News Consumption Pattern among the Youth during Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 witnessed one of the worst pandemic outbreaks in the history of humankind. The deadly coronavirus, COVID -19 took the world by storm. Even though the virus is presumed to have originated in 2019, by March 2020 it crossed all boundaries and swept everything in its way, from the global economy to trade; everything collapsed. When the entire globe was confined within four walls, social media disseminated information across borders at a lightning pace. We live in the era of digital media where everything is just a click away. Social media has replaced traditional media where most youth obtain information on any topic. However social media is also a double-edged sword, having its pros and cons. On the one hand, it helps disseminate awareness during crises, however, it also adds to the misinformation burden. COVID-19 witnessed misinformation and fake news spread like wildfire. As the World Health Organization (WHO) has described, it was an "Infodemic" running parallel to the pandemic. Unlike the olden days were news channels, newspapers and radios were the only sources of getting news updates, the advent of social media flipped the news consumption pattern. The current study looks at how news was consumed during the lockdown by a specific age group of people and how social media platforms changed the face of news consumption.

KEYWORDS: *Youth, Lockdown, Social media, COVID-19 pandemic, Infodemic, Information Pollution*

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has become a household term, an everyday reality we encounter since 2020. Last year, we were unaware of this deadly virus and how it was going to impact our lives forever. COVID-19 changed everything, from lifestyle to how we go about the most trivial happenings. It also changed how we consumed news. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a "public health emergency", social media platforms were flooded with information related to the pandemic, starting from memes to videos about the origin of the virus; how it spreads; precautions; what are its symptoms, and aftermath. India saw a huge explosion in internet penetration during the lockdown time. India's internet consumption rose by 13% since the nationwide lockdown was put in place to check the spread of Covid-19. According to Telecom Ministry data that showed Indians consumed 308 petabytes (PB) or 308,000 terabytes (TB) of data daily on an average for weeks beginning March 22. As COVID-19 made billions to quarantine and isolate them at their homes, as an attempt to control the outbreak and stop the spread, the internet penetration got higher. As the lockdown was imposed, companies were forced to adopt work-from-home, schools had to switch to the online mode of education, thus making the internet a necessity rather than a luxury. The pandemic evoked fear in people's lives, as they wanted to be updated every passing second about the pandemic and the havoc it was causing around; thus news was given much higher importance than ever before. Everyone was glued to their television, phones, and other devices to get updates about the virus. From the daily count of casualties to understanding the restrictions imposed by the government, news channels became staples on television screens. The news was not only consumed through news channels, the young generation who are hooked to their phones used social media as a mode of gathering information. But not everyone realizes what they see on social media may not be true, most of the time they forward or share what they get even without checking whether it is true or verifying its source. Thus as much as social media made dispersal of news easy, on the other hand, dissemination of misinformation was also made easy. Keeping all this in mind this paper looks into various aspects of social media and how it influenced news distribution and answers a few questions related to this topic.

OBJECTIVES

- To determine news consumption patterns among the age group of 15 – 30.

- To find out which was the most used media platform during the lockdown

- To find out the attitude of people towards fake news during the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

A variable is a measurable characteristic that varies. This is dynamic and varies from person to person, group to group, or even within one person over a while due to many external and internal factors. Descriptive research is conducted to understand and then describe the key characteristics of a "mass audience". This focus is on "what" questions rather than how, when, or why the characteristics have taken place. In any kind of research, the data serves as the backbone, without right and enough data, research can't be done effectively. In this survey, the method of data collection used is a questionnaire. It is an e-form generated and distributed by the means of Google forms, for the survey, statistical study, and collection of information for the research. The tools used for the interpretation of the collected data are pie charts and bar graphs. The collected data from 210 participants through the questionnaire is classified and processed into representational diagrams for convenient understanding. The sampling technique used here is "convenience sampling", a type of non-probability sampling method, where participants are selected on the basis of availability and their willingness to take part; so that useful results can be obtained. On account of COVID-19 the survey was conducted online using Google forms for which participants were given 24 hours to submit their responses. A Google form link has been shared with 250 youth out of which 210 participated and responded to the survey questionnaire. Questions in the survey questionnaire were constructed in such a way that maximum information can be extracted without any ambiguity. The questionnaire contained 13 questions, most of them being multiple choices.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were from the age group 15-30, who are active citizens in the society and are aware

of the contemporary issues going rounds. They were mostly from the southern states of India, the highest number of them being from Kerala, then Karnataka and Tamil Nadu having the least number of participants. As Figure 1 indicates, the majority (82.9%) of the respondents were youth belonging to the age group of 21 – 25. Most of them stayed at home with their family while only a small section of the respondents stayed away from home.

RESULT ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The majority of users belong to the age group of 15-20, that is 82.9% of the 210 respondents. From this, we can clearly understand that the younger generation is the ones who consume news digitally. From figure 1 it is evident that the hours of media consumption have increased during the lockdown. Most of the respondents spend spent more than 5 hours consuming various content. Among this environment and health gained prominence as per figure 5, i.e., 65.7%.

The cultural shift of consumption of news from the "traditional" news sources such as newspaper or television news channels to social media is the new trend. Nearly half of the participants depend upon social media as a source of news and information and the diminishing value of the ratio can also be seen in Figure 1.
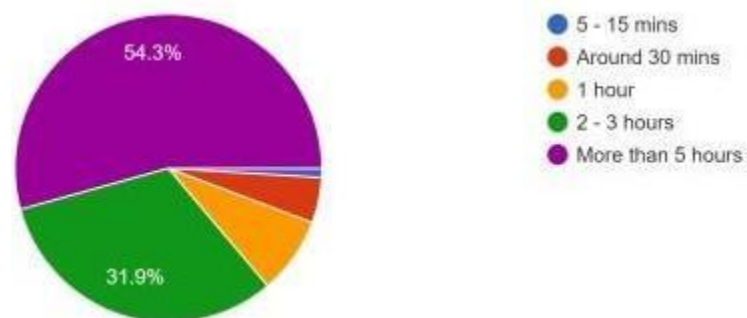

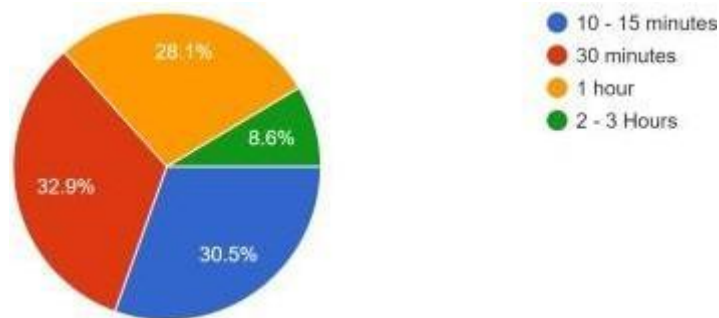**Figure 1. Time spent on media consumption**

Figure 2. Time spent on news consumption

As internet penetration increased 13% during the lockdown time, the increase in screen time is bound to happen. Figure 1. shows that the "internet addiction" nearly half of the people spent more than 5 hours consuming different kinds of media according to their preferences.
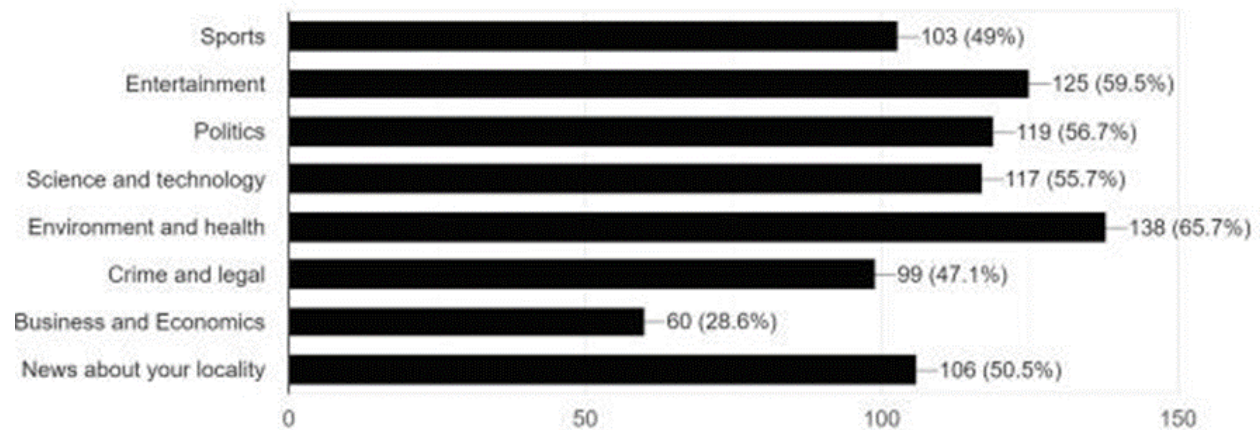

Figure 3. Type of news consumed

COVID-19 made news an essential part of life, as it was the means to get updated about the pandemic across the globe. Figure 3 shows the consumption pattern of different topics of news, Environment, and health topping the list with 65.7%, Entertainment 59.5%, local news 50.5% being the top 3.
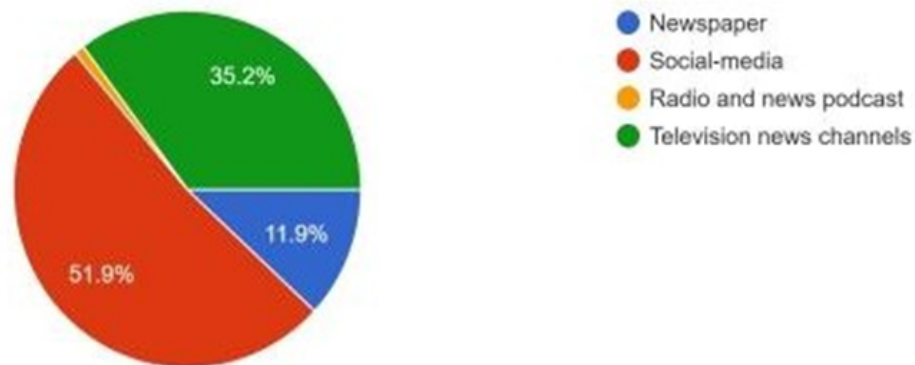
Figure 4. Means of News Consumption

Figure 4 represents various ways in which news is consumed by different people. A close look at the data retrieved from the study enables us to conclude that most of the youth depend upon social media for accessing news content.
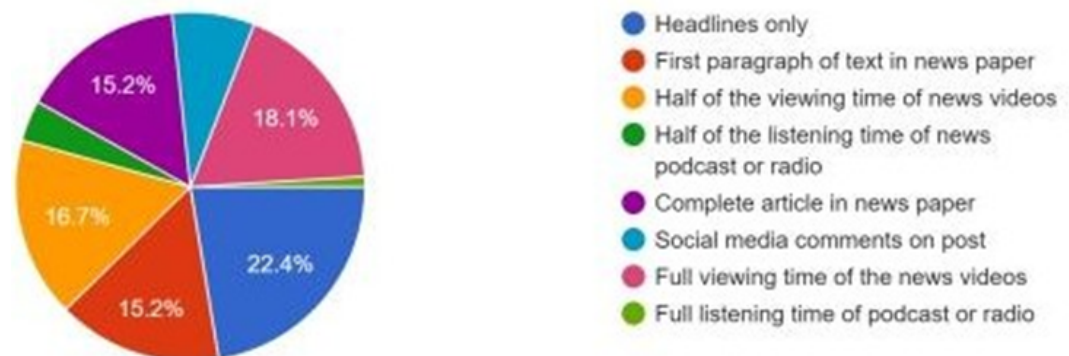

Figure 5. How news is consumed

Figure 5 indicates the pattern in which the respondents spend time-consuming the news items. The majority of the audience 'skimmed' through the headlines, which may say to be indicating the lack of interest in reading the news item. But contrary to this there is more interest for the news broadcasted on television, which clearly indicates the preference of television over print

during the lockdown. People spent considerable time watching the entire video of the news content.
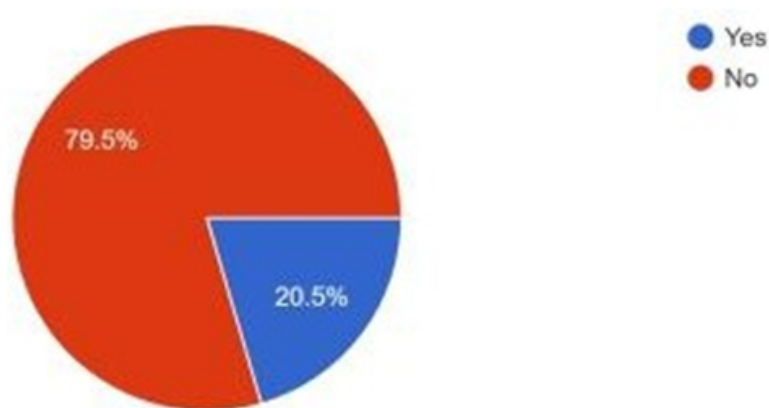

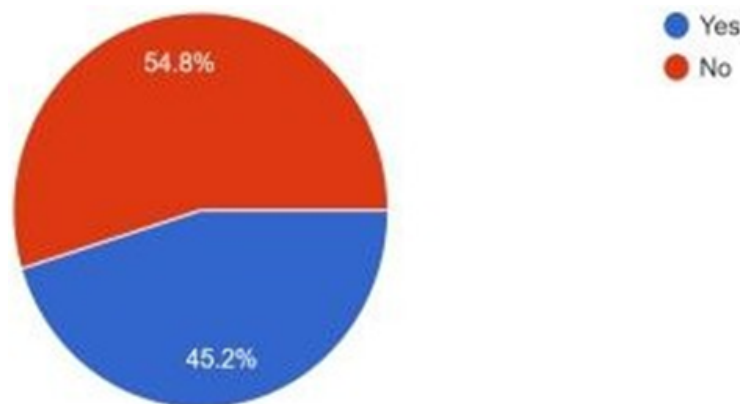**Figure 6. Consistency of COVID news across the portal**

Figure 7. The focus of media on non-COVID-19 news

Most of the respondents believe that news portals covered Covid news in a consistent manner. The focus on the non – Covid news is less during the pandemic. Figure 8 and figure 9, below depict the percentage of people who trust and believe every news item they come across in media platforms and their reactions towards it.
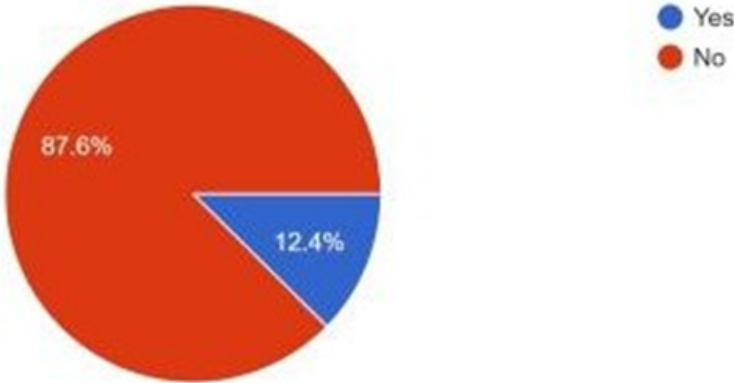
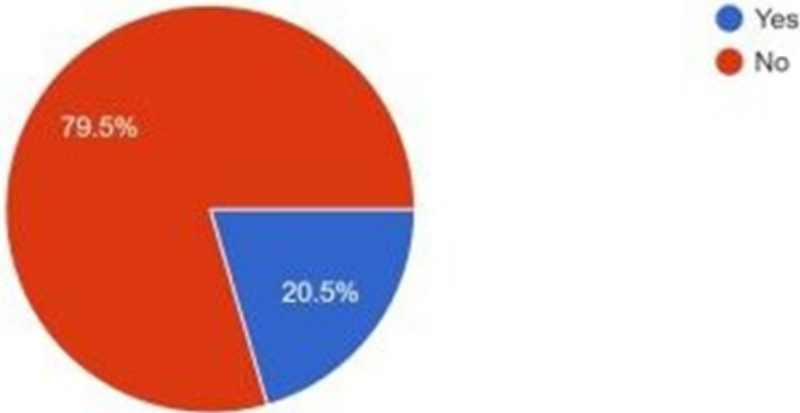**Figure 8. How many people trust the news they read?**

Figure 9. Cross-checking before sharing

Figure 10 reveals that most of them do not believe in what they see as news and which make them verify the news before sharing it (figure 9). "Information pollution" or the spread of misinformation comes hand in hand with the pros of the social media, unknown sources, no verification about the origin, are few of the reasons why fake news spread. Most of the time, when we come across some information of contemporary importance, we share it; even without checking whether it is true or false. This is the reason why people find it very hard to believe what they see online, thus 87.6% of people don't believe every bit of news they come across (figure 8) and 87.6% of the people verify the source and authenticity of the information before
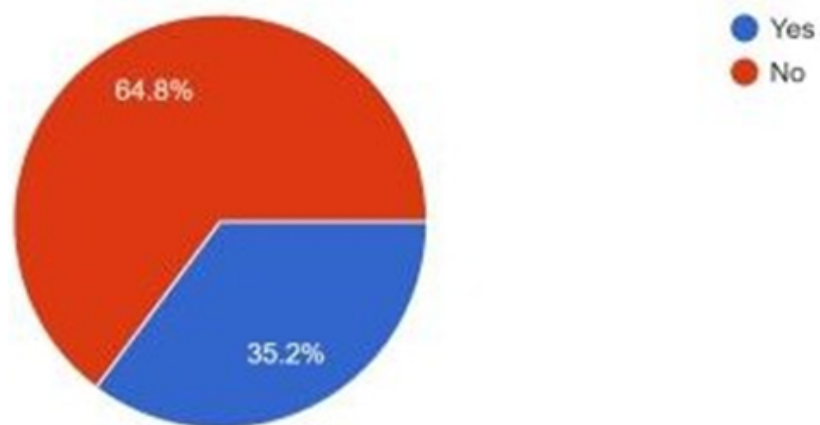
sharing it (figure 9).

Figure 10. Pie chart depicting the trust of people in the media

During the pandemic, one thing which was very evident and caught everyone's attention was the inconsistency of news. Even if large chunks of data were given out daily, it varied across the platforms, leaving the people ambiguous about the numbers Figure 10. From the response to the last question, it is evident that society plays a key role in the dissemination of "fake news" (Figure 11).
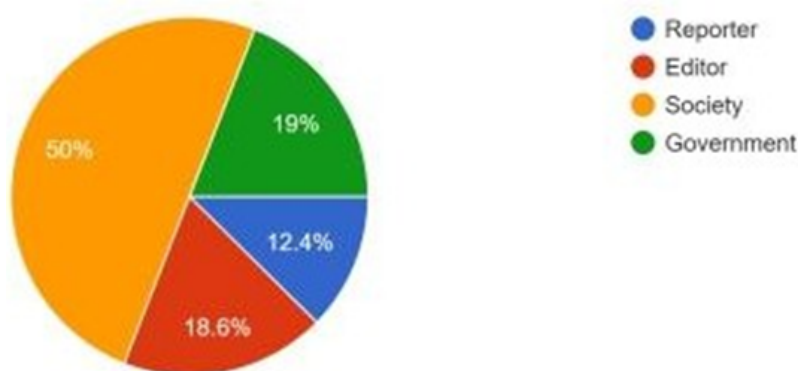

Figure 11. Opinion on fake news

From the above survey and its statistics, it is proved that during the lockdown, consumption of news got a whole new different meaning. The shift of the present-day crowd from the

traditional media to the world of social media to get news shows how the advent of electronic media influenced every sphere of life. The present generation due to multiple incidents is now more conscious about the news they consume and verify and cross-check its source and authenticity. From the above graphical representations, we can infer that social media is the most used platform during the lockdown. As part of digitization, every piece of information is available from the comfort of their houses. From Figure 1 it is clear that the majority of users belong to the age group of 15-20, that is 82.9% of the 210 respondents. Nearly half of the people depend upon social media as a source of news and information and the diminishing value of radio can also be seen in Figure 6. As internet penetration increased 13% during the lockdown time, the increase in screen time is bound to happen, Figure 4 clearly conveys the "internet addiction" nearly half of the people spent more than 5 hours consuming different kinds of media according to their preference. COVID-19 made news an essential part of life as it was the means to get updated about the pandemic across the globe. Figure 5 shows the consumption pattern of different topics of news, Environment, and health topping the list with 65.7%, Entertainment 59.5%, local news 50.5% being the top 3. We can narrow down the findings into four points: -

1. Those from the younger generation are the ones who consume news digitally through social media.

2. Many people depend on social media for news and information, but they don't entirely consume them as truth.

3. Increase in cross-checking the authenticity of the news.

4. There is a change in reading preferences during the pandemic with the environment and health topping the chart.

CONCLUSION

We human beings, being social animals, cannot sustain ourselves without communication.

During tough times like pandemics, it becomes necessary to communicate with one another to inform and educate. Media holds a special place and plays a pivotal role in society by providing news and information. As internet usage increased, consumption of news also increased, as news is one of those ways in which people can stay updated about the issues. This helps them to adapt to the dynamic environment of society. On the other side of it, we all know it is so easy to disseminate information to society through the media, in the same way, "misinformation" or "fake news" can also spread like a wildfire. Wrong information during the pandemic can create problems of greater gravity and cause social unrest. The cultural shift from traditional media to social media, is one other cause of the spread of misinformation, as anyone can post anything, hiding behind the mask of a fake identity. During the last year, we saw social media blow up many cases out of proportion. Take the example of Sushanth Singh Rajput case, where the media was coming to their conclusion, or even the present Zomato case wherein the beginning, with the video by Hitesha Chandranee accusing the delivery guy got viral and people shared and commented on it even without knowing both sides of the stories, now when the other side of the story is out, a vast majority of people are shocked. Most of the time people just want to follow the trend of reposting what everyone is reposting, but if consumers take time to check if the information is from a credible source or not "information pollution" can be reduced. The "infodemic" is here to stay if we don't start taking necessary action.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the close analysis of the data collected, it can be sensed that there is a tendency among the respondents to skim through the news headlines, who also showed less trust with the media content served as news. But it cannot be neglected that there is the emergence of a public/community that in a way paves way for new media habits. It can be more explorative if we could look at this in relationship with the popularity of the 'fact check' initiatives that gained popularity again during the pandemic, in other words how the existence of 'infodemics' paves way for new media habits. Furthermore, the study clearly reveals that even in a period of total uncertainty and fear when citizens had to depend on various media platforms for every

piece of information on their survival, there is a fear for fake news and information. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) date incidents of circulating fake/false news and rumours saw nearly a three-fold rise in 2020 over 2019. A total of 1527 cases of fake news were recorded during the initial year of the pandemic alone. There is a gap between the policies and measures to book fake news and information which eventually harness the effective information flow in the age of pandemics. Under these circumstances communication specialists and professionals should urge for sensitization of society, to navigate through the age of infodemic by conducting seminars and workshops. As the major consumers are younger people more focus should be given to conducting awareness programs and seminars in educational institutions, thus ensuring the cultivation of responsible media consumption habits.

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