

## Consumer Behavior in the Era of Information with Special Reference to COVID -19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

Individuals consume information from different sources and platforms. During the outbreak of Novel Corona Virus, the information behaviour of individuals completely changed due to information overload. People reported mental issues and stress due to misleading and misguided information available on different media platforms. Due to information overload, distrust among the platforms increased. This paper aims to define the behavioural trends and patterns in the information consumption era of individuals on a general level. It will help readers understand the general and psychological aspects of individuals during a critical period

**Keywords:** *Information Consumption Behaviour, COVID-19, Pandemic, Social Media, Fake News, media trends, crowd reactions*

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### 1. Introduction

COVID-19, the ongoing pandemic, has created havoc amongst the masses and uncertainty. When no one knew what the future would be, the whole world had come under this dreadful disease and everything came to a terrifying standstill. As equipped as we are with the technology, the reliance on the same increased, where everything has to be done online; whether it is gaining information, attending or taking classes, so on and so forth.

But there was a growing pandemic outside, there was a slow poison spreading on the inside injected through the media to the masses, creating anxiety, fear, and ambiguity of what is going to happen next. Individuals started raising questions like if this news are credible or authentic enough to trust, should they rely on what is being told online when the news was being repetitive and no one knew what can be next. The media tried to divert the audience by focusing more on other issues which either were baseless or out of context to be specific here, social media does have the power to either make or break things (*Soroya, Farooq, Mahmood, Isoaho, & Shan-e Zara, 2020*).

Pandemic has put an emphasis on credible information in an age of spam and fake news overflowing on informal social media platforms. Credible information became the need of the hour and it had forced citizens to re-examine their patterns of information consumption. This paper analyses those patterns and behaviour that have evolved throughout this pandemic. The quick spread of the novel coronavirus disease has disrupted life across the globe. The level of trust and sources of information also played an important role in motivating the engagement in self-protective behaviours. Consumers have also shown increased interest in the content hosted by government sites whether that it is the latest number of COVID- 19 positive cases or the most updated guidelines to be followed. Governments use mass media, print media, and the internet to mobilize the community, convey precautionary measures to the people and inform them about the supportive measures and channels the content available from these sources amplified the risk of perceptions and fear especially when individuals cannot discern between real and fake news which adversely affects the mental health and well-being of the masses

## **2. Literature Review**

Due to changes in the information ecosystem after the last global outbreak, World Health Organization (WHO) officials have spoken about the need to combat not only the new COVID-19 pandemic but also the associated infodemic pandemic. The perceived credibility of the information received was related not only to lower levels of negative emotional reactions, but also to higher adherence to much-needed self-protective measures to contain the spread of the disease (*Lep, Babnik, & Beyazoglu, 2020*).

People have found that they are seeking information from conventional outlets, such as mass media, print media, and online sources, such as official websites and newspaper and forum websites. Social networking and personal networks were not the preferred sources of information. On the other hand, between various sources of information, exposure to social media has a major relationship with information overload as well as information anxiety (*Soroya, Farooq, Mahmood, Isoaho, & Shan-e Zara, 2020*).

Health information-seeking behaviour (HISB) concept is most commonly described in the literature as an active or purposeful behaviour undertaken by an individual to find information about health, However, limited literature is found investigating HISB among patients or healthy individuals during a disease outbreak Hence this study dedicatedly investigates this segment of the community with regards to their information needs, sources, barriers, and satisfaction with overall existing sources. This could be of value to guide health

awareness and promotion efforts in a situation facing a parallel epidemic of anxiety, panic, and depression (*Ebrahim, Buheji, & Jahrami, 2020*).

Mass media have been cited as a promising means with which to provide health-related information that potentially impacts audiences' behavioural outcomes on a large scale. Particularly, the rapid development of information and communication technologies in recent years has enabled digital media as the dominant channels for broadcasting health information. People could stay up to date on the latest news about the disease at their own convenience, check facts when encountering uncertainties, and obtain informational assistance for health management. due to the disseminating potential, digital media have become prominent in driving the change of preventive behaviours, as well as minimizing the risk of pandemic threats, resulting in the association between health-related information consumption and disease control behaviours (*Piper, 2020*).

### **3. Research Gap**

The challenges that were faced while reviewing the literature were about the statistical data availability of the topic. The data that is available on various instruments is limited as the issue is very new in terms of data collection and its interpretation. The data is either area- specific or age-specific. This limits the reach of the research to a certain point. Sources provided by different organizing bodies were comparatively inaccurate as the subjects providing data were irrational due to the ongoing pandemic. Due to social norms and various governmental policies, it was challenging for the researchers to get primary data. Apart from this, many of the referred papers had limited disclosure of information due to the WHO protocols.

### **4. Research Objectives**

1. To analyse the impact of information on behaviour of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To identify and determine the information consumption patterns of individuals.
3. To observe the individuals' reactions to misleading and fake information.
4. To find causes of information distrust amongst the people.

### **5. Research Methodology**

The research is based on a mixture of primary and secondary data analysis. The primary data was collected by interviewing people who have suffered through the issue of information distrust. The questionnaire included personal and social changes of an individual due to the information overload. The questions covered the attitude, behaviour, and opinions of the interviewees. The secondary data analysis emphasizes general and miscellaneous aspects of

information behaviour during pandemics. The data has been collected by different journal platforms such as ResearchGate, Elsevier, Science Direct, Frontiersin, and Google Scholar.

## **6. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Primary data was collected through different interview sessions with people from different backgrounds, this includes students, working professionals, teachers, and house-wives

In the interview, questions regarding the pandemic and its impact on the information behaviour were asked.

In the beginning, the interviewee mentioned that their information behaviour, in general, has developed and changed. The lockdown has caused that the credibility of the news has been questioned. Their Information consumption increased because more time was spent at home and the latest news was checked daily. The interviewee commented: *“Concerning the cultural aspect I would say that fear has increased as a result of the agitation in the German media. A split in our fellow society is also present in my opinion – especially in social media.”* It was mentioned that there is no trust in news media anymore because there was too much unclear and partly contradictory news. They believe that there were *“too many allegations but no accurate evidence.”*

According to the interviewee, Information consumption has increased significantly among friends and family and they are in a constant search for credible and ultimate information (“When is the end of Corona? When can we go back to our old life?”). Since the social contact had to be reduced to a minimum, social media is also used significantly more. When asked about challenges during this time and the effect on the health, it was said that they have become much more anxious. Their self-confidence has decreased, and they were living in permanent fear because of the information overload. Moreover, they have physical issues from being at home (i.e., home office, online semester).

The interviewee stated that the behaviour during lockdown was completely different and challenging. During the interview, the interviewee mentioned that they were away from their family and it was difficult to survive without them.

According to the interviewee, lockdown and social distancing made them dependent on different media for gathering information on the happenings in the world. The interviewee was inactive in reading the news in general, but lockdown and pandemic forced them to check it regularly. In the beginning, they used to rely on a single source for gathering information but later they found that the information is not much reliable and then, they started reading different media platforms for seeking more information.

They also mentioned the negative side of general media where they used to exaggerate the numbers and different sources for grabbing attention. This had created a huge impact on the mental health of the interviewee and they also said that due to reliance on these media networks it was difficult for them to identify what was right and what was wrong because of which they got really confused on which source they should believe in. they also informed that they used to believe on whatever the information they gathered through social media just because it was sent by their close ones. This created a huge impact on their mental health and as they were away from family, they had a lot of concerns regarding this, which resulted in hypertension, anxiety, fear of missing out, and depression.

Lastly, they reported that the situation could be improved with positive news which should be considered to strengthen the mental health (i.e., focus on how many people recovered or other positive topics). It was mentioned that it is also possible to reduce the usage of social media, as the human brain cannot tolerate such an information overload. It is important to look *“critically about the content the media show us”*. They concluded by saying that the medium of information should be transparent and true and it should focus on the valid content and look after the consequences of their announcements beforehand.

**Table A: Usage of different media platforms for seeking information**

Serial Number	Media Platform	Usage in %
1	Online News Portals	74.1
2	Television News	65.7
3	Social Media	61
4	Official webpage of NIPH	55.3
5	Radio Professionals	27.7
6	Health Care Professionals	11

Source:(Lep, Babnik, & Beyazoglu, 2020)

Within the days of the COVID-19 outbreak in Slovenia, a study was conducted to understand the usage of different information portals among 1718 participants. Table A describes the study and this shows that the most relied upon sources were the online news portal followed by television news social media and the official webpage of NIPH (Lep, Babnik, & Beyazoglu, 2020).

The scientific data used for the research also presented the big impact the pandemic has on people's life and on people's mental health as well as on their information behaviour. While

the pandemic taught people to broaden their perspectives towards information as well as being smart about relying on information they also widened one's resources and learn to be critical of the information which is presented to them. This causes an increased demand for reliable and credible information while the number of COVID-19 cases were increasing rapidly, people's anxiety and worries also started to increase.

Many people also reported that they were overwhelmed by information consumption during the lockdown. Information became the key to understand how the world looks and will look but it also became something troublesome. The pattern seemed to vary between consuming variety of information to complete information avoidance as the pandemic spread across the world. This information overflow is causing an impact on people's mental health like anxiety and other mental problems. The pandemic also increased the demand for mental health services because the impact of people's mental health started to grow triggers for mental health conditions. according to the world health organization (*WHO, 2020*)

## **7. Contribution and Conclusion**

There is an increased demand for reliable information. The participants of the studies are satisfied with the information supply they're getting during the crisis. The participants also have feelings of information overload. In general, people trust scientists the most followed by general practitioners.

Perceived credibility of news relayed by medical professionals and scientists is linked to lower negative emotions and higher subjective knowledge of self-protective behaviours. It can be said that people gather information from different sources especially from online news portals, television news, and social media. The dependence on media increased during the pandemic and there is a huge need for reliable and credible information. A concentration on psychological impact is very important and there is also a need for factoring the information overload and its impact on the discourse of mental health. The perception of how information gets manipulated like fake news is a big aspect.

Furthermore, individuals looked for the authenticity of the website before consuming any knowledge. It was also mentioned that individuals' level of information anxiety has a significant impact on the level of information avoidance and that improvements like positive news or government restrictions can be introduced for future projects.

## **8. Scope for Further Study**

The scope in the future for this topic could be more as the database is getting bigger and the guidelines for disclosing the data are getting lenient. This would help to understand information behaviour in a general and holistic approach. In the future, as more statistical

data will be generated, this field of research will have a larger scope due to dynamic nature. This can be further researched in detailed ways. Intercultural, cross-cultural, and intracultural behaviours can be researched depending on the interests.

Apart from that, region or country-specific research can be done by conducting local surveys. These research analytics can be used as a bridge between the audience and the mediaplatforms to make their user experience better and healthy. By studying the patterns, media platforms can allocate the information supply to a particular audience category.

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