is the same. In addition to messages in regional Indian languages that mainly targeted blue-collar workers, the educated white-collar workers were addressed in Indian English by Sundaresan Rajeshwar, director of Toastmaster Doha.

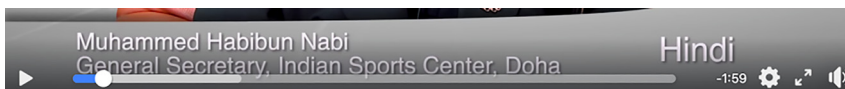


Figure 4: Community leader and language use.

Table 5 gives information about the languages used in the video messages. The languages Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Sinhalese, Tamil, Tagalog, Bengali, Nepali, and English cover the major non-Arab migrant languages accounting for approximately 65% of the expatriate population.

Social distancing also had an impact on the religious practices of Muslims, which includes five daily congregational prayers and a weekly Friday prayer that is held in a bigger mosque and thus attracts larger crowds. On March 13, 2020, in an effort to minimize attendance in mosques and reduce physical contact, the government imposed certain restrictions whereby the time between the call to daily prayers and the start of the prayer was reduced from the usual 15–20 minutes to 5 minutes. Similarly, for Friday prayers, the first call to prayer, which happens 40 minutes before the start of the *khutbah* or ‘religious sermon’, was eliminated altogether. Similarly, mosques were allowed to open their doors only 10 minutes before the *khutbah* and were closed right after the end of the prayer, so people do not gather in the mosque afterward. As more infections were detected, the Ministry of Awqaf shut down all mosques on March 17 for all forms of prayer (The Peninsula 2020). However, as pointed out earlier, many Muslims were found praying in the

**Table 5:** Community leaders using migrant languages.

	Name	Date Posted	Community	Language
1	Engineer Henry Dimaano	April 3	Ex-Chairman, United Filipino Organizations in Qatar	Tagalog
2	R J Ubaid Tahir	April 3	Urdu radio, 107 FM	Urdu & Hindi
3	A P Manikantan	April 3	President, Indian Cultural Centre Doha	Malayalam
4	R Ramakrishnan	April 3	President, Qatar Tamil Toastmasters	Tamil
5	Viddya Shri Shanthikumara	April 3	Sri Lankan community	Sinhalese
6	Mohammad Ramzan Miya	April 3	Nepali community	Nepali
7	Anwar Hossain Akon	April 3	President, The Bangladesh Community-Qatar	Bengali
8	Riyaz Ahmed Bakali	April 4	Pakistani Community leader	Urdu
9	P N Babu Rajan	April 4	President, Indian Community Benevolent Forum	Malayalam
10	Muhammad Habibun Nabi	April 4	General secretary, Indian Sports Centre Doha	Hindi & Urdu
11	S Guru	April 4	Joint secretary, Rajini Makkal Mandaram	Tamil
12	Sundaresan, Rajeshwar	April 4	Director, Toastmasters District 116	English

courtyards of the mosques, which fall outside of the area officially closed by the Ministry. One reason why the courtyards were not closed was because they contain public toilets. When this came to the attention of the authorities, they published another pamphlet during March 24–26 specifically mentioning that prayers in the courtyards were banned too. The non-compliance did not go away and many cases of people holding congregational Friday prayers outside of mosque premises—on rooftops of buildings and open public spaces continued (Saaduddin 2020).

This specific non-compliance made it clear to the government that there was something more to the issue and they began to adapt their multilingual communication strategy. Many Muslims from South Asia believe that not offering Friday prayers is sinful. Consequently, the MOI mobilized religious leaders to deliver messages that could convince the people that compliance with the government instruction not to offer congregational prayers in public is not a sin. Towards this end, the MOI mobilized preachers, imams of mosques, and other religious leaders to create messages in the migrant languages clarifying the religious ruling on offering congregational prayers during times of pandemic. Table 6 provides information about the religious figures who were chosen to deliver the message and the languages of the message.

These messages were different from those prepared by the community leaders, both in terms of their structure and their intended audience. Firstly, the community messages were created by people who are socially and culturally prominent in different walks of life. Secondly, the community messages were crafted using

**Table 6:** Religious leaders using migrant languages.

	Name	Religious role	Language	Date posted
1	Moulavi Mohammd Ishaq	Imam & Khateeb, Ministry of Awqaf	Pashto	April 8
2	Sheikh Zulameen Sarento Puti	Preacher, Qatar Guest Center	Tagalog	April 8
3	Sheikh Ziyauddin Madani	Preacher, Abdullah Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Center	Tamil	April 8
4	Sheikh Abdulbasith Abdulkhaliq Omri	Imam & Khateeb, Ministry of Awqaf	Urdu	April 8
5	K C Abul Latheef	Vice Chairman, Center for Indian Community	Malayalam	April 8
6	Sheikh Yousuf Nore Nabi	Imam and Khateeb, Ministry of Awqaf	Bengali	April 8
7	Sheikh Abdul Mobin Siddiqi	Preacher, Abdullah Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Cultural Center	Nepali	April 9
8	Sheikh Mohammad Ismail	Former Imam & Khateeb, Ministry of Awqaf	Urdu	April 3

secular arguments that mentioned the medical and social benefits of social distancing, and they reiterated the civil consequences of non-compliance. Messages by the imams and preachers, by contrast, recruited religious arguments drawing upon *hadith*, the narrations of Prophet Muhammad, and verses from the holy Quran. Secondly, most speakers were recorded in clothes that gave visual cues about their religious and professional identities. This helped construct credibility and trust in their messages. Speakers of Pashto, Tagalog, Urdu, and Bengali were wearing Arab clothes that included a white *thawb*, an ankle-length usually white robe, and a *shemagh*, a white or checkered headgear. Although the speakers of Nepali, Malayalam, and Tamil had western clothes, they, like others either began their message with a religious supplication or referenced Quran or *hadith* in the body of their message. For example, in the Urdu video, Sheikh Omri starts with the Islamic verse, “In the name of Allah, the most Gracious and Merciful” and then cites Verse 195 of Chapter 2 of the Quran which says, “do not throw yourself into destruction” and supplements it with a *hadith* in which Prophet Muhammad asked healthy people not to intermingle with sick people. He further adds that Muslims will get the same rewards in the hereafter for praying at home as praying in a congregation in a mosque.

The above analysis shows that as the messages in multiple migrant languages were not able to achieve the desired compliance, the government quickly tapped into social and cultural resources of the migrant communities and recruited influential secular as well as religious leaders from amongst them to create and deliver the message. The deployment of community leaders and imams and preachers shows the complex nature of messages and their social and cultural anchoring that impact their reception and compliance. These two factors, however, were not enough. The medium of the message was found to be equally critical.

Although a significant number of non-nationals in Qatar are highly educated and hold white-collar jobs, a vast majority of them are illiterate or semi-literate and work in blue-collar jobs including construction and service sectors. The successful delivery of the message to this group depends on exploiting oral and/or audio-visual medium, especially through radio and phone applications like WhatsApp.

## 5.4 Strategic mediums for information dissemination

In order to understand the use of radio as a tool to disseminate health information to speakers of migrant languages, we interviewed Mohammad who works for Malayalam FM 98.6 and Kumar, Ajay, and Ahmad who oversee operations of Radio

Olive FM 106.3 and Radio Suno 91.7.<sup>4</sup> In separate interviews, they informed us that different departments of the government including the GCO, MOI, and MoPH invited them as early as the first week of March for a meeting to seek their cooperation in spreading COVID-19 health awareness messages through their radio stations. Kumar added that the government knew well that in addition to having a large listenership catering to 1.8 million listeners (Radio this Month 2020) they also had a significant presence on the ground. He explained that they have reached such a large listenership because their strategy “3 O’s” referring to On-air, Online, and On-ground, has been successful. Their on-ground activities include involving migrant communities in cultural activities such as Diwali and Onam celebrations. They also host entertainment programs in Qatar involving film actors from India. Below we discuss how they used these transnational connections to create health awareness videos involving actors from India.

In terms of the contents of the COVID-19 awareness campaign, they informed us that they often reused content received from the MOI, but they also created their own. Radio Olive and Suno Malayalam Network graciously shared their audio clips in 10 languages namely Bengali, English, Hindi, Tagalog, Kannada, Malayalam, Nepali, Pashto, Sinhalese, and Urdu that played on air. These multilingual messages were prepared by their RJs in collaboration with community members. They were aired from March 11 until the end of May from 6 a.m. until 12 midnight every hour. Radio Olive and Suno Network also did something unique; they sent these audio clips to listeners on their WhatsApp. They have a list of 40 thousand listeners in their WhatsApp database. Listeners use WhatsApp to send their requests of songs or answers to competitions, or to say hello to their friends, and so forth.

Malayalam 98.6 FM had a similar approach to the dissemination of health information to its listeners. Mohammad proudly informed us that in addition to Malayalam, the language of their FM channel, they aired COVID-19 awareness material in Tamil, Bengali, Sinhalese, English, and Arabic. During the peak times of the virus, messages in the above six languages were aired every hour. Mohammad said that the multilingual COVID-19 content was rotated so frequently that many of his listeners started to call it a COVID channel. On our request, Mohammad was kind to share the report he submitted to the government about the frequency of the multilingual campaigns on FM 98.6. Figure 5 shows the languages and the rotation of the campaign in Malayalam, Tamil, Bengali, Sinhalese, Arabic, and English.

The items that do not indicate a language are in the default language of the station, Malayalam, so the common notification in the table was in Malayalam and in male and female voices indicated in the table with (m) and (f). Figure 5 shows

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<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

PRODUCTIONS PLAYED IN MALAYALAM 98.6FM RADIO REGARDING THE AWARENESS OF COVID-19 CORONA VIRUS

DATE	ITEM	NUMBER OF TIME PLAYED
APRIL 15 2020	Corona Ads <u>arbc</u>	23
	Corona Ads ENG	23
	Corona common Notification (f)	10
	Corona common Notification (m)	23
	Corona Precaution Malayalam(f)	9
	Corona Precaution Tamil	17
	Corona Precaution Bengali 1	7
	Corona Precaution Bengali 2	3
	Corona Precaution Sinhala	8
	Corona Precaution Capsule set 1 (6Nos)	12
	Corona Precaution Capsule set 2 (6Nos)	10

Figure 5: Rotation of languages on FM 98.6.

that there were two different messages in Bengali marked as 1 and 2. When Mohammad was asked why speakers of other languages would tune in to this channel, he clarified that they do it for two reasons. Firstly, they tune in because of its popularity; the stations play Bollywood songs, which attract non-Malayalis. Secondly, they make announcements about discounts and offers in different stores in Doha, which is another reason why non-Malayalis tune in to their channel.

In addition to on-air broadcast, the radio stations also posted the COVID-19 awareness printed and video contents on their social media pages. The most striking part of the awareness campaign was the community engagement in which radio stations with their RJs partnered with the government to take the message directly to the people in their own languages using vans fitted with public announcement systems, acting as linguistic and cultural mediators. Both Mohammad from FM 98.6 and Radio Olive and Radio Suno Network shared that they were actively involved in this campaign. In Figure 6, we see on the left a Radio Olive RJ making an announcement in Urdu, whereas the car in the right has a Nepali RJ. We also interviewed a community volunteer who participated in this campaign. He informed us that the MOI had identified the migrant labor camps and the neighborhoods that had large concentrations of workers speaking a specific language. The cars went to these locations and parked at the main entrance and the announcements were made through the PA system. He also informed us that they went to neighborhoods and got out of their vans and spoke to people. He said people were very happy that they were being spoken to in their own languages.

Since WhatsApp is extremely popular among Asian expats, the government used it as well for the diffusion of awareness information. On April 6, 2020, it launched the chat-bot based secure WhatsApp service, which people could use to



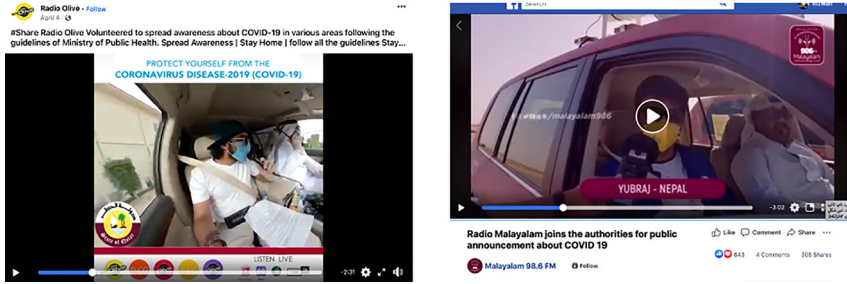


Figure 6: Government partnering with radio olive and FM 98.6.

get information about symptoms of COVID-19, preventions against it, the number of cases in Qatar, and travel advisories in six languages namely Arabic, English, Urdu, Hindi, Nepali, and Malayalam (GCO 2020b). The service was free of charge. Figure 7 shows sample screenshots of the main page of the services showing the available languages in English, and sample information messages about preventive measures in Urdu and Malayalam.

### 5.5 Online platforms for COVID-19 awareness messages

The closing part of our analysis examines the use of online platforms for the COVID-19 awareness campaign, particularly since use of online sources like social media platforms increases during crises. Online campaigns, especially paid ones, have another advantage in that depending on the need, they can target a specific

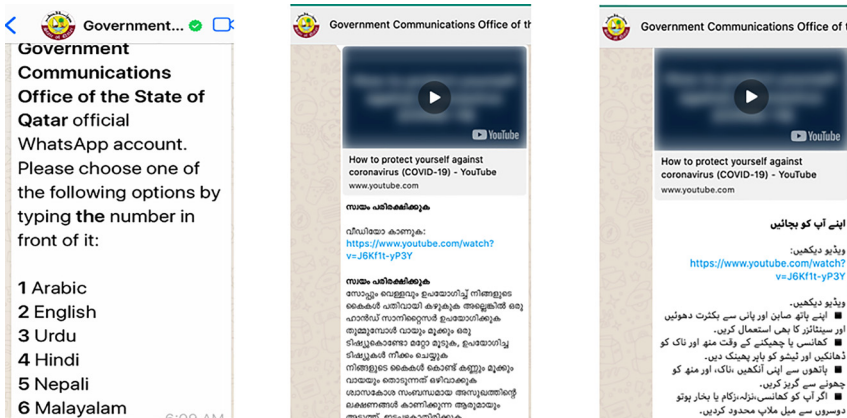
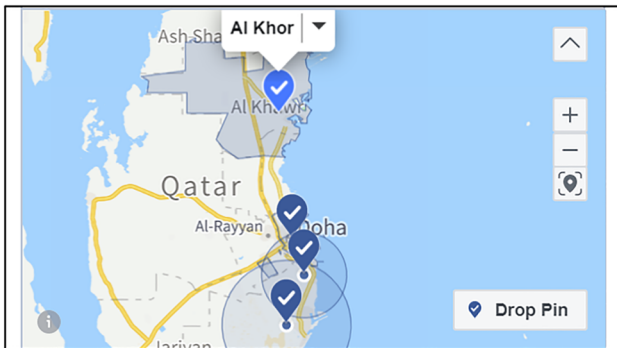


Figure 7: Awareness using whatsapp service.



group based on demographic and geographical factors such as neighborhoods. Since residential locations of workers in Qatar are organized largely in terms of language groups, QMC used paid campaigns to spread awareness targeting each group. In the interview, Faisal al-Mudahka of QMC informed us that they hired services of Dotspace, an advertising agency with Google Premium Partner status, based in Kuwait, to deliver the message in migrant languages based on the concentration of workers in different neighborhoods and reports of violation from specific ones. Using the Geo-targeting method, Dotspace focused on six locations in Qatar namely, Industrial Area, Al-Wakrah, AL-Wukair, Al-Khor, Muntazah, and Corniche. Given below in Figure 8 is a map showing the targeted locations.<sup>5</sup> He mentioned that some of these targeted awareness messages received more than a million views suggesting that the messages were viewed by individuals more than once.

Since Facebook is the most popular social media platform used by Asians in Qatar (Dennis et al. 2019), we examined this platform in greater detail in terms of the number of views of certain COVID-19 health awareness videos. We focused on two video messages—one created by the medical professionals of HMC and the other by the MOI with religious preachers—in Urdu, Nepali and Bengali across FB pages of the relevant ministries and RJ Ubaid Tahir, a social media influencer who also works for Urdu radio FM 107. Table 7 shows that both videos posted on Ubaid Tahir’s FB page were viewed by far more people than the MOI and HMC pages. It was not possible to study videos in other languages since neither Ubaid Tahir nor any other social media influencer will post in all languages. The ministries were



**Figure 8:** Awareness messages targeting specific locations.

5 We would like to thank Inas Abdul Aziz, the CEO of Dotspace, Kuwait, for sharing their report.

not consistent in terms of posting their own videos on their pages. They generally posted their own videos on their FB pages, but sometimes they did not. For example, the video in Nepali by Sheikh Siddiqi is missing from the MOI page.

It is clear from Table 7 that social media influencers play a critical role in disseminating information. The Northwestern University in Qatar study (Dennis et al. 2019) previously discussed in Section 2.3, also showed that 96% of Asian expatriates look at stories and posts from social media influencers and 79% of them get their news and information from social media influencers. Therefore, we decided to examine Ubaid Tahir's FB page more closely.

Ubaid Tahir is a young well-known media personality who works for FM 107. He is extremely active on social media, especially FB where he has over 340,000 followers. Since he is multilingual in Urdu, Arabic, and English, he works as a conduit for transmission of information from Arabic into Urdu. He mainly posts on issues that concern daily lives of the South Asian migrant population in Qatar. He regularly posts on issues related to visa, residency, driver's license, exit permit, vehicle registration, and starting in March, on COVID-19. Although his video posts are written in Urdu and Hindi, his followers go beyond the speakers of these languages. When we asked him who the target audience of his videos is, he replied that it is quite mixed including those who speak Urdu or Hindi as their first languages and speakers of Nepali, Bengali, and other Indic languages who speak Urdu–Hindi as a lingua franca in Qatar. Furthermore, while community and religious leaders have influence over a large number of people of different migrant communities, they may not be equally effective with the youth.

In Table 8, we show views for one informational video that was released after part of the Industrial Area, largely inhabited by workers from South Asia, was shut down on March 17 (GCO 2020a). This news was worrying for workers and the people at large, despite the fact that Assistant Foreign Minister and spokesperson for the Supreme Committee for Crisis Management Lolwah Alkhatir in a press conference assured that essential supplies including grocery and pharmacy would remain

**Table 7:** Number of views of multilingual videos across FB pages.

Language	Speaker	MOI	HMC	Ubaid Tahir
Urdu	Dr. Hassan Ahmedullah	NA	11.2K	84.2K
	Sheikh Mohammad Ismail	22K	NA	87.5K
Nepali	Rama Uprery	NA	17K	X
	Sheikh Abdul Mobin Siddiqi	X	NA	58.7K
Bengali	Dr. Mashukuddin	NA	40.6K	X
	Sheikh Yousuf Nore Nabi	17.8K	NA	25.3K

open. She also assured that people requiring medical services would be able to access them. However, to help alleviate fears, videos were released on March 23 by doctors from the HMC in Malayalam, Nepali, Hindi, Sinhalese, and Urdu in which the doctors stressed that the area had been closed to prevent the virus from spreading to other areas and reiterated that the MoPH would be responsible for all their needs and that medical care or ambulance services would be provided to those in need. Since this news impacted a large number of workers who live in the area and elsewhere, the video message of assurance was uploaded on the MADLSA FB page.

Ubaid Tahir's unofficial video in Urdu, which he made from his home containing the same message, in addition to a few other items announced in the press conference was viewed by more people than the three videos in Nepali, Urdu, and Hindi combined on the Ministry's page. Although he released his video on March 17, the same day of the press conference, and thus had the advantage of more time since MADSLA posted theirs a few days later, the reach is still significantly higher.

Ubaid Tahir's other informational videos related to COVID-19 similarly received a large number of views. Table 9 shows some examples of short videos with specific messages that the government announced, which Ubaid then picked up and repackaged in his videos. He also summarized the announcements of the press conferences held by Qatar's Supreme Committee. These videos received much higher numbers going over half a million views. Media influencers such as Ubaid Tahir worked as an amplifier of the COVID-19 messages in a much more effective way than any other government ministries.

## 6 Summary and discussion

In this paper, we have focused largely on the use of South and Southeast Asian migrant languages in Qatar during the COVID-19 awareness campaign, as these languages are socially invisible because they do not carry the power and prestige of other languages, even though they are spoken by the majority of Qatar's

**Table 8:** Number of Views of videos on FB.

S No	Name	Language	MADLSA March 22/23	Ubaid Tahir's blog March 17
1	Rama Uprery	Nepali	4900	
2	Dr. S. Doiphode	Hindi	1200	614,000
3	Dr. H. Ahmedullah	Urdu	906	

**Table 9:** Social influencer's reach of Covid-19 messages.

S No	Main message	Date posted	Views in thousand
1	Restriction on congregational prayers	March 13	406
2	Stay at home message	March 13	140
3	Closure of congregational prayer in mosques	March 17	396
4	Stay at home	March 21	157
5	Importance of social distancing (Urdu)	April 2	130
6	Importance of social distancing (Hindi)	April 2	121
7	Disposal of gloves	April 13	174
8	Restriction on number of people in cars	April 25	288
9	Opening of the lockdown area	May 6	688
10	Mandatory facemask	May 14	465

population. Thus, speakers of only these languages face unequal access to timely information, which becomes even more dire during a health pandemic. Based on our analysis, we have shown that despite recent measures promoting the use of Arabic over other languages in Qatar, the government was proactive in the use of migrant languages through various modes, carriers, and mediums in spreading awareness about COVID-19. We have shown that, in addition to Arabic and English, languages of the migrant workers, namely Bengali, Hindi, Indonesian, Malayalam, Nepali, Pashto, Sinhalese, Tamil, Tagalog, and Urdu were deployed by different branches of the government in their fight against the virus. We have further shown that the health awareness contents in these languages were circulated through a variety of mediums including radio, public announcements, social media, websites, and in print.

Similar to research on the sociolinguistics of the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Bai 2020; Li et al. 2020), this study additionally shows the tremendous importance of establishing trust in the message and the significance of culture. We have demonstrated the role community leaders can play in multilingual crisis communication and building trust. We have shown that the government realized that the use of multiple languages and modes and the legal consequences including financial penalty and jail term for violations were not enough to bring about compliance with the law and desired behavior change. Thus, they began to mobilize and recruit members from different language communities to deliver the messages of precaution against COVID-19. Socially prominent figures from different walks of life were brought onboard to ensure that the messages were received with trust. Since social distancing touched upon the religious lives of Muslims, imams and preachers were also enrolled in the campaign to make the message credible.

Additionally, we have shown that since a large number of migrant workers are either illiterate or semi-literate, the government in coordination with radio stations in Hindi, Nepali, Urdu, Malayalam, and Tagalog communicated health information orally in their own languages. These messages were aired on radio stations multiple times during the day so that people tuning in at different times would not miss them. Furthermore, the government in partnership with RJs of different radio stations also went to migrant labor camps and neighborhoods that have large concentrations of workers and delivered the messages at their doorstep in their languages.

Lastly, since a large number of migrants in Qatar seek their information from online sources including social media and social media influencers, we also examined how FB pages were used to deliver informational material in different languages. We found that media influencers such as Ubaid Tahir were able to spread COVID-19 awareness information much more effectively than Qatar's different ministries.

In evaluating Qatar's crisis communication efforts and strategies, the government followed many of Haddow and Haddow's (2014) principles of a successful communications strategy. They employed multiple languages via traditional media, digital and social media, as well as engaged community networks of volunteers and activists. The government's efforts further suggest that the awareness campaign adhered to Piller et al. (2020) dimensions for evaluating multilingual crisis communication, including availability (available in multiple languages), accessibility (available on multiple platforms and multiple modes in relevant languages), and acceptability (information is appropriate). The recruitment of community and religious leaders following the non-compliance of social distancing also suggests that the dimension of adaptability was fulfilled.

We do not, however, argue here that the campaign in Qatar was flawless. One issue we observed was inconsistency in use of the migrant languages. For example, Indonesian was barely used, and it is not entirely clear why. Pashto was also used only a few times, which may be explained by the fact that most speakers of Pashto in Qatar come from Pakistan and therefore the government assumed they were likely to understand Urdu. Other non-Asian migrant languages, such as Amharic which is spoken by approximately 25,000 Ethiopians in Qatar, were ignored altogether. It is possible that the government made assumptions that certain groups could understand national languages, such as French or English, without consideration for the reading level needed for comprehension or an emotional connection with the material, even if it was oral. As Li et al. (2020) argue, "language is essential to provide emotional comfort and psychological support services" (p. 619).

Furthermore, while the deployment of migrant languages for dissemination of COVID-19 awareness content among the migrant communities in Qatar was a commendable effort, it became clear from the interviews with the radio station officials and the community leaders that the government did not itself create/translate the contents in different languages. The radio stations and community leaders were given the contents in English, and they were free to adapt them into different languages. This involves not only translating the content from one language to another, but also making sure that the content in the new language is socially appropriate and communicatively effective. A Radio Olive official informed us that the contents they aired in their stations were not translated by professionals; the translation work was done in-house with the help of people who spoke the languages.

Since different individuals and institutions did the translation work on their own, without any professional expertise, it is quite possible that the messages even in the same language may not have been the same, thereby creating room for conflict and misunderstanding. We observed this happen even with some of the messages in English and Arabic, which caused confusion about which message to follow. In crisis communication it is important that the messages in one language across different platforms and sources be consistent. This ensures credibility of the message and enhances their likelihood of acceptance.

There has not yet been a comprehensive study published on COVID-19 multilingual crisis communication efforts in other GCC countries with similar large populations of blue-collar migrant workers, such as the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia. Hopkyns (2020) writes about the linguistic landscape of COVID-19 in UAE and mentions that top-down government communication in the UAE has included availability of information in languages beyond Arabic and English such as Hindi, Tagalog, and French; however, she does not delve into whether there have been efforts to reach illiterate workers or any examples of top-down collaboration with community members. It would be useful to compare the multilingual communication efforts and strategies across GCC countries and see what they could potentially learn from each other in helping to transcend language and cultural barriers for the well-being and safety of all in the region.

Other empirical questions that are also of relevance to the larger Gulf region are if the disaster wreaked by COVID-19 marks a radical shift in the status and use of migrant languages in the Gulf and how the Arabic Language Protection law specifically in Qatar can coexist with the use of migrant languages. Will some of these languages, especially Urdu and Hindi for example, continue to be used in non-crisis situations in Qatar such as labor dispute courts and primary health centers? We asked Faisal al-Mudahka for his views on this. He said that while Arabic is critical for the preservation of the Arab and Islamic identity of Qatar, he

personally sees no conflict between this and the use of migrant languages for communication. He advocated for language-specific community media in normal times too. He said that the government should not wait for a disaster to happen to involve different communities to establish clear and effective channels of communication. This is similar to what Piller (2020b) advocates in light of COVID-19: “one of the many lessons we need to learn from this crisis is to include the reality of linguistic diversity into our normal procedures and processes, including disaster preparation.” While the future trajectories of the use of migrant languages in Qatar and across the Gulf are unclear at this time, what is beyond doubt is that COVID-19 has shown that multilingualism is a resource and not an impediment.

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