Social Media & COVID-19:
A Global Study of Digital Crisis Interaction among Gen Z and Millennials

Key Insights
We’re not just fighting a pandemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.”


A year on, the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic shows how the spread of misinformation - amplified on social media and other digital platforms - is proving as much a threat to global public health as the virus itself.

It has resulted in a blatant disregard of public health directives, the promotion of useless or dangerous “cures” and conspiracy theories, and the exacerbation of racial and political tensions. The constant bombardment of conflicting information can be overwhelming and cause some to stop paying attention even to crucial health news and guidance.

Our international study investigates where Gen Z and Millennials in pandemic hotspots are getting their COVID-19 information, who they trust as sources, what they worry about and their awareness of false news. It also looks at the size of their social media networks and how likely they are to share unverified information.

As we move into the next phase of the pandemic, we hope these findings will help health organizations, governments, media, businesses, educational institutions and others sharpen their health communication strategies.

This ground-breaking study covers approximately 23,500 respondents aged 18-40 years in 24 countries across five continents who were reached on their mobile devices between late October 2020 and early January 2021. This is a joint study by Wunderman Thompson, The University of Melbourne and Pollfish, in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO).

A fuller report will be published in April by the University of Melbourne, with the technical support of the WHO. Given the urgency of the situation, we are sharing key insights and takeaways below. The survey data is also available on this interactive dashboard.
When asked where they go first for Covid-19 news and information, 43.6% of respondents overall say national newspapers, TV and radio; 36.2% say they actively search on search sites and 35.2% pick international news media. Social media content by traditional media (34.2%) is also popular as is social media content from WHO (31.5%). This “multi-source” environment also includes health and science experts (28.8%) and government sources (28.3%).
Personal interaction ranks lower in terms of sources of information

- 22.4% from family
- 19.8% from friends
- 16.1% from friends’ social media

Personal interaction ranks lower, with 22.4% getting COVID-19 information first from family, 19.8% from friends and 16.1% via their friends’ social media content.

There are differences among countries, perhaps relating to national media landscapes and trust in institutions as well as local culture.

In India, Mexico and Nigeria, the WHO’s social media channels are the most popular initial destination for COVID-19 news and information, while in Egypt, Indonesia, Russia and South Korea, search platforms are the first choice.

In Turkey, social media content by science and health experts ranks as the top source of COVID-19 information, while in Russia the most popular choice is search sites followed by interaction with family and friends.

**Takeaway**

National mainstream media as well as their social media platforms continue to be trusted channels for reaching Gen Z and Millennials. However, in a handful of countries, respondents rely more on the WHO and other alternative sources over national media.
When asked what COVID-19 information (if any) they most likely post on social media, 43.9% of respondents say “scientific” content - the top choice for both male and female respondents. This is followed by information “relevant to me” (36.7%) and content that is “concerning” (28.5%). In addition, 28.3% say they most likely share content that includes an article, followed by posts that include a video (24.1%), image (23.0%), narrative (20.8%), creates an emotional reaction (18.2%) and is humorous (18.1%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most likely to share on social media</th>
<th>More likely to share content type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Chemical Symbols" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Article Icon" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.9% scientific content</td>
<td>28.3% articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Document Icon" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Video Icon" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.7% information relevant to themselves</td>
<td>24.1% videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Warning Icon" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Image Icon" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.5% information that is concerning</td>
<td>23.0% images</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also differences among countries. Respondents in Nigeria and Japan are most likely to share content on social media that “is concerning.” In China, while scientific content is also deemed most shareworthy, this is followed by content that “has a lot of shares/likes/retweets”.

Takeaway
Science rules when it comes to sharing COVID-19 content. This shows the digital literacy of Gen Z and Millennials in the pandemic and appears to buck the general trend on social media where funny, entertaining and emotional content spread fastest.
More than half (59.1%) of those surveyed indicate that they are “very aware” of “fake news” surrounding COVID-19, with a further 33.4% “somewhat aware.”

This awareness extends to what they share: 40.8% say they always make sure content is accurate before posting it on social media, while 36.6% say they do so “most of the time.” Just over a third (37.5%) admit to having shared content on social media that they later found was incorrect. Of these, 87.1% say they later corrected or deleted the content.

About a third (35.1%) respondents say that when they encounter false content, they ignore it, while 24.4% report the content and 19.3% comment on it. Only 8.7% unfollow the account that shared it.

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**Key Insight #3**

**Awareness of false news is high, but so is apathy**

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**Takeaway**

Many Gen Z and Millennials are aware of false news and they can often spot it. However, the challenge is in recruiting them to actively counter it, rather than letting it slide.
Key Insight #4

Gen Z and Millennials have multiple worries beyond getting sick

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Concerns During the Pandemic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends and family members getting infected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economy crashing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing financial constraints</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not being able to travel/visit friends and family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Significant change of my lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>My mental health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not being able to access healthcare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Losing touch with my social community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Running out of food</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing political tensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainties regarding residency status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not worried about the broader impacts of the COVID-19 crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the risk of friends and family members contracting COVID-19 was the top concern of respondents (55.5%), closely followed by the economy crashing (53.8%). In fact, a crashing economy is the top concern of respondents in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Italy, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey.

Intertwined with the economic concerns are worries surrounding employment uncertainty (39.8% overall and the top concern in India), and facing financial constraints (39.7%). Respondents also indicated anxieties surrounding the social impacts of COVID-19, including not being able to visit friends and family (38.2%), significant changes to lifestyle (33.7%), and losing touch with their social community (22.5%). Concerns surrounding mental health (33.4%), access to healthcare (31.1%), and access to education (27.0%) were also raised.

Takeaway
Gen Z and Millennials are grappling with multiple concerns when it comes to COVID-19. Health communicators need to be aware that these concerns can be interlinked and/or competing, and to acknowledge perceived trade-offs – for example, between lives and livelihoods.
Key Insight #5

Interest in vaccines is soaring

Interest in vaccines leapfrogged from third place to top place amongst COVID-19 related topics since the start of the pandemic.

The survey shows that 55.0% of Gen Z and Millennials are interested in information regarding a COVID-19 vaccine now, versus 45.6% at the start of the pandemic, and 41.9% said social media content by the WHO would be their first source.

By contrast, interest in the opinions of celebrities and influencers on COVID-19 ranked low both at the start of the pandemic and now. Despite their influence over many areas of people’s lives, when it comes to facts/health they don’t rank highly.

More broadly, the WHO is the most highly trusted source of public health information (45.5%) followed closely by science and health experts (44.0%).

Takeaway

As governments around the world roll out immunisation programs, interest in vaccines is likely to continue to be high. Health communicators have a critical opportunity to shape public receptiveness to vaccines, allay fears and increase uptake. But don’t rely on celebrities or influencers.
More than half (58.3%) of the Gen Z and Millennials surveyed strongly or somewhat agree that they are overwhelmed by the amount of information out there on COVID-19 and 52.0% have stopped paying attention. They have their own slate of multiple sources, yet remain sceptical: they feel that the media is not “telling me everything” (59.3%); their government is not giving the full picture on the pandemic (57.1%).

About half of the respondents overall feel that their government is not doing enough to control the pandemic and about half feel that their government is overreacting.

However, 56.9% feel optimistic about the future, with about the same proportion saying things would go back to normal with a vaccine.

**Takeaway**
Pandemic fatigue is setting in and people are overwhelmed. They also yearn for things to go back to normal. This is a critical window for health communicators to emphasize that things can only get back to normal if people staying vigilant and comply with health guidelines whether it’s wearing masks, social distancing or getting vaccinated.
Methodology

The online survey of 23,500 citizens aged 18 to 40 was conducted by Pollfish in 24 countries. The included countries are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States with 1,000 responses from each country except South Korea with a sample of 500. After additional verification the final number of responses is 23,483.

Citizens were reached via their mobile devices between 24th Oct, 2020 to 7th Jan, 2021.

The sampling was designed to balance representation across gender and age groups. Overall gender split is 50.2% males and 49.8% females, with 21 of the 24 markets having near 50/50 split.
For more information, please visit:
http://covid19-infodemic.com

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