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Health has always been, and always will be, one of the most highly ranked priorities of people. Understanding how health and health behaviours are created, promoted, and maintained in the future under the influence of constant and changing media environments requires a younger generation of scholars in the field of health communication who are willing and able to bring their own ideas and methods to this ever-changing field. The special issue “Young Scholar Action” reflects an effort to embrace these young scholars from the European Journal of Health Communication and ECREA Health Communication. It was born out of the “Young Scholar Award Initiative” that was part of the 2021 European Conference on Health Communication, held digitally in November 2021 and hosted by colleagues from Belgium and the Netherlands. This initiative followed a two-step evaluation procedure for conference abstracts that had to be first authored by a PhD candidate. The procedure included external reviews on the conference abstract submissions, after which a five-member jury ranked the 10 best PhD candidate presentations of these abstracts during the conference. These 10 were invited to submit an article to the present special issue “Young Scholar Action”, of which three articles were included in this special issue. These three articles focus on a variety of topics, employed a variety of methods and are from different European countries. However, because they all share one common thing – namely that the data were all collected during the Corona pandemic – the work presented in this special issue also provides for more broader conclusions to be drawn for health communication research.

First, although the health topics covered in this special issue were already important before the pandemic, they became even more important during this health crisis. For instance, while studies prior to the Covid-19 pandemic had already demonstrated the personal and societal burden of mental health issues (e.g. Kieling et al., 2011), the pandemic and the accompanying governmental regulations and restrictions (e.g. lockdowns, social distancing measures, vaccinations) are likely causes of the increase in the prevalence and impact of stress, depression, and anxiety amongst different populations, suggesting a need to understand how communication technologies can be used as substitutes for real-life social contacts. The article of Marciano and colleagues (Marciano et al., 2023) uses data from 764 children and adolescents in Switzerland collected between early Fall 2020 and early 2021 to investigate this issue. Based on their results, these authors conclude that – when real-life social contacts are compromised
due to regulations and restrictions – digital technologies can be used as a substitute to obtain and maintain social contacts that are crucial for life satisfaction and their well-being.

The pandemic also spurred an unprecedented amount of health information in news media. Related to that observation, the paper of Temmann (2023) compares the impact of responsibility framing in news media on people’s understanding of these health issues, and particularly on their beliefs about who is responsible for their causes and treatment. This topic is investigated in the domain of mental health (depression) and lifestyle-related health issues (Type 2 diabetes) through qualitative interviews with 22 (German speaking) persons living with and without depression and Type 2 diabetes. Their results highlight important differences between these two health issues: depression is believed to be less controllable, while Type 2 diabetes is believed to be more linked to individually controllable attributions and behavioural stigma. Hence, individuals living with depression are expected to seek and accept medical and social support, while persons living with Type 2 diabetes are expected to deal with their disease more individually. The topic of vaccination was also high on the (health) policy and research agenda prior to the pandemic but became even more of a priority during the pandemic. Particularly, the role of communication in increasing vaccination willingness and decreasing vaccination hesitancy was deemed a high priority. In the article by Vanherle and colleagues (2023), the role of interpersonal communication, news and social media was investigated for its associations with Covid-19 risk perceptions, vaccination willingness and compliance with Covid-19 regulations using daily diary data from 208 emerging adults in Belgium. The role of news media was particularly important for Covid-19 risk perceptions, which then affected vaccination willingness. In contrast, social media use was particularly important for stimulating interpersonal communication about Covid-19.

Secondly, the three papers in this special issue rely on research methods that were “Corona-proof”, that is reaching out to diverse samples of respondents and gathering data (at one or several moments in time) via online tools. That is, they use either a longitudinal online survey (Marciano et al., 2023), an electronic diary study (Vanherle et al., 2023), or semi-structured interviews via phones or videocalls (Temmann, 2023). Finally, the three papers all underline the power of social connections. They show that online interactions are crucial to children’s and adolescents’ life satisfaction in times of isolation (Marciano et al., 2023), emphasize that the perceived “societal” severity is not only a predictor of Covid-19 risk-reducing behaviours, but also that health topics are also further discussed on social media platforms (Vanherle et al., 2023), and that the societal framing of health issues by the media affects how the audience perceives social context as a cause and solution for health issues (Temmann, 2023).

To conclude, we believe that this Special Issue with articles that are first-authored by PhD students illustrates that the field of Health Communication in Europe is alive and kicking. While the Covid-crisis was disruptive in many ways, it also put important health topics to the spotlight, challenged (health communication) scholars to rethink their research methods, and illustrated the urge for evidence-based (health communication) interventions. Even though, at this moment in time (Fall 2023), society and scientists might experience a Covid-19 (research) fatigue, we do think that it is important for (future) health communication scholars to study the long-term impact of this crisis, not only on mental health issues among younger and older populations, but also on vaccination hesitancy, the use of online health applications, social media use and its positive or negative impact on well-being.
References


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**Dr. Gert-Jan de Bruijn** is a Professor Strategic Communication and Emergent Technologies at the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Antwerp. His research centers around the application of novel communication technologies, such as virtual reality, chatbots, and wearables, for societal and health-related purposes. His research is/was sponsored by various grants from Dutch Research Council, The Netherlands Organization for Health Research and Development, Diabetes Foundation, Netherlands Heart Foundation, and Horizon 2020. He doesn’t tweet.

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