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Informing social and behavior change programs: Using social listening and social monitoring

Breakthrough RESEARCH

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Informing Social and Behavior Change Programs

USING SOCIAL LISTENING AND SOCIAL MONITORING

This brief offers practical guidance on how to use social listening and social monitoring as tools to inform social and behavior change (SBC) programs. It is intended for global and regional SBC program implementers, evaluators, and donors in USAID priority countries. The brief provides an overview of social listening and social monitoring and explains how these methods can be important tools for collecting information about target audiences' knowledge and attitudes, as well as their exposure and responses to particular SBC interventions. Using applied examples in Francophone West Africa, it illustrates the steps undertaken in social listening and social monitoring, provides examples of lessons learned, and identifies how these methods can be applied to SBC programming.

KEY MESSAGES

- People throughout the world increasingly use social media to express themselves and engage in conversations about their lives and their health.
- Social and behavior change programs can leverage social listening to gather insights related to people's health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.
- Insights generated through social listening and social media monitoring can be used together with other monitoring and evaluation techniques to produce data-rich learning environments for program design and adaptation.

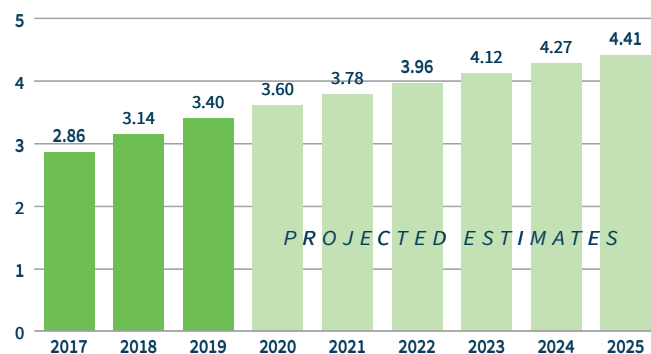
Background

An increasing number of people throughout the world are using social media to express themselves and engage in conversations about their lives and their health. As of 2020, nearly 3 billion people used social media¹ (see Figure 1). Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. Examples include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, blogs, news sites, etc.² Through social listening and social monitoring, their conversations and comments can provide a wealth of information to researchers and program planners.

Social listening is the process of tracking the number of mentions and conversation content related to a topic, program, or brand on social media.³ For SBC projects, social listening can be an important tool to understand user beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Social listening enables SBC programs to look at *what* is being said on social media, analyze the content and sentiment behind the messages—including misinformation—and use this information for program design and adaptive management.

Social monitoring, also called social media monitoring, is related to social listening and can be used to track a target audience's engagement with and reactions to shared messages related to a particular product or program. Monitoring changes in engagement and responses allows

FIGURE 1. SOCIAL MEDIA USERS REACHED OVER 3 BILLION IN 2020



Source: Statista, *Dossier: Social Media Usage Worldwide* (2020), <https://www.statista.com/study/12393/social-networks-statista-dossier/>.

program managers to measure audiences reached and conversation sentiment.⁴

These methods are of increasing relevance to SBC work in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) priority countries because internet and social media use are growing steadily there. In Francophone West Africa in 2017, Côte d'Ivoire's internet usage was 44%, while usage in Burkina Faso, Togo, and Niger was approximately 16%, 12%, and 10%, respectively, and rising. Men in sub-Saharan Africa are the primary internet users, revealing a gender gap in which women are 15% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 41% less likely than men to use mobile internet.⁵ Similarly, social media use is higher among men than women in the region, with women representing between one in three users of Instagram and one in four users of Facebook.⁶

Despite low- and middle-income countries' relatively small shares of populations using the internet and the gap between genders, their users spend about one hour more per day on social media than those in the United States. Globally, younger people in low- and middle-income countries spend two to three times longer on social media compared to older people.⁷ As internet usage continues to grow in these countries, the volume of social media conversation will rise, further increasing the availability of social media-related data, particularly for younger populations.

Public health programs can leverage methodologies such as social listening and social monitoring, traditionally used in marketing, to gather insights on health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors expressed through online interactions. These insights can be used in conjunction with other traditional monitoring and evaluation techniques to produce data-rich learning environments for program design and periodic programmatic adaptation.

How Is Social Listening Conducted?

Social listening uses existing data from public online sources. It can be conducted both retrospectively and prospectively, enabling SBC program, research, and evaluation stakeholders to access relevant insights in a quick and cost-effective way. Platforms in which social listening can be conducted include Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and news sites, among others.

Advancements in the development of machine learning algorithms for text analysis have expanded our capacity to rapidly collect and analyze social media data. For example, the LexRank machine learning algorithm can identify the most representative posts in a conversation, and the Crimson Hexagon/Brandwatch Brightview software can classify posts by topic.⁸

By leveraging the power of this software for social listening, analysts can: 1) identify key conversation terms and construct Boolean search strings using translated terms in all languages required; 2) set the listening or monitoring period of interest; 3) target one or more social media platforms; and 4) work with social media analysis software programs and machine learning software.

For social monitoring, the sources are limited to the social media channels used by the relevant SBC program. Program implementers may set up hashtag-monitoring systems to track engagement metrics and reactions to campaigns or content of interest. For example, a program may monitor posts on a campaign's Facebook or YouTube page while also tracking hashtags related to the campaign used on other social media platforms.

Information collected through the social listening process is analyzed for patterns in posts at scale to determine volume of posts; spikes in engagement; and drivers of conversation, sentiment, and audience affinities, among other characteristics. This analysis can be similar to an analysis of qualitative data from other sources. During this process, all posts used for analysis or featured in reports must be anonymized by removing names and profile pictures. Social listening platforms do not automatically anonymize posts, but it should be done by analysts to confer identity protections or, if in the context of research, abide by ethical human-subject requirements. Finally, the information is shared with program managers to determine how to use the findings to improve the design and adapt the program.

Social Listening and Social Monitoring to Inform SBC Programs in Francophone West Africa

Breakthrough RESEARCH is working with our resource partner, M&C Saatchi, to apply social listening and social monitoring to inform SBC programs throughout Francophone West Africa.⁹ We provide examples from our experiences using these methods of the USAID-supported activities Merci Mon Héros and Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) II.

The Merci Mon Héros Campaign

Breakthrough RESEARCH's sister program, Breakthrough ACTION, is implementing a mass and social media campaign called Merci Mon Héros (MMH) in nine countries in Francophone West Africa (see Figure 2). The campaign aims to: 1) encourage young people to talk about their family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) realities; 2) encourage adults to overcome restrictive social and gender norms to talk about FP/RH with young people; and 3) stimulate discussion between young people and adults to identify, address, and shift restrictive social norms and remove the shame and taboos that prevent young people from accessing FP/RH information and services.¹⁰

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING KEY TERMS

Total potential impressions: The number of people who could have seen any given post based on the number of followers of those who engaged with the post.

Total reach: The number of people who saw a post at least once. Reach is defined by Facebook as “the total number of people who had any content from your page or about your page enter their screen.”¹⁵

Total engagement/conversation volume: The total number of times people engaged with posts through reactions, comments, shares, retweets, mentions, and likes.

Sentiment: The overall positivity or negativity featured in a post. It reflects the tone of the keywords used in a post and is measured by analyzing those keywords.

FIGURE 2. **MERCI MON HÉROS**



Source: Merci Mon Héros Campaign.

The MMH campaign was developed by youth through an initiative supported by Breakthrough ACTION and launched online in November 2019, primarily through Facebook. MMH campaign messages were also disseminated through other traditional media channels and community-level events. Campaign content included original testimonial videos

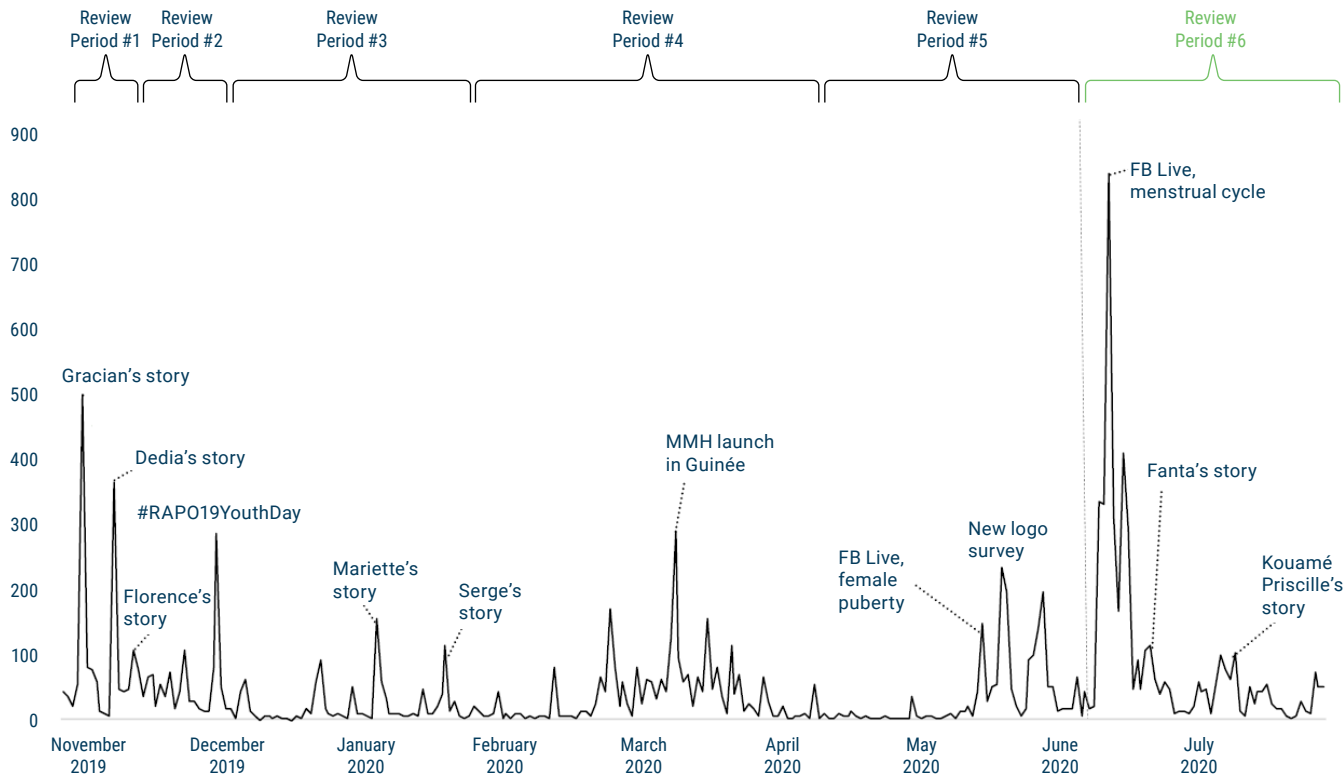
featuring youth and adults discussing topics such as first periods, first sex, first pregnancies, first relationships, and family planning methods.

Breakthrough RESEARCH uses social listening to monitor and evaluate the MMH campaign in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Togo in conjunction with other research methods. The social listening component helps stakeholders to:

- Identify knowledge and attitudes toward key FP/RH topics in target countries.
- Detect engagement with the MMH campaign content and provide recommendations for program adaptation.
- Recognize how knowledge and attitudes regarding key FP/RH topics changed over time.

A social listening report covering the period of November 2018 to November 2019 helped identify themes, such as the role of gender and partner communication, to incorporate into new campaign videos.¹¹ Figure 3 shows the campaign's timeline and volume of conversation on Facebook. Peaks in the line graph illustrate significant engagement and the

FIGURE 3. **MONITORING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MERCI MON HÉRO CAMPAIGN**
Conversation Volume, November 1–June 10, 2020



Source: Breakthrough RESEARCH. 2020. "Merci Mon Héros." *Social Listening Monitoring Report #6*. Washington, DC: Population Council.

content or events driving responses on social media.¹² Between Nov. 1, 2019, and July 30, 2020, 24,023 organic engagements occurred across social media channels directly related to the MMH campaign content, including shares, retweets, mentions, and Facebook comments in response to videos. These reports have informed the MMH strategy. For example, one finding indicated the campaign was reaching mainly youth and younger adults (ages 18 to 34), but not the older adults who are a critical audience for inspiring intergenerational communication to break taboos about discussing reproductive health. In response, youth leaders created additional online content specifically oriented toward older adults.

The Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) II Program

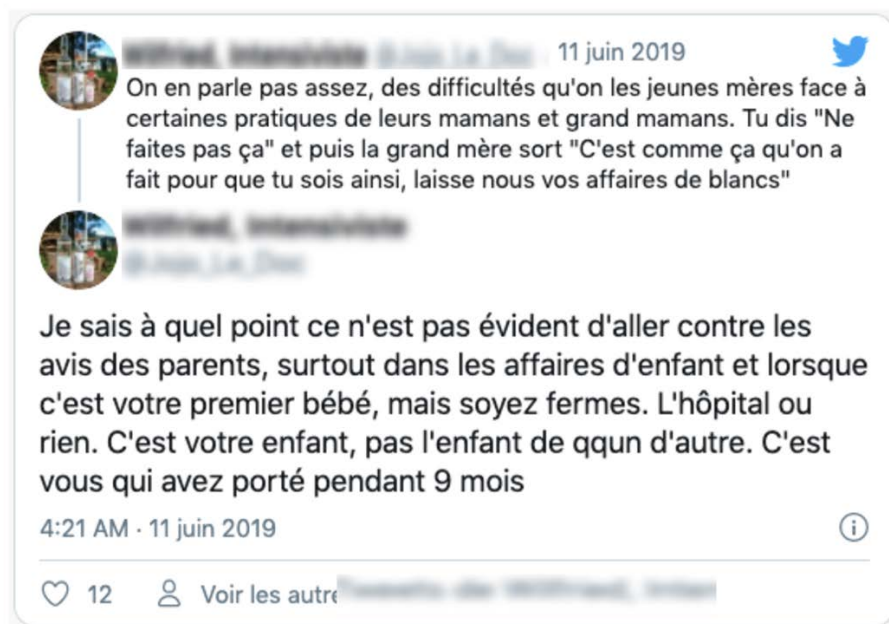
USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) II program targets chronically vulnerable populations through approaches to improve priority behaviors in maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH); family planning; nutrition; and water, sanitation, and hygiene. The program is implemented at the community and facility levels through four Development Food Security Assistance

partners and health service delivery mechanisms in selected zones in Burkina Faso and Niger.¹³ To support these implementation partners, Breakthrough ACTION provides capacity strengthening and technical assistance to the partners to improve coordination and enhance the quality and alignment of the program's SBC components.

Breakthrough RESEARCH uses social listening and social monitoring to help RISE II implementers identify needs and priorities among target audiences within communities for situation analysis and planning. Breakthrough RESEARCH surveys social media and press coverage sources to explore online conversations and identify beliefs, attitudes, and expressed social norms across health topics, including MNCH, nutrition, and water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Preliminary findings from social media and press coverage conversations provide insights regarding how young women feel social pressure to maintain traditional practices from older women related to pregnancy and childbirth. For example, as the tweets in Figure 4 show, some older women may encourage young mothers to avoid the hospital or to adopt cultural practices that may not be in the best interest of the child, and this pressure may be difficult to avoid.

FIGURE 4. SOCIAL MEDIA PROVIDES INSIGHTS INTO ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS



Translation:

"We don't talk about it enough, about the difficulties that the young mothers face in front of certain practices of their mothers and grandmothers. You say 'don't do that' and then the grandmother says, 'That's how we did it so that you can be like that, forget the stuff from the whites'."

"I know how hard it is to go against the advice of parents, especially in children's matters and when it's your first baby, be firm. Hospital or nothing. It's your child, not anyone else's child. It is you who has been carrying [the child] for nine months."

The Strengths of Using Social Listening and Social Monitoring to Inform SBC Programs

Social listening and social monitoring present many advantages for people implementing, monitoring, or conducting research about SBC programs, including communication campaigns.

- **Social listening is a highly flexible tool**, giving program implementers and researchers the ability to analyze data retrospectively or prospectively, in short- or long-time intervals as the volume of conversation allows.
- **Rapid insight generation** can be attained through social listening and social monitoring of data already present in online forums and social media platforms. The timeline from study concept development to insight generation can be just a fraction of that involved in traditional research.
- **Technology is evolving very quickly**, and social listening and social monitoring techniques will likely become more sophisticated and lead to better understanding of target audiences' feelings.

The Limitations of Using Social Listening and Social Monitoring to Inform SBC Programs

While social listening and social monitoring offer opportunities to rapidly collect information from online conversations regarding beliefs, attitudes, and social norms and behaviors, several limitations should be considered.

- **Generalizing of online data** is a risk. Due to the inequalities in access to the internet and social media use, social listening data cannot be considered representative of the general population and therefore findings cannot be generalized. This issue is further compounded by the fact that privacy considerations pose limitations to how much we know about who posts messages, particularly on platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

- **Conversation volume** should not be considered a perfectly precise measure. First, the search string is constructed to minimize irrelevant conversation and cannot be 100% effective. Second, some posts could feasibly sit across multiple topics, yet are assigned to just one topic.
- **Topic sentiment** is difficult to determine in written language, despite increased sophistication in the tools that analyze language. This difficulty is particularly true when the topic itself frequently manifests in language typically considered negative, such as “sexual abuse.”
- **Bots**, or computer programs intended to disrupt conversations, can spread false messages or create confusion. Depending on the topic, it may be necessary to review accounts or messages to separate out those that are not from real users.¹⁴
- **Other biases** may be present but not visible. Are people taking certain positions because they feel they will receive a benefit from their friends/followers? Are social media posters more or less likely to voice their real beliefs and opinions online rather than when talking to someone face to face, such as during more traditional qualitative research?

Social Media Is a New Source for Program Learning and Adaptive Management

The growing use of social media platforms provides an exciting opportunity to leverage online conversations to monitor and inform SBC programs, particularly in countries with high internet use. Insights generated through social listening and social monitoring can be used in conjunction with other traditional monitoring and evaluation techniques to create data-rich learning environments for periodic programmatic decisionmaking and ultimately improve program performance. Global and regional SBC program implementers, evaluators, and donors in USAID priority countries should consider incorporating social listening and social monitoring in their toolbox of methods to provide feedback for learning and adaptive management of programs.

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Photo credit: Merci Mon Héros, John Hopkins Center for Communication Programs

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Breakthrough RESEARCH, Population Council

4301 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 280
Washington, DC 20008
+1-202-237-9400
breakthroughactionandresearch.org
BreakthroughRESEARCH@popcouncil.org



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Breakthrough RESEARCH catalyzes social and behavior change (SBC) by conducting state-of-the-art research and evaluation and promoting evidence-based solutions to improve health and development programs around the world. Breakthrough RESEARCH is a consortium led by the Population Council in partnership with Avenir Health, ideas42, Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, Population Reference Bureau, and Tulane University.