Friends get vaccinated: The power of social media groups in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign
by Shlomit Manor and Tamar Israeli

Abstract
In times of crisis the power of social media is reflected in its ability to influence social behavior and act quickly without bureaucratic mechanisms. During the Israeli COVID-19 vaccination campaign, social media groups were formed to collect, verify, and disseminate information about leftover vaccine doses. Masses of people quickly joined these groups, rushed to the vaccine locations, and shared real-time information with other group members. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews with group members and admins, we identified three motives for creating groups: making information accessible, the struggle against vaccine opponents, and a desire to return to life as it was before the pandemic. Rapid group joining has been described in terms of collective behavior and contagion theory.

Contents
Introduction
Theoretical literature
Method
Findings
Discussion and conclusion

Introduction
The Israeli COVID-19 vaccination campaign began at the end of December 2020. At the time there were about 3.8 million vaccine doses in Israel, enough to vaccinate the entire population at risk. All citizens over 60 or with underlying health conditions were eligible for the vaccine.

New deliveries of vaccines arrived in the following months. While there is no clear data about the number of vaccine doses in Israel, there are expected to be enough for the entire population.

During the first three weeks of the vaccination campaign, about one and a half million people received the first dose. Due to the short shelf life of the vaccine, there was concern that leftovers doses would be discarded. To prevent such wastage there was a need to address audiences that were not among those currently eligible.
Friends get vaccinated: The power of social media groups in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign

Health maintenance organizations (HMOs) were unable to keep an organized record of vaccine surpluses and their locations due to their heavy workload. This created a vacuum that was filled by social media groups.

Within a few days, WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and a Facebook group were formed to disseminate information on the locations of leftover vaccines, allowing young and healthy people to get vaccinated before the vaccines expired. A WhatsApp group called “Leftover Vaccines” filled up within hours of opening, and more groups were opened one after the other. Within a few days, more than 4,500 people joined a Telegram channel and 63,000 people joined a Facebook group called “Vaccines Between Friends.” Long lines formed near the vaccination locations. People waiting reported in real time on the number of vaccines remaining, the age group that could be vaccinated at that specific location, and the length of the line. This information was quickly transmitted within and between the social media groups. After being vaccinated, many people wrote to thank the other members of the groups and administrators for helping them.

People’s desire to get vaccinated quickly merged with the ability of media groups to disseminate information. This created a fast and efficient system of sharing and verifying information. Employees from the HMOs used these groups to report on leftover vaccines. The disposal of vaccines was thus avoided, and many people were able to get vaccinated quickly but not at the expense of those eligible.

The founders of the social media groups were surprised by the mass joining. They were similarly surprised that many of those who joined did not leave the groups after getting the vaccine. Instead, they contributed their own information to the group and passed information from the group to their acquaintances.

The aim of this study was to understand this fascinating phenomenon. What motivated people to form those groups and to invest time and effort collecting, organizing, disseminating, and verifying information? What motivated thousands of young and healthy people to join those groups, dash to remote destinations, and stand in long lines to get vaccinated quickly? They would anyhow be able to soon receive vaccines by making appointments through their HMOs.

We explain this phenomenon using the social contagion theory of collective behavior. Accordingly, social media groups intensify the rate of contagion and enable the quick and efficient dissemination and verification of formal and informal information.

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**Theoretical literature**

**Social contagion theory**

Social contagion theory is a theory explaining crowd behavior which was developed in 1895 by Gustave Le Bon. According to his theory, individuals adopt the attitudes or behaviors of others in their social networks. The theory does not require an intent to influence or even an awareness of influence, only that communication takes place (Snow, 2013).

Social contagion offers a compelling theoretical explanation for the emergence and spread of generous behavior, especially when directed toward strangers or in large groups where there is a low probability that the generosity will be directly reciprocated (Tsvetkova and Macy, 2014). Social contagion may be facilitated by many factors including dramatic situations or events.

When facing unfamiliar or potentially adverse situations, individuals naturally react with anxiety and stress. To alleviate fear, people strive to prevent, end, or lessen the severity of aversive events (Wang, *et al.*, 2016). A sense of controllability can be achieved by taking actions to modify these events (Miller, 1979).

One action people take to reduce uncertainty and stress is to search for useful and reliable information. Social media can provide access to relevant and timely information from both official and non-official sources and facilitate a feeling of connectedness. During a crisis, there is no readily available top-down structure directing
the information exchange process between people. Bottom-up self-organized communities are a by-product of social media's embedded features.

**Social media and information**

Social media groups have become an effective tool in times of emergency when people feel an urge to respond quickly but anticipate too many bureaucratic obstacles to join established NGOs (Carlsen, et al., 2021). The same mechanism for spreading information is used during different disasters: social media users watch their friends’ activities or reported behavior and, through messaging actions, make this information visible to their own fans or followers. In the case of an international emergency such as a pandemic, the dissemination of factual and timely information is a crucial part of the collective response. Users adapt social media to fit their needs and to collaborate with others to produce useful content and information and to help others through the crisis (Kaewkitipong, et al., 2016; O’Brien, et al., 2020).

Members of social media groups form a collective identity based on a common set of interests or goals and solidarity (Brünker, et al., 2019). These groups play a defining role in generating a sense of belonging and shared definitions of us versus them (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011). The distinction of the collective self from others requires boundary work, which involves creating a reciprocal identification between group members and expressing differences from reference groups (Fominaya, 2018).

Global mobile chat apps, such as WhatsApp, WeChat, Signal, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger, are popular all over the world. These apps are an important vehicle for information dissemination and social mobilization during important events. Private group chats are a key component of their architecture. Users may communicate with their peers by sharing information or collaborate to find solutions to problems. Alternatively, they may simply enjoy the feeling of engaging with others (Caetano, et al., 2019; Nobre, et al., 2020; Oh and Syn, 2015).

In these private group chats users can converse and interact instantly with all who have joined the group. The visibility of such conversations is restricted to members of the group and thus controlled by the group admin who decides who can join the group. While some groups, like WhatsApp, are limited to small numbers (256 members), the same users are often members of a number of different groups and thus share information between them.

Information spread can also be facilitated by making the group public. The admin can share the link to join the group in Web sites or social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Anyone with access to the link can join the group (Resende, et al., 2019). Despite constant changes in the membership, there are members who stay in the group over time and often develop a sense of familiarity. They can feel supported and closely related to each other.

The development of ongoing and trusting relationships has a positive influence on information-sharing behaviors (Chen, et al., 2019). This interaction is facilitated by a strong sense of reciprocity. In the context of social media, reciprocity does not simply indicate the concept of “give-and-take” in a one-to-one relationship. Rather, it is a generalized reciprocity which explains one-to-many relationships among peers. Users of social media groups may share information in order to return favors received from others with a “pay it forward” action (Oh and Syn, 2015).

One of the most frequently tested factors in motivational studies related to information sharing in social media as altruism (Kuznetsov, 2006; Hsu and Lin, 2008; Rafaeli and Ariel, 2008). Altruism is defined as a form of unconditional kindness without the expectation of a return (Oh, 2012). Social media users reflect altruism in their positive attitude toward sharing their knowledge with others. By answering others’ questions, they gain confidence in their own abilities and increase their knowledge, self-efficacy, and pride (Ma and Chan, 2014; Zhao, et al., 2016). Other factors which promote users’ willingness to share knowledge includes extrinsic motivation, social and psychological forces, and the general sharing culture of social networking (Pi, et al., 2013).

**Israeli society**
By the end of 2020, the population of Israel was 9.3 million (73.9 percent Jews and 21.1 percent Arabs) (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Israeli society is heterogeneous and composed of several ethnic groups that differ in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, and language. However, it is characterized by a cohesive social network and close family ties.

In its early years, Israeli society had a strong official ideology that emphasized collectivism and personal sacrifice for the common good. The 1980s saw an extended process of liberalization and materialism and a widening of the social divide. The collective values gradually weakened.

However, the debut of new media in the twenty-first century has facilitated the reemergence of former trends. The old desire to belong to communities such as kibbutzim or youth movements was replaced by the desire to belong to a tight circle of friends or family or to professional communities and to remain in touch with them on social networks platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp (Karniel and LavieDinur, 2012).

Since Israel is a small country, family members live in close geographic proximity. According to the 2019 social survey carried out by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 77 percent of the elderly in Israel meet at least once a week with a family member who does not live in the same household as them.

Another characteristic of Israeli society is the relatively low concern for privacy. Ribak and Turow (2003) explained that traditional Israeli collectivism alongside ongoing political tensions make the violation of privacy by the government and army understood and accepted by the general population. In the age of social media, Israelis are willing to compromise their privacy in exchange for other values such as access to information and the ability to stay in contact with friends and family (Karniel and LavieDinur, 2012).

As a result of its challenging geopolitical position, Israel has for many years invested substantially in preparation for large-scale emergencies. The volatile security situation, which periodically raises the threshold of personal and national anxiety, attracts technological innovations (Malka, et al., 2015). Core values of Israeli society include entrepreneurial spirit, dedication, courage, risk-taking, excellence, and nonconformity (Cohen, et al., 2019).

According to a Pew survey (Taylor and Silver, 2019) Israel is the second country (after South Korea) in smartphone ownership (88 percent) and first in social media use with 88 percent of Israelis using WhatsApp and 74 percent using Facebook (Leizerovitz, 2020). In recent years, WhatsApp has become one of the most popular apps in Israel (Abou, 2020). Israelis believe that WhatsApp facilitates group activities for various ad hoc family, social, and professional needs and for managing extended projects and maintaining relationships with family and friends (Malka, et al., 2015).

**Israeli health system**

Unlike in most countries where health services were originally private and then became public service, Israel’s health care system has been public from the very beginning. It was founded on social principles whose influence can still be seen in neighborhood community clinics covering the entire country including the geographical periphery (Rinsky-Halivni, et al., 2020). Since 1995, all permanent residents are covered by universal national health insurance. Health plan members have longstanding relationships with and a high level of trust in their HMOs (Rosen, et al., 2021).

These unique cultural and structural characteristics of Israeli society may help explain the phenomenon of mass participation in social media groups during the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

**Method**

The aim of our study was to examine what motivated people to form social media groups around leftover
vaccines and to invest time and effort gathering, organizing, and verifying the information in these groups. We also wanted to understand why so many people felt such urgency to join these groups, travel to remote destinations, and stand in long lines to preempt their scheduled appointments.

The current research was conducted using a qualitative method that offers an in-depth understanding in order to assess the subjective meaning of the studied phenomenon.

The interviews with the group administrators were analyzed according to a phenomenological approach. This method is most suitable for examining the meaning and interpretation that individuals ascribe to a certain phenomenon or event as they themselves experience it (Spinelli, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

To that end we used thematic analysis which refers to the words, descriptions, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the interviewees. The textual analysis makes it possible to understand the phenomenon in the cultural context in which it occurs.

Data collection and participants

The study focuses on the admins and members of three major social media groups on WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook.

During January 2021, at the height of the vaccination campaign, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews: three long interviews with group admins and 12 short interviews with group members. Semi-structured interviews allow for a combination of predetermined central questions with flexibility and the freedom to develop a dialogue and raise additional questions in the course of the interview.

All the interviews were conducted by phone due to social distancing restrictions.

The interviews with the admins lasted about an hour. Questions included: What drove you to form the group?; How did the information flow within and between the groups?; How did you verify the information?; How much effort did you invest in the project?; and What do you expect will happen to the groups once the vaccination campaign ends?

The interviews with group members lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. They were asked why they felt such urgency to get vaccinated.

The social media groups were heterogeneous in their composition. However, since some group members identified themselves using full names and others joined with no identifying details except for a phone number, we do not have accurate data on the division between Jewish Israelis, Palestinian Israelis, or any other ethnic group. At the same time, reading the content of hundreds of text messages indicates heterogeneity in terms of gender, ethnicity, levels of religiosity, age, place of residence, and geographical distribution. Of the 12 randomly sampled respondents, five were men and seven were women.

Analysis of the findings

The analysis of the data was conducted in several stages, as suggested by Giorgi (1997). In the first stage, each interview was read separately to identify preliminary categories and meaning units. In the second stage, the interviews were read transversely according to the same meaning units. In the third stage, the various meaning units were merged into major themes and subthemes.

The interviews were recorded with the approval of the interviewees and transcribed by the interviewer the following week. Names and identifying details were changed to protect privacy.

The research was approved by the ethics committee of Western Galilee College.
Findings

After analyzing the interviews with the group admins, we found three major themes: different incentives to form and manage the groups; surprise at the rapid responsiveness; and ways of verifying information and dealing with overload.

After analyzing the interviews with group members, we were able to point to the main reasons for the urgency to get vaccinated.

We summarized major themes and subthemes in Table 1.

| Table 1: Major themes and subthemes identified in the process of textual analysis and their frequency. |
|---|---|---|
| **Group admins**  
(n=3) | **Themes** | **Subthemes** | **N** |
| Incentives to form and manage the groups | Struggle against COVID-19 deniers and anti-vaxxers | 3 |
| | Make accurate information accessible | 3 |
| | Prevent wastage of vaccines | 3 |
| | Desire to help the health system | 1 |
| | Restore normal lives | 3 |
| | Altruism | 3 |
| | Self-satisfaction | 3 |
| | **Surprise at rapid responsiveness** | 3 |
| | Through HMO nurses and health care workers | 3 |
| | Real-time reports from group members at the vaccine locations | 3 |
| | Transferring information from one group to the other | 3 |
| | Get help from friends in the group or in other groups | 3 |
| | Blocking the group when a discussion is not appropriate | 1 |
| **Group members**  
(n=12) | **Themes** | **Subthemes** | **N** |
| | Fear of getting infected | 1 |
On 24 December, five days after the vaccination campaign began, it was clear that there were daily leftover vaccines that would expire if not used. To prevent the loss of these vaccines, it was necessary to locate people who did not meet current eligibility criteria but wanted to be vaccinated. This led to the formation of social media groups that shared information about where leftover vaccines were available and who was eligible to be vaccinated.

**Rapid responsiveness**

The social media groups filled up quickly and gained momentum. In the first hours of their opening, hundreds of people joined, with increased participation in the following days. The speed with which people joined the groups surprised group founders. They did not expect such enthusiasm and were amazed by the numbers. Sharon, founder and admin of one of the largest groups, said:

A friend of mine tagged me in a post about leftover vaccines and suggest that we form a group because she knows I like to collect data ... that’s how the group started ... . I thought the group would have about 500 people. I didn’t think it would reach this size. In less than an hour there were already 200 members. I went for a nap and when I woke up, there were already more than 700 people. Today there are thousands of people in the group.

Nina, admin of another group, described a similar phenomenon:

When we opened the first WhatsApp group, a friend was skeptical and asked me why I was doing this. Suddenly ... boom ... the group was filled up, and I had to open a second one and a third. We reached seven groups. By that time, we already had a Telegram channel with 4,500 people ... We couldn’t understand the event.

The group founders that we spoke to are ordinary anonymous people: two of them live in Israel’s southern periphery and two of them are unemployed. None of them believed that the groups would fill up like this in such a short time and turn into such an “event,” in Nina’s words.

**The panic and motivation to join the groups**

Panic is a form of collective behavior in which people faced with a sudden feeling of threat or danger react in a fearful, spontaneous, and uncoordinated way (Robertson, 1987).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused panic among parts of the public. Many people began to look for leftover vaccines so that they could get vaccinated before becoming eligible and receiving a scheduled appointment. From the moment there was information about leftover locations, people were willing to travel far and stand in long lines.

Ron testified about himself: “I had no problem traveling even an hour, an hour and a half to get vaccinated.” [1]
The rate of vaccine uptake was markedly lower than average in the Arab sector (Rosen, et al., 2021). The Arab communities therefore had lots of leftover vaccines. Although, there are some Arab localities where Jews go shopping or eat in restaurants, group members got vaccinated and reported from localities which are not typically visited by Jews.

As more and more people were diagnosed with COVID-19, including members of families and social groups, the fear of being the next patient increased the eagerness to get vaccinated as quickly as possible.

Sheila said: “I am afraid of getting sick, because someone in my family has already gotten sick.” Ilana expressed a similar concern: “Two of my friends who were careful and wore face masks all the time got sick, so I’m afraid I’ll get sick too.”

Another reason for joining the social media groups was strong social pressure and the feeling that everyone else had already been vaccinated. Iris explained her motive as “the desire to be like everyone else.”

Nina was aware of the social pressure caused by watching other people getting vaccinated. Therefore, during the group’s early days, she took photos of her family and friends getting vaccinated and shared it with the group. She explained the contagious effect: “People ask themselves, ‘What’s going on here? Everyone is getting vaccinated and I’m not?’”

On 22 January 2021, the Israeli Ministry of Health expanded eligibility and enabled 16- to 18-year-olds to be vaccinated so they could go back to school and prepare for their matriculation exams.

Some members of the social media groups were angry about this decision to vaccinate young people before them. Ruth said that she joined the group from fear that there might not be enough vaccines left for her. Nina agreed that prioritizing one group over another pushed people to look for vaccines: “When there is competition over resources, people feel under pressure. Therefore, our groups became such a buzz.”

**Motivation to form social media groups**

Despite the efficiency and speed of the vaccination campaign, the HMOs were unable to centralize data and report on leftover vaccines and their locations. Group founders started to collect this information and disseminate it through WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook.

Sharon, one of the founders of the largest group, described her motivation:

> To make accurate information accessible ... The HMOs have their information, but there is not good enough access to it. For example, can a tourist get vaccinated? You need accurate information regarding how, when, and where to go. Everything happened at once and changed constantly. There was no order. It was as if the vaccines fell from the sky and we didn’t have time to get organized. So I entered this space and started to organize all the information in one place so we could help sharing it.

Collecting, organizing, disseminating, and verifying information are tasks that require time and effort. Why would someone decide to take this on? There were different answers to this question including: the desire to help prevent vaccine waste, intrinsic motivations, the aspiration to return to normal, and the struggle against COVID deniers and anti-vaxxers.

For example, Nina said:

> At the beginning of the campaign, I saw there were leftover vaccines being thrown away. I was terribly upset about it and thought it shouldn’t happen. I wanted to try and do something to prevent it ... I saw a vacuum here and thought: What do we have
here in Israel that you can’t find anywhere else? Rumors, word of mouth, this is how things work in Israel. The group success fills me with a sense of satisfaction, a sense of pride.

Daniel, founder of another group, said that his motivation stemmed from a desire to help the health system and the HMOs deal with the epidemic.

To get out of this situation, you need to take active measures. Disseminating information on vaccines, which are a valuable resource, is an active measure. We don’t want vaccines to be thrown into the trash ... I want to help the health care system that is collapsing under the workload ... the way to fight this collapse is through the vaccines.

Daniel, an unemployed young man, believes that he can help prevent the collapse of the health care system through social media groups. It sounds almost like the story about the little Dutch boy who saved his country by putting his finger in a leaking dike. Daniel believes that by disseminating information on social media, many people will get vaccinated and this will reduce the pressure on hospitals.

Helping others has been found to reduce personal distress (FeldmanHall, et al., 2015; Piferi, et al., 2006). Nina illustrated this type of motivation. She described herself as a sociable person who feels lonely being away from her parents and family. To alleviate her loneliness, she looks to help other people. She expressed concern about people who work in restaurants, entertainment, and tourism and are now suffering from financial and mental distress. Nina believes that when everyone is vaccinated, it will be possible to return to full economic activity and a normal life. Her intensive activities in the social media groups she formed aim to get as many young people as possible vaccinated so that everyone can get restore their active social lives.

It’s impossible to live like this. We must get out of this situation and rebuild the economy and life in general ... I am a sociable person, this social distance is so unnatural for me ... Something has changed in me, something has broken in me, not hugging people and not being sociable is very difficult for me.

Another motive for forming the groups was the desire to fight COVID-19 deniers and anti-vaxxers. All three group admins spoke in terms of a war against both the virus and the anti-vaxxers, who run their own active and efficient social media groups.

Daniel said:

This is a war against the epidemic and against those who deny the existence of the epidemic. I am fighting this phenomenon called COVID deniers and their conspiracies. I have been fighting it since the beginning of the pandemic. As time goes on, the war with them gets harder because there are a lot of anti-vaxxers. Currently, we are winning.

Nina described the anti-vaxxers’ practices:

They open many groups and publish all their unreliable stuff there and people believe it as if it was the word of God ... Some people are experts in marketing their anti-vax agenda on social networks. There is one woman who is the leader of the COVID deniers today. She goes on and on and gets into people’s minds, so if she can do it, why can’t I go on about the vaccines? Every person who gets vaccinated is a victory.
Friends get vaccinated: The power of social media groups in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign

Verifying information and dealing with post overload

Between January and mid-February, before the limits on vaccination eligibility were removed, the groups on various media channels were active and intensive. Every hour there were dozens of posts reporting on the locations of leftover vaccines or requests for details. The group admins tried to verify information and disseminate it among the various groups. The WhatsApp groups had a clear rule: “The purpose of the group is to share where there are available vaccines. The post must include a location address, operation hours, and age and HMO eligibility. We ask you not to fill the group with nonsense.”

Real-time verification of information took place in different ways through informal channels. One group used an HMO nurse known by a group member. In other groups, members reported in real time from their locations. For example, Nina posted to her group: “The information is reliable. I checked with a friend who was vaccinated there.”

Sharon explained that she only published posts after going through them and trying to verify the information with someone at the location. Many people who went to these locations based on information they got from the group felt a need to report back and provide others with reliable and up-to-date information.

However, sometimes the information turned out to be unreliable, and people under a certain age or belonging to certain HMOs were not, in fact, eligible. In such cases, the group admins did not always feel responsible. Nina said: “I’m not responsible for it. It can happen sometimes. A person arrives and there’s nothing going on there. It’s a problem, but it’s just part of this going and trying.”

The level of involvement varied between group admins. Sometimes they just transferred information from group to group, and sometimes they were more involved and responded to the posts. Either way, the information overload was time-consuming. Sharon received help from group members: “Luckily, nice people in my group offered me a lot of help. Some of them are programmers. Within a week we had set up a Web site with all this information so we could arrange it in a more organized way.”

The dynamics in the group sometimes required the group admin’s intervention. Nina decided to block one of the groups when a political debate began: “In the middle of my workday, Group 4 suddenly started with politics and Bibi [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] so I blocked them. I told those who wrote to me in private to stop. This discussion is not appropriate here.”

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined the establishment of social media groups for the dissemination of information on leftover vaccines. With no financial resources or previous experience in managing social media groups, three anonymous people were able to form groups on three different media channels: WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook.

These groups quickly filled up with large numbers of people who wanted to get vaccinated. The group admins expressed several motives for forming the groups, in particular, the desire to boost the vaccine campaign, prevent vaccine waste, and return to a normal life.

Social media groups are an effective tool for mobilizing the public for action (Caetano, et al., 2019; Nobre, et al., 2020; O’Brien, et al., 2020; Oh and Syn, 2015). Studies have suggested that in times of crisis social media contributes to the dissemination of information and the reduction of stress and uncertainty (Kaewkitipong, et al., 2016). The public tends to respond quickly in times of emergency and is often deeply involved in activities such as search and rescue, first aid, and the evacuation of casualties. Today, through social media channels, the public has additional ways to participate and communicate using unofficial sources (Simon, et al., 2015).
Collective behavior is characterized by a spontaneous public response to a real threat, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. Collective behavior is inherently unorganized and short-lived, with groups sometimes forming around a common interest and acting as one body (Smelser, 1962).

Social media influences and reinforces the spontaneous nature of this behavior (Shi, et al., 2013). The contagion behavior in the context of online social content is commonly referred to as virality. Vijaykumar, et al. (2015) used the idea of virality to explain the potential for a message to spread across online social networks through a process of social contagion (person-to-person sharing) by contact between individuals who have the message and those who do not. Content sharers might not necessarily create content but actively share it via social media with social media followers and via traditional media with social media inactives, thus gaining influence.

The phenomenon described in this paper illustrates the possible impact of social media on the behavior of individuals and its ability to motivate off-network social action. Despite being virtual and characterized by anonymity, social media can provide a sense of solidarity and belonging. Opponent groups, here anti-vaxxers, reinforce the collective identity and sense of cohesion of group members through a sense of us versus them (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011).

The prolonged closures, ban on gatherings, and forced isolation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of loneliness. At such a time, people need a sense of belonging and seek social connections, even if they are ad hoc connections. A common goal, such as looking for leftover vaccines, is an excellent basis for forming such bonds.

The variety of channels and distribution of social networks provide an excellent infrastructure for empowering social activities (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002). The characteristics of the networks and their ability to disseminate information quickly and act in a changing social environment are a huge advantage over cumbersome formal organizations (Brown, 1978; Hall, 1963).

Another reason for the rapid spread of information through social media groups can be attributed to the unique characteristics of Israeli society. Israel is a small country and is characterized by high familiarity. Israel’s cohesive social networks contribute to high levels of interpersonal contact and communication (Lemish and Cohen, 2005).

Israelis are, in addition, used to sharing data with people they are not familiar with. The Waze navigation app is a good example of this. While it has not spread widely throughout most of Europe, Waze has been widely adopted in Israel and become very popular Israel (Wazestats.com, 2021). Israelis report on hazards, accidents, heavy traffic, and nearby police for the common good (Fire, et al., 2012).

Concern for privacy violations is relatively low among Israelis (Karniel and Lavie-Dinur, 2012; Ribak and Turow, 2003). The fact that Israel committed itself to providing details to Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company providing vaccines, did not provoke much discussion, as it did in other countries. This factor along with Israeli fascination with innovation may also explain the haste to get vaccinated.

The way in which information passed between the social media groups reinforces Granovetter’s (1973) theory regarding the strength of weak ties. According to this theory, when the level of acquaintance between group members is low, they serve as a bridge to transfer the information to other groups. In the present study we found that many people remained in the groups after being vaccinated in order to pass on the information to their friends and relatives.

There is a perception among social scientists that public activism in a time of crisis is mainly driven by altruism (Kuznetsov, 2006; Hsu and Lin, 2008; Rafaeli and Ariel, 2008). Such altruism was, indeed, evident in the huge effort made by group admins who collected and organized information voluntarily. They reported a great sense of satisfaction and pride in their contributions to the vaccination campaign.

While the admins were not sure that the groups would continue to play a role after the end of the campaign, they expressed hope that the infrastructure created could be used for future cooperation between public and
state institutions in other cases. The bilateral communication between the formal and informal sources of information in this case indicates that such collaboration is possible and effective. We hope that such communication will be applied in other cases in the future. It would be interesting to examine whether such groups continue to exist after completion of a specific task and what motivates group members to stay in these groups.

About the authors

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Note

1. Israel is a small country. One and a half hours is considered a long drive.

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