The Public's Dependency on Social Media during Crises with The Application to The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The study seeks to identify the extent to which the public within the UAE depend on social media during crises by applying to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the light of the assumption of increasing the importance of relying on the media in times of crisis, and the role that information can play in informing the public of what is happening in their social environment. The study was applied to a deliberate sample of (400) respondents, and concluded several results as follows; The superiority of social media as a source of information, Arab satellite channels, then social media, then the Internet came at the forefront of the sources of information that the study sample relied on during the Covid-19 crisis. The results of the study indicate that the goal of understanding came at the forefront of the sample goals, followed by the goal of guidance and then the goal of entertainment. Reliance on social media does not necessarily mean the excellence of its media coverage. But it may be due to the public's desire to know the developments of the crisis and the different visions of how to confront it.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, crisis, media dependency, Social media, United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Introduction

Social media is one of the most prominent actors in managing the Covid-19 crisis, as it facilitated interactions between people during the relatively long periods of isolation across the world. Social media has become the main breather for the public, not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of obtaining and tracking information. One of the most important motives for relying on social media is that it is a source of information in times of crisis. It achieves cognitive goals in addition to emotional and behavioral goals. One of the most important effects that result from this dependence is that the information available in social media gives the public the ability to take a stand towards the crisis and help them deal with it, as well as, it removes the ambiguity of the crisis and reduces concerns about the risks related to it.

The people have become more than ever concerned with what is going on around him, and the public's relationship with the media increased in times of tension, anxiety, instability and conflict. As well as times of crises, so its dependence increases on the media, which has become a major

source of information, Social media is one of the most important sources of information because of its immediateness in conveying events and interacting with the public beyond other sources of information.

This study seeks to identify the extent to which the public in the United Arab Emirates relies on social media as a source of information during the Covid-19 pandemic with multiplicity of information sources.

Research Problem & Importance

In view of the wide interest in studying the dimensions of media dependency relations and the effects that can result from this dependence during crises, this study seeks to identify the extent to which the public within the United Arab Emirates depends on social media during crises by applying to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the light of the assumption of increasing the importance of relying on the media in times of crisis, and the role that information can play in informing the public of what is happening in their social environment. Especially with the interest of the public of different age groups, educational and social economics, in following up on this crisis and its various effects.

The study also seeks to know what extent social media has been able to attract the public in addressing the crisis in light of the multiplicity and competition of different media (national, Arab and foreign) in transmitting information and details of the pandemic to attract the largest number of recipients to it.

The significance of this study:

- The study addresses an existing topic that still presents itself in the discussion arena, which is the Covid-19 pandemic with its various consequences.

- The study examines the significance of using social media as sources of information on the time of this crisis, and its cognitive, emotional and behavioral effects on the public, compared to other sources of information.

- The subject of the study provides an opportunity to examine some hypotheses of the theory of media dependency in the Arab society, especially in the society of the United Arab Emirates.

Objectives of the study:

1 - Identify sources that the public depend on within the UAE to access to information to follow up on the Covid-19 crisis.

2- Identifying the extent of the public's dependency on social media during the Covid-19 crisis compared to other sources of information.

3- Identifying the causes and objectives of exposure to social media as a source of information about the crisis.

4- Knowing the public's evaluation of the media's treatment of the crisis in social media.

5- Recognizing the effects that result from dependence on social media as a source of information.

Literature Review

The previous studies about the role of social media during the crises revealed the following results: The public's awareness of positive interactions with the information received about the COVID-19 pandemic through social media has increased, which came in the forefront of verifying the accuracy of the information before publishing, neglect of rumors and awareness of its danger to society (Ibrahim, 2021). There is also an increase in the use of social media during the pandemic period, and it has succeeded in providing information to them compared to other media (K, & Saurabh,2020). Social media has helped to increase public interest and awareness (Chen et al., 2020), and also helped to understand the crisis and explain what they can do, but it exaggerated the outbreak of the epidemic when it spread false and misleading information (Nielsen, et al., 2020) . This was also confirmed by the results of another study that showed that social media spread fear and panic among public, but on the other hand, it contributed to increasing their awareness and knowledge of the virus, its symptoms and ways to prevent it (Singha, 2020). Also social media raised false allegations and false information about the extension of the ban period (Kadam, 2020), and the early stages of covering the crisis somewhat lacked the breadth of coverage, but the later stages provided Wide range of coverage on COVID-19 related issues and social concerns (Quandt et al., 2020).

Theoretical framework of the study:

The theory of Media Dependency: The current study derives its theoretical framework from the theory of media dependency, because it suits the subject of the study and achieves its goals. As the idea of this theory is based on the complexity of life in modern ideas, the media in transmitting information, and the public's dependency on it increased, in terms of the formation of knowledge and attitude s towards what is happening around them in their society or other societies (Lin, 2008). The dependence on the media increases in two cases: The first is in complex societies where the media perform many and specialized functions.

The second case relates to the instability in society due to conflict and change which includes crises, emergencies, and clashes in society (Morton & Duck, 2000), and these two situations create an atmosphere of uncertainty increases the public's need for information that helps them relieve tension, and hence the dependence on the media increases (Loveless, 2008).

Study hypotheses:

1 - The dependence on social media as a source of public information during the Covid-19 pandemic decreases as the sources of information is diversified.

2 - There is positive function of a statistical correlation between the public's dependency on social media as a source of information about the Covid-19 crisis and the desire to achieve the goals of understanding, guidance and entertainment.

3- There is a positive function of a statistical correlation between the degree of confidence in social media coverage of the Covid-19 crisis and the degree of public dependency on it as a source of information.

4 - There is a positive function of a statistical correlation between the public's dependency on social media and the cognitive, emotional and behavioral effects caused by this reliance.

Study type

This is a descriptive study aims to collect facts and data about a particular phenomenon, which is the public's dependency on social media during crises by applying the Covid-19 crisis in an attempt to explain these facts in an accurate scientific explanation.

Methodology

The used method :This study relies on the use of the survey method, in which it uses a field survey on a sample of the public, due to the difficulty of conducting a comprehensive survey of all vocabulary.

Data collection tool:An electronic questionnaire was used via Google Drive, and a pre-test was conducted for the questionnaire on a sample size of (10%) of the original sample size of (40) individuals to ensure its ability to achieve the objectives of the study and measure what it aimed to measure, then some minor modifications were made. The minor ones were applied in their final form for two weeks from the 27th of June 2021 to the 10th of July 2021.

Study population and sample

The United Arab Emirates, with different emirates, was chosen as the study community. The study was applied to a deliberate sample of (400) respondents from the age of (18 years and over), the description of the study sample was based on gender, age, educational level, nationality, and socio-economic level as follows:

(50.5%) of the respondents were males, (49.5%) were females.

(40.5%) of the sample in the age group (18 to less than 30 years old), (29%) of the sample (30 to less than 45 years old), (30.5%) of the sample in the age group (45 to 65 years old).

(35.5%) of the sample have an educational level below university, (51%) have university education, and (13.5%) have postgraduate, master's and doctoral studies.

(24%) of the sample are Emiratis, (16.5%) Egyptians, (15.5%) from Syria, (12.5%) from Yemen, (9%) from Jordan, (7.5%) from Iraq, (6%) from Palestine, (5.5%) from Oman, (3.5%) from Algeria.

43% of the sample has a high socio-economic level, (32%) has a medium level, and 25% has a low level.

Honesty and consistency in the questionnaire:

The Questionnaire's honesty was measured by presenting it to arbitrators from media professors who indicated its validity for application after making the necessary modifications according to their observations and opinions.

The stability of the questionnaire was tested in several ways:

- Alpha Cronbach method and the reliability coefficient were (0.92).
- The split-half method and length correction using the SPEARMAN-BROWN equation, and the reliability coefficient was (0.95).

- (10%) of the questionnaire sheets (40) sheets were re-applied two weeks after its application for the first time on the same respondents to whom it was applied before, and the value of the reliability coefficient was (0.91).

This indicates the stability of the questionnaire and its validity for measurement.

Study results and discussion:

Sources of information on which the study sample depended on the Covid-19 crisis

Social media advanced in terms of the public's dependence on it as a source of information during the Covid-19 crisis (39%). The public was keen to know its media viewpoint on the crisis, especially as it has advantages and technical characteristics than other sources of information, as it provided a wide range of coverage on issues related to Covid-19, and the public accepted it to understand the crisis and its dimensions. Arab satellite channels came in second place in terms of public depended on them, with a similar percentage of social media (37%), and this may be due to the superiority of some Arab satellite news channels in conveying the details and developments of the crisis moment by moment. Then the Internet came in third place (30%), foreign satellite channels fell to fourth place (7.5%), then Arab radio stations (5%), with the same percentage, Arab newspapers, then foreign radio stations (4.5), and finally foreign newspapers (4%).

Table No. (1)

The relationship between dependence on social media as a source of information and dependence on other information sources

dependence on other sources		Arab satellite	Foreign satellite	Internet	Arabic Radios	Foreign Radios	Arabic newspapers	Foreign newspapers
dependence on social media	Spearman value	-0.29	-0.38	0.35	-0.06	-0.31	0.3	-0.38
	morale level	0.0001	0.006	0.002	0.68	0.05	0.03	0.03

By reviewing the data of the previous table, it is clear that there is a negative correlation between dependence on social media as a source of information on the Covid-19 crisis and dependence on Arab and foreign satellite channels, foreign radios and newspapers, meaning that there is less dependence on social media when these sources are available.

It is also clear that there is a positive significant correlation between dependence on social media and dependence on both the Internet and Arab newspapers. In addition to it is also clear that there is no correlation between dependence on social media and dependence on Arab radio stations.

By reviewing the first hypothesis of the study, we find that the hypothesis was partially fulfilled, and therefore we can accept the validity of the hypothesis.

The best sources that covered the Covid-19 crisis from the point of view of the study sample

The results of the study indicate that the Arab satellite channels came in the first place as the best sources that covered the crisis with a percentage of (51.3%). This may be due to the fact that some Arab satellite channels, especially news channels, have the ingredients to provide a distinct and continuous news service on various events, and they have also followed up on this crisis and provided explanations and analyzes for it.

Then came social media (39.5%), then the Internet (22.5%), and in the fourth place came Arab radio stations (7.3%), Arab newspapers (6.5%), foreign satellite channels (6%), foreign radio stations (5.5%), and then newspapers (5%).

The reasons for preferring these different sources varied, and they were represented in the speed in conveying the developments of the crisis, explaining and analyzing the crisis, presenting the complete facts, and then being accurate in presenting the data.

The study sample assessment of the importance of the Covid-19 crisis

The results of the study show that most of the respondents (85.5%) think that the Covid-19 crisis is important, and it is a logical result, and (59%) of the sample were keen to follow up on the crisis in social media. . It is a significant percentage that confirms the position that social media enjoy as a source for information, especially in times of crisis, and this was confirmed by the results of the study (Riehm et al., 2020) and the study (Illah, 2020)

.**The reasons for the public's dependence on social media during the Covid-19 crisis**

Dependency theory focuses on identifying the reasons why individuals resort to these means, especially during cases of crises, when conflict and changes in society intensify in order to satisfy their various needs (Abdul Hamid, 2008). The results of the present study are consistent with the results of the study of (Ferreira & Borges,2020) about the information consumption in times of uncertainty i.e. the current pandemic. The reasons for dependence on social media during the Covid-19 crisis as confirmed by the study of (Sood, et al., 2020) were:

Continuous follow-up to the developments of the crisis (72%), confidence in sites (66.2%), picture accompanying the sound (63.5%), depth in processing (55%), balance in the presentation of points of views (43.8%) and providing information to support health care and achieve the concept of Telemedicine from healthcare professionals with expertise in the field (40%).

These percentages indicate that social media attracted the public during the crisis as a result of the possibility of following up on the crisis moment by moment. It was sometimes followed up with analyzes and explanations, and mentioned the different dimensions by experts and those interested, which helped in realizing the facts and understanding the events, and this was confirmed by the results of the study (Jakhar et al., 2020).

The relationship between respondents' dependence on social media and the desire to achieve the goals of understanding, Act meaningfully and effectively and entertainment

According to media dependency theory, the individuals achieve three important goals: understanding social world, act meaningfully and effectively in the world and entertainment.

People differ in the degree of their dependence on the media as a result of their targeted goals, interests and needs for obtaining information (Kasirye,2021).

In this study The goals to understand comes at the forefront of the respondents needs, these goals are: 1- Understand what is going on around me in the surrounding environment.2- Understand the consequences of the crisis. Followed by The goals to act meaningfully and effectively, these goals are 1- Obtaining sufficient information about the crisis that would benefit me personally. 2- Guidance on appropriate behavioral patterns to deal with the crisis, and then the goal of entertainment. These goals are 1- Getting rid of boredom and spending time at home for long periods due to closure. 2- Discussion with colleagues and friends. This is an expected result because the audience during crises is targeted first understand the crisis and its explanations, causes and results. This understanding used in directing his actions and interactions with others and in guiding him on how to deal with difficult situations, and then comes in the end the goal of entertainment, which is less important during crises.

Table No. (2)

The relationship between dependence on social media and the desire to achieve the goals of understanding, Act meaningfully and effectively and entertainment

Goals		Understanding	Act meaningfully and effectively	Entertainment
Dependence on social media	Spearman value	0.31	0.28	0.21
	Morale level	0.0001	0.0001	0.05

Using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient to find out the relationship between respondents' dependence on social media and the desire to achieve the goals of understanding, act meaningfully and effectively and entertainment. It was found that there is a significant correlation between dependence on social media as a source of information about the Covid-19 crisis and the desire to achieve the goals of understanding, meaning that it increases the achievement of the goals of understanding. When relying on social media.

It was also clear that there is a significant correlation between dependence on social media and the desire to achieve the goals of act meaningfully and effectively and entertainment, and this reflects the success of social media in achieving the desired goals as it should during the crisis.

Thus, the validity of the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

Evaluation of the study sample for the social media coverage of the crisis

The results indicated that there is a degree of satisfaction with the coverage, but it is a limited amount, as the largest percentage of the sample (44.5%) considers the coverage acceptable, (38.5%)

considers good, and (13.2%) considers weak, while the percentage of those who consider it excellent (3.8%) has significantly decreased.

The negative aspects of social media coverage of the crisis from the point of view of the respondents were the inconsistency and inaccuracy of the information provided on the crisis (58%) in the first place. Followed by the second place with a limited relative difference, the weak participation of experts in analyzing the crisis (57.5%). Followed by intimidation in the size of the crisis and its effects (38.5%), the lack of official information about the crisis (25.4%) and lastly there is a relationship between social media exposure to COVID-19–related information and anxiety and depression (24%) as confirmed by the results of the study (Gao et al., 2020).

These percentages give a clear indication of the existence of a degree of shortcoming in social media coverage of the crisis, which requires the importance of awareness by developing and modifying the method used in covering and addressing crises in order to increase its effectiveness in proportion to the degree of public use of it. Despite the public's keenness to follow social media during the crisis, which led to a high percentage of dependence on it as a source of information about the crisis, but this does not mean complete conviction and satisfaction with what it offers. This requires raising awareness to provide media coverage characterized by depth, analysis, explanation and objectivity in order to meet the needs of the public.

The relationship between the public's dependence on social media as a source of information on the Covid-19 crisis and the degree of confidence in covering the crisis

The largest proportion of respondents (63.8%) trust social media to some extent, meaning that social media could not gain the public's trust hopefully, despite the high percentage of reliance on it as a source of information on the crisis.

There is (19.5%) of the of respondents do not trust social media at all, a percentage that we must stop before. Almost one-fifth of them do not trust social media despite its enjoyment of many capabilities and advantages such as the intensity of use and the immediacy in conveying the developments of the crisis. But the public believes that there is a shortcoming in the social media's handling of the crisis and its developments that prevents achieving confidence in it, while only (16.7%) of the sample trust social media completely.

By reviewing the third hypothesis of the study, it is clear that this hypothesis is not valid.

Effects of dependence on social media as a source of information

Table No. (3)

The effects of depending on social media

Disagree		partially agree		agree		degree of agree / Phrase		The effects
%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency			

7.5 18.7	30 75	20.5 46.8	82 187	72 34.5	288 138	Realizing the developments of the crisis Realizing the risks and consequences	Cognitive
11 17.5 3.3	44 70 13	25.8 25.5 22	103 102 88	63.2 57 74.7	253 228 299	Concern for the global economy affected by the crisis Feeling worry and afraid of the increase in cases of infected people Sympathy with the death cases and the infected people	Affective
15.7 81	63 324	41.3 10.5	165 42	43 8.5	172 34	Share opinion about the crisis Not caring about what's happening and not participating	Behavioral

There are many effects that resulted from the public's dependence on social media. They were represented in the cognitive effects that relate to the knowledge and information of the public to overcome the ambiguity resulting from the lack of information and the formation of trends, and the emotional effects that relate to feelings such as fear, and anxiety, and then behavioral effects. The behavior is often the result of cognitive and emotional changes.

The cognitive effects were represented in: knowledge of the developments of the crisis, knowledge of the risks and consequences of the crisis, providing information from the official authorities related to maintaining personal safety and avoiding the spread of infection as confirmed by the results of the study (Depoux, et al., 2020). The aspects of the emotional effects were: sympathy with the victims and the injured, concern for the global economy due to its impact on the crisis, feeling anxious and fearful of the increase in injuries, while the behavioral effects were: participation in the opinion about the crisis.

Using the Spearman correlation coefficient to monitor the relationship between dependence on social media, emotional and behavioral effects resulting from this dependence, the following became clear:

Table No. (4)

The relationship between dependence on social media and the effects resulting from this dependence

Goals		Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral
dependence on	Spearman value	-0.23	-0.001	0.12
social media	Morale level	0.003	0.99	0.12

By reviewing the table data, it is clear that there is a significant negative correlation between dependence on social media as a source of information about the Covid-19 crisis and the cognitive effects of this dependence, meaning that the cognitive effects decrease when depending on social media. It is also clear that there is no significant correlation between dependence on social media, and emotional and behavioral influences. This indicates the inability of social media to achieve the effects of depending on it as a source of information about the crisis.

By reviewing the fourth hypothesis of the study, it is clear that this hypothesis is not valid.

Conclusion

The study concluded several results. The most important of which can be summarized as follows; The results of our study were in agreement with the results of many previous studies that concluded the superiority of social media as a source of information. Because of its advantages and characteristics that exceed other sources of information such as immediacy and the ability to convey the developments of the crisis and the measures taken in connection with the image that provides a true transmission and expression of reality.

Arab satellite channels, then social media, then the Internet came at the forefront of the sources of information that the study sample depended on during the Covid-19 crisis. This arrangement reflects the role played by satellite channels in conveying the facts of the crisis, as it was characterized by novelty and speed in presenting the facts. It also provided much information that helped to understand the different dimensions of the crisis and its developments.

Most of the study sample realized the importance of the Covid-19 crisis, so they were keen to follow it on social media, which is a logical result, as it is a crisis that has affected on the lives of millions around the world, changed lifestyles, and destabilized the economy of many countries. It is natural that the percentage of those who see it as an important crisis will rise.

According to the theory of dependence on the media, individuals depend on these means to achieve three important goals: understanding, guidance and entertainment. The results of the study indicate that the goal of understanding came at the forefront of the sample goals, followed by the goal of guidance and then the goal of entertainment This is an expected result because the public during crises aims first to understand the crisis and its explanations, causes and results. This understanding is used in directing his actions and interactions with others and in guiding him on how to deal with difficult situations, and then comes in the end the goal of entertainment, which is less important during crises.

There is a degree of satisfaction among the study sample with social media coverage of the Covid-19 crisis, as the largest proportion of the sample considers the coverage acceptable.

Dependence on social media does not necessarily mean the excellence of its media coverage, but it may be due to the public's desire to know the developments of the crisis and the different visions of how to confront it. Therefore, it became clear that there is no relation between the degree of trust in social media and the degree of dependence on it.

When the public depended on it as a source of information, social media did not achieve the different effects of media dependence.

Recommendations

- According to the study results, the effective role of social media in influencing the public's attitudes during crises becomes clear, which confirms the importance of raising awareness of the responsibility of using social media and investigating accuracy and objectivity, and verifying the sources of information.

- False information and rumors must be confronted, so that social media is a key partner in the success of awareness and educational initiatives, instilling correct behaviors and raising awareness for all segments of society, and not a major source of dissemination of false and misinformation.

- More researches must conduct to assess the performance of social media in dealing with pandemics and crises, to follow up on this performance and to identify strengths and weaknesses.

- Developing the performance of social media and preparing qualified cadres to work in it by focusing on the elements that achieve more competitiveness.

- Attention to the development of legislation that legalizes the exchange of information through social media, and the formation of centers to monitor and address cases of media misinformation, and to bring its promoters to trial.

- Activating and developing the websites of the official authorities to confront and monitor the news and information published about the Corona virus, correct the error in it, and educate the public about it.

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