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## USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE TIME OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

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### Abstract

Social media was introduced back in 2000's. At that time, nobody really imagined that social media would play a prominent part in their lives. It was only after the introduction of smart phones in 2005 that the app culture was created. Through this app culture social media sites viz Facebook, Twitter, Instagram found their way in to the personal space of people. Everything suddenly became so mobile, interactive, connected because of these apps. The present study is aimed to explore the usage of social media at the time of social distancing. The world is currently facing global health crisis in the form of covid-19. In this paper we will discuss the uses and gratifications of social Media and building of different networked societies at the time of social distancing observed in India due to outbreak of covid-19. The paper explores the theoretical frameworks in context to the present pandemic outbreak.

### Introduction

Corona Virus disease 2019 is a respiratory illness which occurs due to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus2 also referred as SARS COV-2 infection. Early detection of the infection was found in Wuhan City of China. Gradually the infection took over the globe. At present 204 territories worldwide are affected by the disease. World Health organisation declared covid-19 as a 'pandemic' due to its chain transmission. The disease is found to be deadly and till date the worldwide countries are working day night to develop a cure.

As per WHO data retrieved on march 31, 2020 there are 697244 confirmed cases and 33257 deaths due to Covid-19. Major economies worldwide are majorly affected by the outbreak of covid-19 including India. As on march 31, 2020 India has reported 1071 corona cases.

The country reported first few cases from Kerala of the students who had a travel history to Wuhan. It later became a cause of chain transmission as within

2-3 days the number of covid-19 cases rose to 50. To control the impact of pandemic initially mass gathering places were shutdown like education institutes, malls, parks etc. On March 11, 2020 Epidemic disease act was invoked in all the union territories. And thereafter keeping in view the safety of Indian citizens the Prime minister of India announced a 14 hour Janta Curfew on March 22 which later transformed as Complete lockdown from march 24, 2020.

Country's to and fro move came to a standstill after the announcement of lockdown. India is a nation with around 1.35 billion population; just imagine so many people are confined to limited or minimal public movements. After the lockdown people around the world are maintaining social distancing in order to safeguard them. The term social distancing refers to the minimised physical interaction amongst individuals with a gap of at least 6 feet during interactions.

#### **Social distancing includes**

- Reduced social interactions
- Not attending group gatherings or events like concerts, weddings, sports etc.
- Closure of Workplaces and work from home
- Closure of Educational Institutes and Online learning
- Maintaining a gap of at least six feet while buying goods and groceries.

India is reported to be the country with second largest internet user of base 570 million after China. It means nearly half of the country is relying on internet or phone usage. As per Statista digital population of India stands to 688 million out of which 346.2 millions are reported to be Social Media users. India is also reported to be the country with the largest Facebook user base in the world. The growth of social media penetration is projected to reach 444.2 million by 2023.

Now looking upon the statistics of social media penetration and country's current lockdown scenario it becomes important and interesting to see the changes in usage of social media at the time of social distancing.

#### Research objectives:

- To identify types of usage of different social media platforms during lockdown.
- To identify the growth of social media at the time of social distancing
- To discover the usage of social media in satisfying different social needs.

#### Review of literature

World has become a Global Village as defined by Marshall McLuhan. Dispersion of integrated technologies in the form of social media is resulting into digital dependence. People are not really bothered by real life space but are more concerned about their virtual presentation on social media.

Ruggiero (2000) predicted through research that the Internet will be transformative, leading to "profound changes in media users' personal and social habits and roles" (p. 28). As per his prediction we can see that internet

has infused many dimensions in media habits of people. The consumption of media has become more personalised.

Benkler, Yochai (2006) defined social media as source of communication to utilize open, online space in building dialogues amongst users.

Social media is referred as a form of electronic communication which can be operated by users online where they can built different online communities like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Mails etc to share ideas, information, pictures, videos etc.

Social Media can also be defined as a hub of online communities built through Internet based technologies which allow users to create personal, professional and several interest based profiles where users can interact, share and transform. Social media became truly popular only after the fuelling of Smartphones in the market enabling users with custom social media apps.

Williams, 2012 explains the importance of Uses and gratifications theory in context to social media because of its origin from communication paradigm. Social media is a prominent platform for communication allowing mass communication. Also Social media platform is free from time and space boundaries. Millions of users around the world can communicate at the same time. The uses and gratification theory explains that users keep on switching between different media to satisfy their different needs (Lariscy et al., 2011)

A commentary paper title “Why people use social media : A uses and gratification approach” was published which discussed ten different types of gratifications that individuals seek from a social media. Study also revealed different motivation of use of media can be helpful for advertisers to target specifically on prospective buyers.

In the present study the researcher has selected three platforms of Social media viz. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram on the basis of their popularity and usage in context to Indian user base.

## Theoretical frameworks and Analysis

### Networked society

World Wide Web brought a technological revolution nearly 30 years ago. The launch of the web portal allowed users to share information, commerce, entertainment and social networking with each other. This was the stepping stone for the built social networking sites in the form of networked societies.

Manuel Castells(1996) used the concept of ‘Network society’ first of all in sociology in the late 20th century. He stated that a social structure frame is based on microelectronics nodes and thus a network society is framed through information and communication. He further explains that a network society creates a user base through online communication. He also mentioned that emerging changes in the social needs of a society is the ground force of technological revolution.

According to him, network society is characterized by the following:

-Nodes of interaction are irrespective of time and space

- An individual can interact irrespective of time and space with a technical assistance

-Communication is beyond time and space nodes. Communication patterns are regularly mobile in nature and move around the network. This process is termed as “space of flows”

- Information flow is the prime factor in a network society

In reference to Castells concept Networking societies are formed due to individual social needs. The current lockdown situation has brought an abundant flow in the different networks societies on different Social Media platforms. People are around the globe are building different societies:

"In UK itself, on an estimate around 300 local Corona virus support groups are created on Facebook having membership of more than million people”

Worldwide doctors are joining specialized social media communities and developing answers in real time. A Facebook group called the PMG COVID19 Subgroup, has 30,000 members worldwide and is discussing issues pertaining to corona virus treatment.

On a twitter handle namely Brief19, a group of three emergency room doctors are daily posting the information and policy in regard to the covid-19 pandemic. Group created on March 20, 2200 has already gained 6432 followers. The bio of Brief 19 reads “Unfortunately everywhere”

As suggested by Castells these need based communities are set up on different social media platforms. Social Media is eradicating the barrier of social distancing through these interconnected virtual communities. The growing worldwide Facebook, twitter groups are the mark of major social movement developed due to the needs of society.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory**

Uses and Gratification theory was framed by Katz(1974). Theory discuss about different type of gratifications that attract an individual to use a particular type of media. Usage of media is directly related to the satisfaction of the social and psychological needs. The theory discusses the active involvement of individuals as they have the choice to select any type of media.

The theory assumes:

Audience as an active individual having predefined media goal

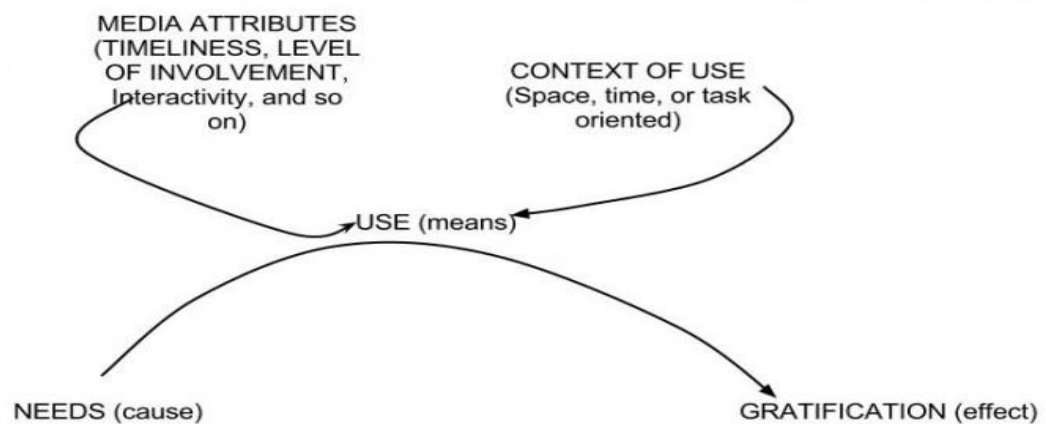
Audience have different type of individual needs which can be satisfied through media.

Audience starts linking their gratification to a specific medium.

Audience are self-informed and aware about their media use.

So we can say that Uses and gratification theory assumes that active individuals use different media to satisfy their needs and gets satisfied when their needs are

fulfilled. The theory entirely discusses the media usage for different gratifications.



Here we will discuss the types of individual needs which are fulfilled through media in context to social media. Needs are categorized into five categories:

**Cognitive Needs** where people use different media to acquire facts, information or knowledge. It helps people fulfil their intellectual and information needs. Gratification of cognitive needs make a person believe that he/she is actively aware about the latest information and updates.

#### Individual role

In context to present situation as an active audience people are dependent on different social media portals of news organisations to get the latest updates of covid-19 situation.

#### Role of Government in fulfilling cognitive needs

Government has created Whatsapp Chatbot named as MYGov Corona Helpdesk which gives information inform and ensure verified responses to the users.

Apart from this government has also enlisted important information on different government website

<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/> this website of ministry of Health and welfare gives information about the data base of corona virus and also contains information about helpline numbers and do's and don'ts to stay safe. #India fights corona

**Affective Needs** where people use media to satisfy their emotional needs by viewing different media. People depend largely on the medium to relate their current situation to the character or the subject. These needs help in reassuring the fulfilment of empathetic need

With restricted movement out of home, major numbers of Indians are spending their time contributing their content on different social media sites.

“Volume of Social media usage is doubled since after social distancing and quarantine time is gaining pace in the country” said Prasun Basu, South Asia Zone president of Nielsen Global Connect. He also mentioned about the tremendous jump in online shopping as people are spending their lockdown time in a proactive way by fulfilling their different needs.

**Personal Integrative needs** where people use different media to strengthen and maintain their status in society. So, that they attain a respectable status in society. People use and consume media to strengthen their lifestyle and social status

As there is Pandemic outbreak majority of people are posting the news content related to covid-19 and also in the form of pics, video etc to stay connected to the society through a common cause.

Celebrities, cricketers and politicians have taken the cause of covid-19 to their social media platforms and making short videos of gratitude on Janta curfew day and several actors like Kartik Aryan, Ayushman Khurana, Akshay Kumar are sharing small videos by altering their famous dialogues and insisting people to follow the lockdown.

Sharing routine: In order to stay relevant on social media a lot of Indian Celebrities, social media influencers are sharing their daily routine videos doing workouts, household chores etc.

Twitter trending Use of The word Corona Virus: As per the Forbes report as on February 28, 2020 nearly 6.7 million people mentioned the word corona virus on their social media accounts. Nearly after two weeks the twitter mention of covid-19 rose to 20 million as stated by Sprinklr.

**Social Integrative needs** where people interact with near and dear ones to socially maintain their bonds. These needs are primarily fulfilled through social media only. People use different social media platforms to interact with their closed ones.

According to an Article published in India Today there is a tremendous growth in virtual socialisation amongst the people of India. There is a continuous increase in the usage of voice calls and video calls through Facebook. The messaging on Facebook has increased up to 50 percent.

There is an increase in the usage of social networking sites across all messaging platforms amongst young adults and adults. Three social networking sites specifically whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram have experienced hike from the normal usage

As per the survey conducted by Hammerkopf Firm they have mentioned that there is 87 % increase in the social media usage compared to the week before lockdown.

**Tension free needs** where people use media to get an escape from the real world situation temporarily. Most of the time people listen to songs or watch films in order to get away with the boredom. Usage of Sites like Netflix, Amazon prime, Hotstar, voot etc

Market research firm Nielsen reported that social media volume in India saw hefty rise in usage i.e. up to 50 times from the months of January to March after the covid-19 pandemic

Also surfing of different online streaming platform has doubled to 10 times as lot of people are spending time on subscription portals.

### **Challenges with Social Media**

Over Information:

Social media has opened the gateway of massive flow of information without any gate keeping. This has resulted into plethora of information. In context to corona outbreak WHO has recently shared their concern over growing infodemic through social media. Infodemic is termed as excess of information with credibility in doubt. In case of covid-19 the myths, the information are bombarding in numbers which is another kind of incurable problem just like corona itself.

Misinformation

Through social media both history and misinformation about the virus was created. Europe was waking up to the problem and stories about 'no meat consumption' began spreading.

February witnessed interest and rumours about the spread of virus in Europe using hastags such as #NoMeat\_NoCoronavirus

A former AIIMS Virology department HOD, Dr Pradeep Seth says "Rumours are spread by educated illiterate who do not understand the seriousness of present situation. 99 % of such are sharing and circulating illogical messages on Whatsapp and different social media accounts describing various home remedies to prevent corona infection like eating onion, doing 2 hours of Morning Prayer. These are purely Home remedies and are not to be taken seriously. What is the purpose of science if only prayers solve all the answers. Don't blindly believe these myths. Keep your religious sentiments aside and stop doing negligence behaviour. This is the time to stop and reflect the bigger picture. This is the time of pure patience.

A new term called 'CovIdiots' also emerged for those who broke the stay-at-home diktat by PM Modi on the day of Janta Curfew and came out in huge numbers to celebrate on the streets.

Social media users continue to use #COVIDIOTS to identify those who refuse to follow social distancing and lockdown norms.

Some popular Twitter trends built by Indian twitter users were

A total of 0.4 million mentions were recorded during the month who used hastags such as #CoronavirusOutbreak, #nCov2020, #Kerala, #WuhanVirus, #ChinaCoronaVirus and #WuhanOutbreak.

In the first week of March with India reporting few cases. An estimated 1.6 million mentions were recorded during this time as users shared information on social media platforms using hastags such as #Coronavirusindia, #CoronaVirusUpdate, #CautionYesPanicNo, #CoronareachesDelhi, #COVID19India and #HelpUsToHelpYou.

On March 11, World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as a pandemic thereafter, users started sharing precautionary hashtags #CoronavirusPandemic, #Sanitiser, #Mask, #SwasthaBharat, #KaroNamaste #SayNoToPanic, #SafeHands and #CancelEverything around 3.1 million mentions were made.

Social distancing tweets got momentum as the number of cases started growing in India

From 15 to 18 March, people started mentioning alarming awareness tweets hastags #IndiaFightsCorona, #SocialDistancing, #CoronaOutbreak, #CoronaFighters and #SafeHandsChallenge around 4.1 million mentions were made during the time.

The lockdown week witnessed maximum number of twitter mentions of around 11.5 million. Here active and non-active users continuously shared and discussed Corona virus on their different social media platforms with hashtags discussing #JantaCurfew, #CoronavirusLockdown, #SocialDistancing, #IndiaFightsCoronavirus, #BreakTheChain and #StayHomeStaySafe.

### **Findings**

The present research focused on the social media usage only. Social distancing is gradually coming out as normal routine activity amongst Indian users. As they are heavily gauging on different social media platforms to satisfy their individual needs. As per news report people are heavily relying on social media to consume news and also in the same time communicating with their friends and families.

Social media is not the only medium of dependence for gratifying needs. TV penetration has also increased by 76 % as there is a drift in TV viewing. As per Hammerkopf Consumer Survey, conducted on 1300 people amongst 4 metro cities 76 % people are watching TV at prime time. Internet surfing has increased

The study has identified that there is growth in number of messages or communication through Facebook, Whatsapp, and Twitters since one week of lockdown.

Users are using different media platforms along with the social media to gratify their needs which includes television and online streaming portals. Apart from this smartphone users are also downloading various cooking, gaming, fitness, and e-learning apps to satisfy their cognitive needs.

### **Conclusion**

As the number of corona cases are increasing with every passing it surely has become matter of speculation that this practice of social distancing is going to continue for a while. However a lot of experts are to believe that in the present time presence of social media is very helpful in overcoming the feeling of isolation. The smartphone culture which was earlier in everybody's radar is now turning out to be best resource available in terms of gratifying needs related to information, communication and education.

With the help of several apps now people are engrossing themselves into different routines by joining different networking communities online viz. Unacademy, Byju, Google classrooms etc for education, teams, Skype, LinkedIn etc for connecting professionals online. And along with these there



are several interests based social apps available on Google play store to engage with a lot of likeminded users online.

Psychological association mentions that social networks are helpful in relieving stress, anxiety and bring a normalcy in any work. This interconnectivity can be done through video chats, video calls, emails, messengers etc. In order to maintain a calm in such stressful times social media platforms are best empathisers where you can share information, messages with your closed ones and ease your social distancing.

As mentioned by psychological association usage of different social Media networks at the time of social distancing is more comforting as gratifies our information, entertainment and most importantly our communication needs. Different individuals focus primarily on different needs.

Presently social media is acting as energy booster at the time of physical separation. Social distancing has created base of active audience who are consistently engaged on online communities and are satisfying their different needs in the time of pandemic outbreak

Nevertheless to say communication through different social media networks like Facebook, Twitter etc is helpful in attaining a relief from FOMO ( Fear of missing out) the continuous social media footprint is a sign of close physical interaction in the times of geographical boundaries. Social distancing seems, not so distant with the help of social Media.

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