

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE EFFECT AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AMONG PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Background: The current pandemic has given rise to a lot of issues and one of them is the dissemination of information on social media platforms during COVID-19 and its impact on the people. The most important issue is that social media is flooded with mis-information's which spread more rapidly than reliable information and even faster than the virus itself. This is affecting the mental health of social media users who are being clutched psychologically

Objective: The basic objective of this study is to find out how social media has affected the people of Jhansi in created panic during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology: The data was collected through an online questionnaire framed as a Google form. A convenience sampling technique was used through which data from 280 participants was collected. Only descriptive study has been done and the results are interpreted by using crosstabs.

Results: It was found that social media has affected the mental health of people. COVID-19 is affected by social media negative affects and it is one of the factors to create panic among students, which directly or indirectly laid impact on their psychological well-being and mental health. social media (73.9%) is the highest preferred media which Youtube (54.3%) is the highest used platform followed by WhatsApp (42.9%), Facebook (42.1%) and Instagram (39.3%) there was no significant difference between females and males using YouTube. News related to health was the most recurrent topic taken into consideration (92.9%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the students (60.7%) were psychologically affected, whereas those were physically affected (28.6%). Female students were psychologically affected (58.2) and were more afraid than male students (41.8).

Conclusions: Therefore, this study showed that social media information such number of COVID patients and mortality rate due t COVID has created panic among society and people want that policies should be made for filtering information and making social media accountable for their work.

Keywords: COVID -19, Social Media, Dissemination, Accountability, Pandemic.

Introduction

Social media is a very important tool for disseminating information. Many people are influenced by the information provided via social media channels. Internet users are increasing day by day and the information is flowing and communicating at a very fast rate among people, therefore, the authenticity of information through these social media channels is a crucial and important issue because the information that is passed could affect the person positively or negatively that can, directly and indirectly, influences behavior changes in the person.

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Propagation of information through social media must be valid and should have a valid source of dissemination because if incorrect information is passed then its effects could be adverse and the person's physical growth, economic growth, and mental health of the person. It has been observed that during COVID-19 also people relied more on social media sites and used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other digital channels for gathering information regarding the number of deaths that took place in the country due to COVID, people also searched and posted information about the causes for the spread of Covid-19, some people posted their own created remedies to reduce Covid-19 effect etc.

During the COVID period as people were not able to get out of their houses because of the pandemic, so social media was the ultimate and most useful tool for them to hear and see news from social media sites. But unfortunately, due to poor responsibility by the government initiatives the social media site went unethical and produced and created wrong information for the public. Social media is accountable for the information that they do provide. Union IIT minister of India *Ashwini Vaishnav* says that "it is important to hold it accountable which will first start with self-regulation, then industry regulation, followed by government regulation." To effectively harness the power of media and information, users' responsibility must be demonstrated. Information and media consumers should always act responsibly. Being accountable makes us more conscious of our actions.

In order to get fame on social media and to earn money people are posting incorrect information. Some erroneous information even led to riots among religions, religious disbeliefs, and disputes have also been created through some channels therefore it is very important to raise the issue of accountability of social media and their ethical behavior. Advertisement that is unlawful and unethical must be scrutinized in content moderation decisions of social media platforms that should get as an incentive for more proactive user grievance redressal.

Statement of the Problem

Social media post so much information but the authenticity of the information is not available and such information could create a negative impact on society that can hinder the country's constructive development. We have seen its effect in Covid 19 situation as well. So, this paper it is tried to find out the impact of social media platforms during Covid 19 how they affected the psychological and physical development of the person. Therefore, it is important to find out the accountability of social media platforms.

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted which have shown the impact of social media during the period of COVID. (Eqbal Radwan, 2020) determined in their study revealed that social media has a significant impact on spreading panic about COVID-19 among school students, which poses a negative impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of the students. Social media has played a vital role in dissemination of information by social media during Covid19. (Chukwuere, 2022) Observed that social media platforms promulgate false news and misrepresentation (infodemic) about the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby jeopardizing public trust and promoting fear and panic. (Gunasekeran, 2022) reviewed the history of social media in health care and discussed potential negative and positive public health impacts. Research also identified that social media platforms have numerous potential benefits and drawbacks on public health. They are of the view that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown our imperfect and incomplete knowledge and presented wrong information which has detrimental impact on public health.

(Khan, 2021) analyzed the behavior of different groups of students during COVID-19 and explored that students mainly team up with networks on social media. He investigated that individuals are motivated by cognitive learning and perceived enjoyment. He also analyzed various factors that affects individuals' adoption for social media and perceived ease of use.

(Shaher & Radwan, 2022) analyzed that communication level by the government of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is totally changed by COVID-19 Pandemic and now new version of message delivery is seen in the process of communication. Social media now has become important tool to communicate and spread information among citizens of KSA. He found that KSA government has taken steps to increase social media as a means communication and to attract the citizens hearing through social media platforms.

As underscored by Figenschou (2020), social media has become an integral part of people's everyday lives, demonstrating its immense value in effectively managing crises such as the pandemic. The emergence of the pandemic prompted the strategic adoption of social media as a powerful tool for governmental communication. Through this platform, the government gained the capability to provide vital information to citizens, share comprehensive insights regarding imposed limitations, and issue daily guidelines related to Covid-19 (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

The forgoing review reveals that most studies have analyzed various forms of social media platforms and their impact on people and few studies have been done to see the effect of social media in creating panic in society but there is no previous study that is done in India to see the effect of social media and its negative effect generation during COVID-19.

Methodology

• Study Population and Sample

The target population consists of people of Jhansi especially belonging to an educated group which included teachers, students, business men, doctors etc. The survey was conducted in online mode on the basis of convenience so that more and more respondents can be approached. The questionnaire was shared with more than 300 people out of whom only 280 responded.

• Study Instruments

To measure the impact of social media platforms on the people of Jhansi who are using social media platforms during COVID-19, a well structured questionnaire has been prepared. The questionnaire consists of three sections (1) Demographic characteristics, (2) The social media platforms employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) the effect of social media panic on study participants. The objective of the study is:

- To study the socio-economic characteristics of people using social media platforms.
- To analyze the preference level of respondents towards usage of social media platforms.
- To study and analyze the impact of social media platforms in creating panic during the Covid-19

A reliability test was conducted initially to find out the consistency of data. A Cronbach Alpha coefficient was found to be 0.746 which states that the data is reliable.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach Alpha	N of Items
0.746	33

• Statistical Tools

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 22 and MS-Excel was used to analyze the data in this study. This study is entirely descriptive. Therefore, only descriptive statistics have been used for data analysis. To represent the demographic characteristics of the study participants and to compare them with the other variables crosstabs have been used. The data has been interpreted by using frequency distribution and percentages. The data has been depicted through various charts and tables.

Results/Analysis

Two hundred and Eighty (n=280) out of 300 responded in this study with a response rate of 93.3%. The demographic characteristics of the study participants are presented in **Table 2**. Of 280 participants there are 53.6% are females and 46.2% males. More than half (78.2%) participants 18 to less than 30 years of age. The participants under study are well educated as almost 40.7% are graduates, 30% post graduate and 10.7% are doctorates and 18.6% are Intermediate qualified.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Gender	Female	150	53.6
	Male	130	46.4
Age	18 to less than 30	219	78.2
	30 to less than 40	47	16.8
	40 to less than 50	14	5.0
Educational Qualification	Intermediate	52	18.6
	Graduate	114	40.7
	Post Graduate	84	30.0
	PhD	30	10.7
Total		280	100

Source: Primary Survey

(Table 3) On the question which type of media is preferred the most for gathering information regarding COVID-19, social media (73.9%) is the highest preferred media followed by news channels (37.9%). Social media is preferred by both females (51.7%) and males (48.3) as no significant difference have been found in their usage ($p>0.05$) most of the participants using social media platforms are youths (81.6) and belong to 18 to less than 30 years of age. The question device used to connect to social media most of the participants are using smart phones (97.1%) out of which 54.8% are females and 45.2% are male. It also reveals that there is no significant difference in the use of smart phones between male and females ($p>0.05$). The second most used device is laptop (23.9), which is used by (35.8%) females and (64.2%) males which shows that males use more laptops than females ($p<0.05$).

The results of the question, social media platform mostly used to get information about COVID-19, reveals that most of the participants use Youtube (54.3%) followed by WhatsApp (42.9%), Facebook (42.1%) and Instagram (39.3%). The percentage of usage of Youtube by females(50.0%) and males (50.0%) is equal. A significant difference have been found in the usage of Facebook by females(44.9%) and males (55.1%) which shows that males used more of Facebook than females ($p<0.05$). A significant difference have been found between the usage of Facebook ($p=0.000$),WhatsApp ($p=0.000$) and Instagram ($p=0.002$) with the age group. Participants between the age group of 18 to less than 30 years are mostly using Youtube (78.3%) than the other counter ages. **(Table 3)**

The results reveal that the pandemic has laid a impact on the type of news being read/ heard or seen during COVID-19. Health news (92.9%) was seen mostly during the COVID period followed by Economic news (43.2%) and Sports news the least (13.6%). **(Table 3)**

Table 3: Social Media Platforms

Variables	Total n=280	Female (n=150)	Male n=(130)	P <0.05	18 to less than 30	30 to less than 40	40 to less than 50	P<0.0 5
Q 4 : Which type of media did you prefer the most for gathering information regarding COVID-19								
Social Media	207(73.9)	107(51.7)	100(48.3)	0.288	169(81.6)	30(14.5)	8(3.9)	0.057
News Papers	76 (27.1)	37(48.7)	39(51.3)	0.317	56(73.7)	16(21.1)	4(5.3)	0.492
News Channels	106(37.9)	51(48.1)	55(51.9)	0.153	75(70.8)	25(23.6)	6(5.7)	0.48
Other Sources	27(9.6)	14(51.9)	13(48.1)	0.851	18(66.7)	9(33.3)	0(0.0)	0.032
Q 5 : Device used to connect to social media								
Smart Phone	272(97.1)	149(54.8)	123(45.2)	0.18	211(77.6)	47(17.3)	14(5.1)	0.318
Laptop	67(23.9)	24(35.8)	43(64.2)	0.001	52(77.6)	10(14.9)	5(7.5)	0.534
Home PC	14(5.0)	4(28.6)	10(71.4)	0.054	13(92.9)	1(7.1)	0(0.0)	0.376
I pad	17(6.1)	5(29.4)	12(70.6)	0.039	14(82.4)	3(17.6)	0(0.0)	0.621
Q 6: Social media platform used to get information about COVID-19								
Face book	118(42.1)	53(44.9)	65(55.1)	0.013	79(66.9)	29(24.6)	10(8.5)	0.000
WhatsApp	120(42.9)	70(58.3)	50(41.7)	0.166	78(65.0)	32(26.7)	10(8.3)	0.000
Twitter	67(23.9)	35(52.2)	32(47.8)	0.802	60(89.6)	5(7.5)	2(3.0)	0.035
Instagram	110(39.3)	61(55.5)	49(44.5)	0.611	97(88.2)	12(10.9)	1(0.9)	0.002
YouTube	152(54.3)	76(50.0)	76(50.0)	0.192	119(78.3)	27(17.8)	6(3.9)	0.629
Telegram	31(11.1)	14(45.2)	17(54.8)	0.319	28(90.3)	3(9.7)	0(0.0)	0.179
Q7: Which type of news was mainly read/heard/seen on social media during COVID 19								
Health News	260(92.9)	140(53.8)	120(46.2)	0.74	204(78.5)	44(16.9)	12(4.6)	0.564
Economic News	121(43.2)	54(44.6)	67(55.4)	0.009	98(81.0)	18(14.9)	5(4.1)	0.608
Political News	72(25.7)	30(41.7)	42(58.3)	0.019	58(80.6)	10(13.9)	4(5.6)	0.736
Social News	112(40.0)	54(48.2)	58(51.8)	0.142	89(79.5)	19(17.0)	4(3.6)	0.669
Education News	101(36.1)	46(45.5)	55(54.5)	0.043	85(84.2)	11(10.9)	5(5.0)	0.136
Sports News	38(13.6)	14(36.8)	24(63.2)	0.026	32(84.2)	6(15.8)	0(0.0)	0.297
Technology News	56(20.0)	22(39.3)	34(60.7)	0.017	40(71.4)	13(23.2)	3(5.4)	0.341

Source: Primary Survey

The responses covering the panic created by publishing more news related to COVID reveals that (64.3%) of the respondents think that news related to COVID-19 has created a more psychological terror in their minds. Out of the maximum females (35.7%) approved the above statement. **(Figure 1.1)**

(58.2%) of the participants feel that the level of dissemination of information by Indian pages, groups and accounts on social media covering COVID 19 is of good quality and out of these (59.28%) females and (51.8%) males strongly gave their confirmation regarding the subject. **(Figure 1.2)**

About 68.21% of the participant published more information on social media related to COVID 19 whereas, 42.85 percent denied to have done so. Where (52.88 %) females were found to be more constructive in posting such information on social media than males (47.12%). **(Figure 1.3)**

As a lot of information is being disseminated daily on social media, most of the participants agreed (75.0%) that there is a need to set up specific policies for filtering information published on social media. More of females (53.8%) are giving their consent to the notion than (46.19%) males. **(Figure 1.4)**

The results reveal that publishing of more and more information on social media has created a panic in the society. Most of them are affected by the information regarding the number of deaths due to COVID 19 (52.5%) out of which 58.5 percent were females and 41.5 percent were males in which most of the respondents were of 18 to less than 30 years of age (75.5 percent). This was followed by the other variable which is information disseminated regarding the number of COVID 19 infectants (44.6%). Posting of videos, photos and news of the countries with high number of cases and fake news about COVID 19 outbreak also created panic up to a certain extent. **(Table 4)**

Figure 1: Dissemination of COVID related Information

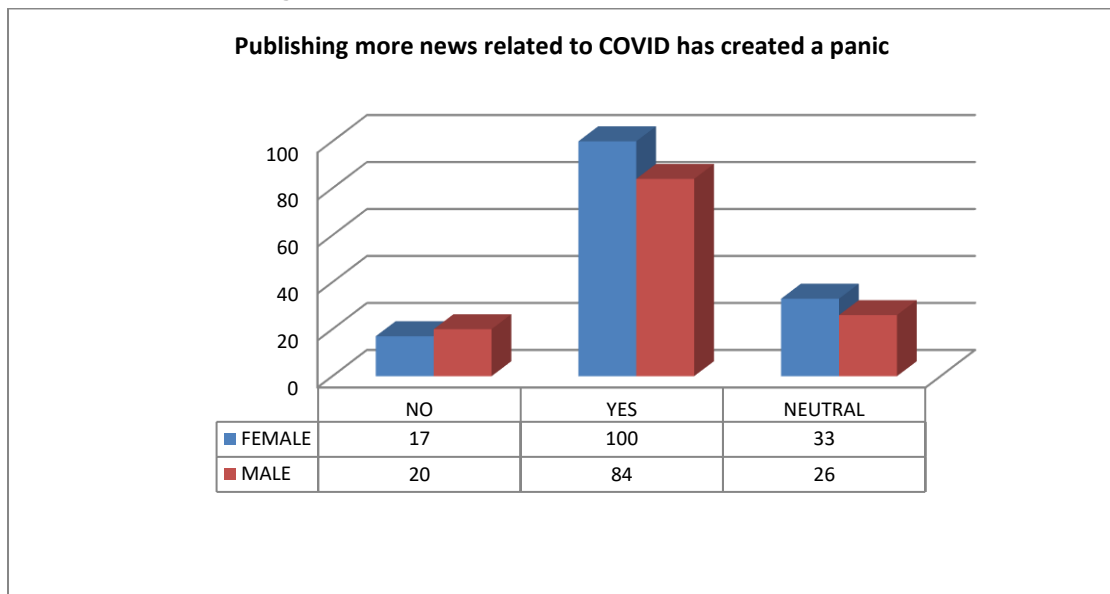


Figure 1

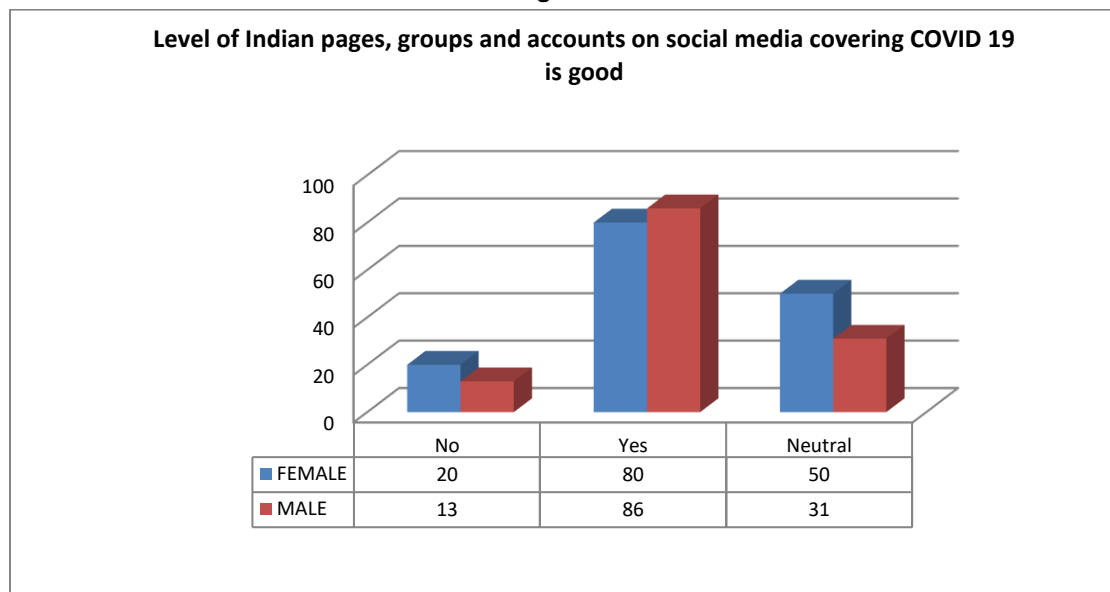


Figure 2

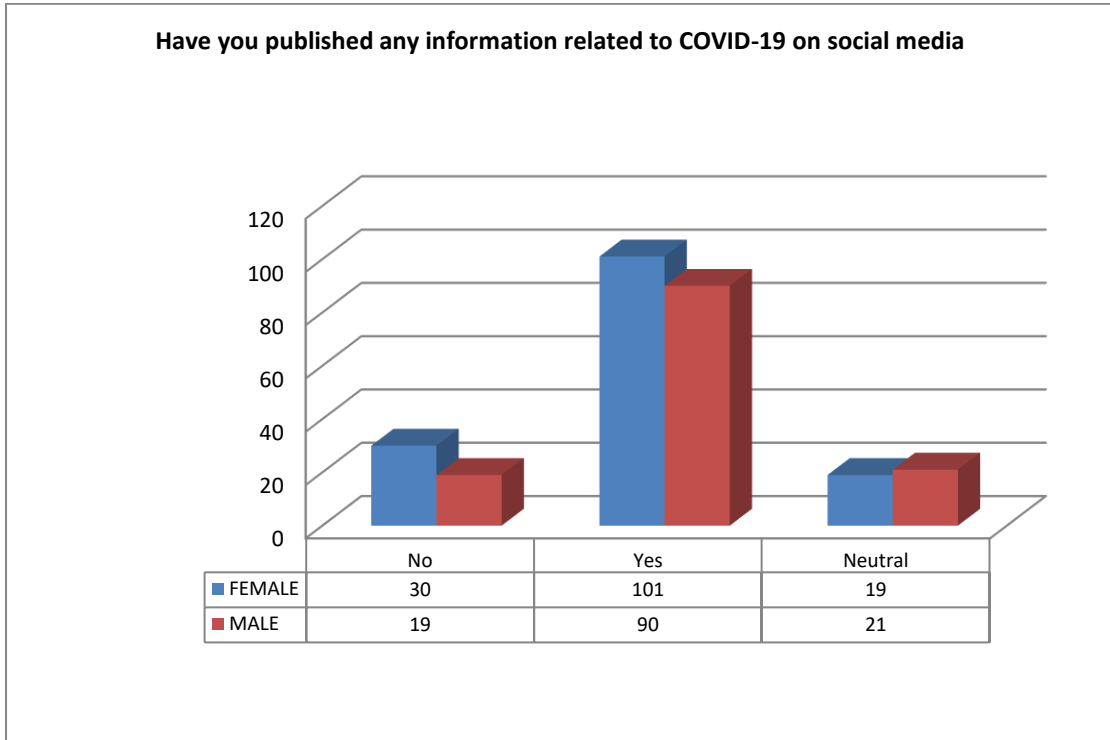


Figure 3

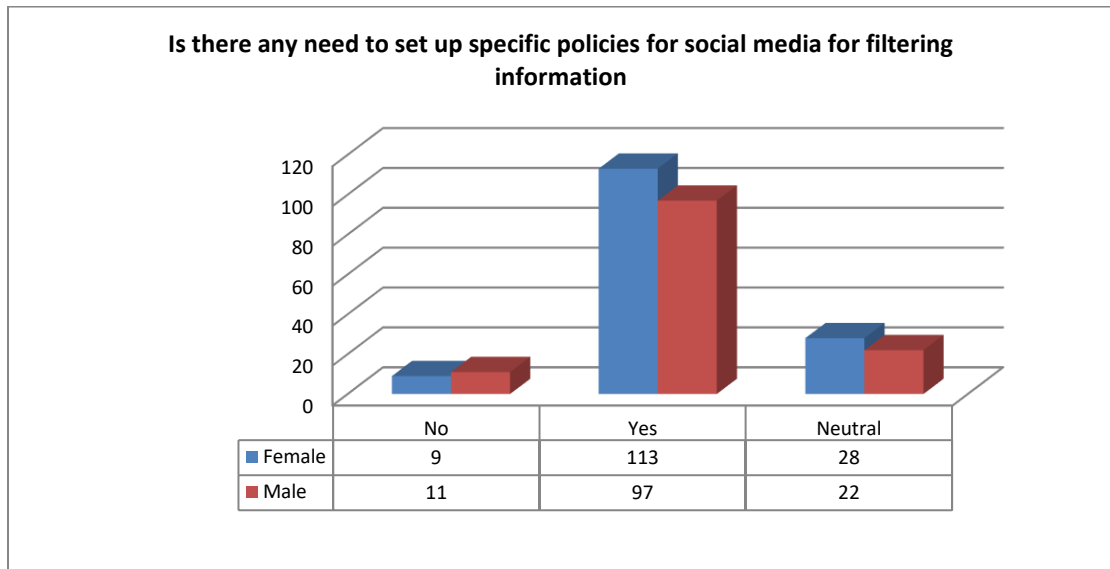


Figure 4

Source: Primary Survey

Table 4 also illustrates the effect of panic resulting from social media. The results reveal that majorities (60.7%) of the participants were affected psychologically than any sort of physical effect (28.6 %). Females (58.2 %) were psychologically affected more than males (41.8%). Psychological affect was mostly (78.8%) found among the participants within the age group of 18 to less than 30 years. It was also seen that 71.1 percent of the respondents believed that social media platforms are effective for creating a sustained social movement.

Table 4: Effect of Panic creating Information related to COVID 19

Variables	Total (n=280)	Female (n=150)	Male (n=130)	18 to less than 30	30 to less than 40	40 to less than 50
Q 12: Type of COVID-19 related information created panic on Social media						
Information regarding the number of COVID- 19 infectants created panic on Social media	125(44.6)	65(52.0)	60(48.0)	94(75.2)	26(20.8)	5(4.0)
Information regarding the number of deaths due to COVID- 19 created panic on Social media	147(52.5)	86(58.5)	61(41.5)	111(75.5)	28(19.0)	8(5.4)
Posting of videos, photos and news of the countries with high no. of cases	96(34.3)	53(55.2)	43(44.8)	74(77.1)	19(19.8)	3(3.1)
Information regarding preventive measures	40(14.3)	21(52.5)	19(47.5)	30(75.0)	8(20.0)	2(5.0)
Fake news about COVID-19 outbreak	96(34.3)	52(54.2)	44(45.8)	73(76)	18(18.8)	5(5.2)
Panic inducing information about COVID-19	42(15.0)	20(47.6)	22(52.4)	32(76.2)	7(16.7)	3(7.1)
Other type of information created panic on social media	18(16.4)	7(38.9)	11(61.1)			
Q 13: Effect of Panic resulting from social media about COVID-19						
Psychological effect	170(60.7)	99(58.2)	71(41.8)	134(78.8)	24(14.1)	12(7.1)
Physical effect	80(28.6)	41(51.3)	39(48.8)	58(72.5)	21(26.3)	1(1.3)
Psychological and Physical both	20(7.1)	6(30.0)	14(70.0)	18(90.0)	2(10.0)	0(0.0)
No effect	10(3.6)	4(6.0)	6(14.0)	9(90.0)	0(0.0)	1(10.0)
Q 14: Do you think that social media platforms are effective for creating a sustained social movement.						
No	16(5.7)	6(37.5)	10(62.5)	12(75.0)	3(18.8)	1(6.3)
Yes	199(71.1)	101(50.8)	98(49.2)	152(76.4)	36(18.1)	11(5.5)
Neutral	65(23.2)	43(66.2)	22(33.8)	55(84.6)	8(12.3)	2(3.1)

Source: Primary Survey

Conclusion

Social media platforms provide the convenience of creating profiles using only an email address, lacking rigorous verification procedures that could establish accountability. Unfortunately, this lax approach has paved the way for the proliferation of fabricated information and unfavorable claims within these platforms. Allegations of viewpoint manipulation and opinion distortion have also been directed at social media platforms. Social media is mainly preferred by people to gather COVID-19 information. Health news was the major concern of people to see social media sites whereby information created a negative impact on the psychological health of people and fake news created panic among people. Fake news affected the Psychological health of both males and females but social media sites are majorly preferred by female counterparts therefore their psychological health is important as they have to look after the entire family. It is also concluded that social media platforms are effective for creating a sustained social movement.

Suggestions

In recent months, numerous nations have introduced legislation to regulate influential social media corporations. The Union government is contemplating a distinct law to hold social media companies accountable for their published content, while reevaluating the definitions of intermediaries and social media entities. India has experienced a substantial upswing in internet users and social media engagement in recent years, with the pandemic and subsequent lockdown further amplifying these figures as individuals increasingly turn to these platforms for connecting with friends and family.

However, this digital expansion has given rise to concerns, encompassing issues of transparency, accountability, and user rights concerning digital media. Various countries have established laws governing the operations of social media, and through a comprehensive assessment of these regulations, India can develop its own legislation to ensure social media accountability. Such legislation must extend beyond mere content moderation, addressing paramount issues such as the dissemination of false information, distribution of inappropriate content, child pornography, and hate speech. The rampant misuse of these platforms to incite racism and threats has become a pervasive concern.

The foundational strength of social networks lies in their provision of 'freedom' that has propelled their success over the past decade. Nevertheless, this very freedom has now metamorphosed into a formidable challenge in upholding law and order. While platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook empower individuals to express themselves freely, the critical issue pertains to the platforms' decisions about content treatment. Far from being neutral, social media companies consistently make determinations about which content to amplify, promote, or recommend to users.

Recent revelations by prominent news organizations have exposed how Facebook's internal research underscored its failure to curtail the dissemination of misinformation and hate speech. Addressing this, there is a pressing need for regulations or penalties against the propagation of false information, particularly concerning COVID-19 and other pertinent subjects. Recommendations include stringent governmental enforcement of laws and regulations governing the publication and uploading of information. It is also emphasized that the spread of inaccurate news not only induces panic but also sows discord among different religions and erodes confidence in the information propagated by social media platforms. There should be some kind of restrictions or punishment for spreading fake news regarding COVID-19 and other matters as well. It is also suggested that government must enforce laws and regulations for publishing and uploading any information. It is also suggested that along with panic fake and wrong news can create differences among different religions and also reduces confidence in the information provided by social media sites.

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