GDPMR
Global Digital & Print Media Review

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Social Media in the Post-Pandemic World

Abstract: *Social media linkage to audience behaviors has remained a flashpoint for social scientists especially in the post pandemic world. The researchers, therefore, attempt to comprehend how exposure to social media affected different segments of social life including mental health; children safety; domestic violence; virtual education and social media usage protocols in the light of the evolving literature on COVID-19 and the use of social media. The review of the relevant literature indicated that social media exposure has been significantly associated with mental health issues like Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), anxiety and depression. Fear of the future served as the strongest mediator between functional impairment of health and media usage. It was also suggested that uncertain socio-economic situations along with social isolation can potentially increase the risk of domestic violence to which children are most vulnerable. To contain exposure to violent social media content development of effective remote access support mechanisms was stressed. Similarly, In the post-pandemic scenario educationalists realized that certain elements of online education should be permanently incorporated in the routine curriculum to cope up with future challenges.*

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Introduction

Covid 19 was initially declared as a health emergency but later characterized as a pandemic. Restrictions were imposed on large gatherings and public movements at all levels including international and local movements.

Social distancing became the new normal during and after the pandemic which led to the audiences' dependence on social media. The paper has organized the literature review of studies related to COVID-19 and the use of social media in the post pandemic scenario

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into different themes including the focus on mental health, children's online safety, virtual education, and social media usage protocols. A detailed discussion on each theme is laid out in the following sections.

Media, Pandemic and Mental Health

The pandemic shifted the focus of many leading nations of the world towards mental health issues. Most of the literature generated in this context revolved around youth and its social media consumption habits. A related study conducted on Chinese students regarding social media usage and mental health during the pandemic revealed that the higher level of exposure to media was directly associated with worsening mental health conditions. Excessive exposure to disaster-related news triggered negative effects among the viewers which in turn contribute to increasing mental health issues (Zhao & Zhou, 2020).

In situations where mass-level trauma has involved exposure to media content had either long-term or short-term negative effects on mental health. Even in man created disasters like Iraq War and 9/11 exposure to its media coverage was linked with rising levels of Post-Traumatic Stress (Silver et al., 2013).

Post-pandemic literature suggested that COVID-related social media exposure has been significantly associated with mental health issues like STS, anxiety, and depression. Consumption of pandemic and disaster related information from social media platforms was regarded as the highest contributor in terms of deteriorating mental health conditions. The differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) by Valkenburg & Peter (2013) was effectively used to comprehend the relationship between the health outcomes of the audience and patterns of media usage. DSMM argued that patterns of media usage can affect physiological, psychological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes. Audience members with prior history of challenging mental health if exposed to disaster or pandemic-related news tend to witness an increase in the levels of mental distress (Thompson, Jones, Holman & Silver, 2019). High exposure to disaster and pandemic-related information also leads to an increase in mental distress among the audience. Although the relationship between health outcomes and media exposure has remained largely underexplored some of the available evidence suggested that fear of the future served as the strongest mediator between the functional impairment of health and media usage (Holman et al, 2019).

Some of the researchers also urged that higher exposure to covid related social media information led to a significantly higher level of depression because people struck at the hands of the pandemic faced real problems in terms of lack of available necessities which reinforced their feeling of helplessness. A stronger manifestation of the feelings of helplessness and sadness usually manifests in the form of depression in comparison to other forms of psychological distress including anxiety and STS (Zhao and Zhou, 2020).

Social media is usually associated with disseminating less credible information and creating a sense of confusion and fear among the public. The element of adding personal interpretation to social media information by its users can also potentially contribute towards disseminating misinformation (Wang, McKee, Torbica, & Stuckler, 2019). At the same time, there is also a growing counter argument that social media in comparison to traditional media has helped the audience in seeking news that could benefit mental health in terms of recommendations related to improving both physical and mental health (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). This has been possible because social media has improved the connectivity between health providers and patients. The extraordinary role of social media is also supplemented because of its ability to cope with high speed, outreach, and penetration among the masses. The high speed and the availability of an extensive amount of pandemic-related information, on the one hand allowed people to stay connected to the most relevant information but on the other hand also made people vulnerable to mental

health challenges as they were able to know about the stories of the people who succumbed to the pandemic (Zhao and Zhou, 2020). Although these arguments and counterarguments have remained largely underexplored because of the developing nature of studies majority of the literature points towards the potential of social media that can be used for the dissemination of credible health-related information.

On-line Children, Pandemic and Violence

The response adopted by most of the countries to deal with the COVID crisis led to extraordinary changes in the lifestyle of their citizens. Parents, guardians, and caregivers were overburdened with societal and economic pressures. Factors like financial insecurity, job losses and social isolation led to disruption in lifestyle which ultimately had irreversible effects on children as well. During the pandemic, children were required to spend more time online both for educational purposes and for interacting with peers which increased the chances of cyber bullying and various other forms of digital violence.

Stay-at-home restrictions led to a change in the frequency of domestic violence incidents as a surge was witnessed in such trends. Restrictions on movement forced the family units to spend more time together which in many cases led to "heightened tension in the household" (Babvey et al, 2021). It is believed that uncertain socio-economic situations along with social isolation can potentially increase the risk of domestic violence to which children are most vulnerable (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Lee & Ward, 2020).

It was realized during the COVID crisis that as human societies moved towards adopting dependency on technology, the protection of children from both virtual and actual violence became more challenging. Even in the developed world where the concept of functional children protection units was in place, lockdowns created disruption in such services. In more conventional societies signs of abuse faced by children were mostly

picked up by teachers, family members or other community workers. During and after the pandemic it became difficult for these support systems to work together as regular contact could not be maintained with children. Post-pandemic the world realized that these support systems, although mostly taken for granted played a pivotal role in ensuring the well-being of many vulnerable parts of the population, especially children.

The trends and data related to children and violence remained scarce and infrequent even in the pre-pandemic scenario, but the post-pandemic scenario made both the researchers and policymakers realize about the insufficiency of relevant data. Although during the last two decades, data regarding domestic violence has been generated the data regarding different forms of violence has remained largely under-explored (Gappa & Petrowski, 2020). Another limitation regarding the data on children and violence is grounded in the fact that most of the available information is based on high-income countries which makes it daunting for policymakers and researchers to make over all generalizations and long-term policies, especially in the underdeveloped and developing parts of the world.

The insufficiency of data in certain instances is covered up through the data available on social media regarding children's exposure to and contact with violence. Twitter, in this case, proved to be most beneficial as unlike other forums of digital media where there is a restriction to be at least 13 years of age to create an account there is no age limit to sign up on Twitter. Also, there are not many network restrictions on Twitter which makes it possible for users to post content which is visible to all users. As of July 2020, the number of twitter users was roughly 330 million of which 8 percent were below the age of 18 (Statista, 2020).

A new form of abuse referred to as Technology Facilitated Abuse has surfaced more strongly in the post-pandemic scenario as it has been frequently used to control, monitor, and harass behaviors through android screens, apps, and various other social

media outlets (Dougla, Harris & Dragiewicz, 2019). Dataset from Facebook has also been analyzed in the literature to classify the themes of violence about which the content is posted on social media. Some of the classified themes of violence on social media included awareness, empathy, fundraising, personal story and general (PettyJohn, Muzzey, Maas, and McCauley, 2019).

Babvey et al, [2021] compiled data regarding the change in non-abusive and abusive tweets between November-December 2019 and March –April 2020 for 15 countries. The study found that the number of abusive messages saw a rise in all countries except Sweden. The findings are represented in the following figure:

Graph 1

Ratio between the number of tweets from November-December 2019 and March-April 2020 by whether the tweets were abusive or non-abusive
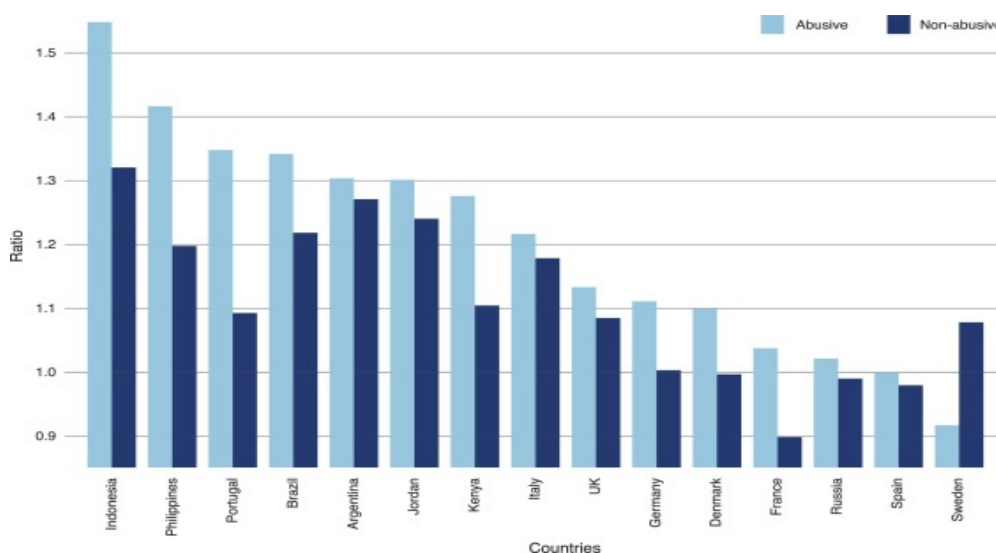
Source: Babvey et al [2021]

The post pandemic scenario with respect to social media and children has created a realization that how Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can help in the auto distinction between abusive and non-abusive content. To contain exposure to violent social media content development of effective remote access support mechanisms must be stressed upon.

Pandemic, Virtual Education, and Social Media

Most of the universities and educational institutions were neither well equipped nor prepared to incorporate online and distant

learning elements into their routine curriculum. Android screens and social media not only revolutionized the world of connectivity but also had a dominant influence on distant learning and its related areas. The Pandemic saw an increased reliance on virtual classroom forums including google classroom, Edmodo, and other related software and apps. Along with these virtual classroom setups, social media was also effectively used for the purpose of formal education.

Educationalists are seeing social media platforms like Facebook, Youtube and Instagram as potential forums of students'

engagement. The effectiveness of such platforms can be best measured by analyzing the learning objectives of courses offered through distant learning and social media apps (Muller et al, 2018). The involvement of social media platforms make the instructional goals attractive and interactive for students which helps in increasing the efficacy for both instructors and students (Swan, 2003). Online learning either through social media or through virtual platforms has been more effective in theoretical courses in comparison to practical courses (Nadeak, 2020).

There is also a growing concern that too much engagement through social media and virtual platforms in education might deviate students all together from traditional and conventional forms of education. In the post-pandemic world educationalists have realized that online learning also brings with it the challenges of physical distance because of which actual involvement and attention of students cannot be assured. The lapse of concentration is bound to occur more frequently in online learning as compared to physical classes (Szpunar, Moulton & Schacter, 2013). To ensure the efficacy of online classes it is mostly recommended to keep the duration of the classes short so that the maximum attention of students can be captured during the lectures. Some studies have also pointed towards the difficulty in comprehension of the reading material provided during online lectures which required the instructors to provide a more detailed explanation of the support material (Nadeak, 2020).

Overall, in the post-pandemic scenario educationalists realized that certain elements of online education should be permanently incorporated in the routine curriculum so that in case of future challenges the education system has the online element embedded in it. The post-pandemic scenario also helped the world in realizing that online and digital platforms can help in bridging the literacy gap, especially in the developed and developing economies.

Post Pandemic Social Media Usage Protocols

Social media has the capacity to enormously increase the speed at which information flows across the world. But the speed and power of social media brings with it the need to be responsible. Displaying responsibility towards social media usage can help in not only the quick dissemination of information and sharing of scientific findings but also in developing safe and socially responsible human societies.

Any major happening be it at the local level, national or international level turns people towards social media for the purpose of gaining information. During the pandemic the searches regarding COVID statistics, its causes, symptoms, and preventive measures witnessed peak. The protocols of quarantine, social distancing and gatherings were far easier to disseminate through social media. Also because of the interactive nature of social media it became easier for the masses to share their stories with each other. This feature of prompt connectivity proved more beneficial for less developed and peripheral parts of societies as social media empowered them to gain access to relevant and useful information. Certain literature pointed towards the fact that the effective distribution of scientific information on social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter also helped in increasing the number of downloads and citations of the scientific literature (Eysenbacj, 2011; Allen et al, 2013).

Other than event-specific information social media has also been extensively used to connect at a more personal and intimate level. The feature of connectivity was heavily relied upon during COVID as travel and meet-up restrictions increased the dependency of people on social media for distant connectivity. Excessive dependence on social media also brings with it several challenges among whom the sharing of incorrect or incomplete or outdated information is the most challenging one. Most social media users, because of the lack of media literacy have the tendency to accept any information on its face

value. Another related disadvantage springs up from the *bubble filter* concept which was initially introduced by Eli Pariser (2011). A bubble filter broadly refers to a personalized ecosystem in which similar and connected content is shown to social media users. The problem of bubble filter springs up when a loop of similar kind of content is created for the user which bars him from exposure to counter or diverse information on any given issue. Bubble filter proves more harmful in scenarios of illness as repeated exposure to limited and incorrect information can lead to more harm than good.

In an attempt to counter the *bubble filter,* affect Gonzalez- Padilla & Blanco (2020) developed guidelines for the responsible use of social media for dissemination of information in general and scientific information in particular. The guidelines included the following:

1. Dissemination should be done preferably through standard platforms or professional groups.
2. The information generated from credible and verifiable sources should be shared.
3. Refrain from sharing information that adds to an already stressful environment.
4. Information with low-quality evidence must be avoided as it may lead to unfounded expectations.
5. Declaration of conflicts of interest must be encouraged.
6. Avoid seeking and providing medical advice on social media platforms through unauthorized individuals/groups/companies as it adds to public confusion along with other potential hazards.
7. In case of original scientific writings/manuscripts transparent peer review methods should be followed with clearly stated author/s details and institutional affiliation

Source: "González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco" (2020)

Conclusion

Human societies usually remain open towards changes that take place gradually and one at a time but Pandemics like other natural disasters push societies towards emergency measures which in turn have both short-term and long-term effects on the sustenance and wellbeing of citizens. Like all other facets of society, media in general and social media was also not well equipped to deal with the extraordinary situation. Still, it played the part of the effective support system for all sectors ranging from health services to the education sector. In the post pandemic world, the relationship with and dependence upon social media platforms needs to be reassessed in accordance with the standards of media literacy to ensure the sustenance of socially responsible and productive human societies.

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