

# **Social Media & COVID-19: Socioeconomic and political aspects in 2022 and beyond**

**LAB ICT Heron**

**Panagiotis Tzavaras**

Adjunct Lecturer - European University Cyprus

**Athanasios Davalas**

Phd Candidate – University of the Aegean

## **Abstract**

Social Media are emerging as the dominant means of information and social interaction, while directly affecting political and financial elements of contemporary life. And while there is a wide acknowledgement of both their positive as well as their negative effects, it is questionable whether both research as well as public opinion understand all implications stemming from these effects.

To this end, this study reviews literature on the socioeconomical and financial effects of Social Media on the contemporary way of living, especially in light of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to map the current interaction of social media with our lives and way of thinking. A compilation of findings is attempting to shed a light on the ever-evolving role social media will play in mitigating and managing the COVID-19 crisis, taking into consideration the social media dominance emerging in the global ecosystem, a dominance that is touching upon the ways we interact, learn, access information, alleviate stress understand politics and participate in public life.

Sociology has a quite intriguing phenomenon to interpret, this of a new-age media that is shaping opinion, fear, preferences or even consumer behavior, taking into consideration all the social, economic and political effects of this dynamic. Both research as well as empirical evidence showcase that social media might be a revolutionary means of communication, networking and information, however it is this undeniable power of social media is an extremely dangerous tool in the hands of powerful individuals, organizations or governments in manipulating public opinion, fueling propaganda or even attempting a worrisome surveillance of the individuals, with regards to their personal views and choices.

But social media are not only a foe. The astonishing speed in which information can be disseminated through social media, renders them an excellent ally in providing crucial information to mitigate a crisis, especially one similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the magnitude of reach regarding information, needs to be carefully monitored in order to avoid disseminating misleading or even dangerous information. It is for this reason that a new term

was introduced, characterizing the dissemination of information through social media as an ‘infodemic’ which is directly referring to a dangerous pandemic.

This study contributes to a better understanding of social media in the socioeconomic and political sphere, by initiating a discussion on how global logic is built due to the use of social media and how we need to thoroughly understand this critical effect of social media on our lives, trying to manage it in a way that benefits the development of a mankind that takes informed decisions on policy, health, science and social life in general.

## Key Words

Social media; information; fake news; health crisis; COVID-19; infodemic; consumers panic behaviour; dissemination of information; knowledge dissemination; social media communication strategies.

## Introduction & literature review

The authors review political economy and sociology literature in an effort to map the socio-economic as well as political effects of social media, especially in the time of crisis, of a health-crisis and of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular.

Research is eloquent on the magnitude of the impact social media have on the contemporary society, coloring the behavior of individuals as well as of communities and the entire society. Online communication differentiates itself from physical communication (both in a positive as well as in a worrisome way) and to this end online communication is being examined as such. Authors state that in order to create a relationship or achieve certain goals, people tend to manage impressions in a strategic manner, emphasizing certain characteristics while downplaying certain others. Online communication emphasizes verbal and linguistic hints rather than non-verbal ones, the latter being more difficult to tame (Walther, 1996: 1-43). Certain scholars, including Walther, believe that online communication restores a ‘social equality’, rendering the dominance of the opinions of powerful individuals more difficult. More recent studies claim that online communication only requires more time to create an equal first impression than what a physical communication requires (Tzavaras, 2020: 71-75).

More importantly, while the COVID-19 is still unfolding globally, having lasted more than 2 years and with scientists stating that there is good chance that humanity will be dealing with COVID-19 for the coming years (even if the virus becomes endemic), the social media dominance is emerging as a means of shaping human behavior. Considering that global logic is nowadays built due to the use of social media (Naeem, 2021) as well as the fact that interrelationships between media coverage and epidemics have the potential to generate negative media coverage (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019), it is important to promote and develop research on the ways social media shape the future of the mankind.

The existing literature, and particularly the one reviewed in the current research, is covering the ways in which social media interact with human behavior and socioeconomic milestones of the modern world. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon humanity a crisis that can, to some extent, be paralleled to past pandemics, however, the momentum of modern people being avid social media users, and of social media being on the edge of becoming a platform both of information as well as misinformation distinguishes this pandemic, and the way social media will affect humanity’s response to it.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature by reviewing research that explains the ways that social media establish their dominance in social interaction and information, shaping humanity's response to fear, crisis and COVID-19, laying the ground for consumptions and discussion on the future role that social media will play in our interaction with science, health and globalization. The understanding of social dynamics between content consumption and social media platforms is an important research subject, since it may help to design more efficient epidemic models accounting for social behavior and to design more effective and tailored communication strategies in time of crisis (Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, Valensise, Brugnoli, Schmidt, Zola, P., Zollo, F. & Scala, 2020).

## Methods

This research is reviewing literature covering various aspects of the interrelationship between social media and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Provided that the authors of the literature reviewed by this research have used various research methods during their own research, provides us with a solid research reliability, able to lead to comprehensive results while shading a light on the gaps of the theory that are yet to be covered as this pandemic is unfolding in the social media dominance era.

More specifically, methods used by the authors reviewed in this research include:

- automated text-mining and manual content analysis (10,132 comments related to coronavirus from different geographical forums, from 1 January 2020 to 29 February 2020);
- purposive sampling technique (telephonic interview of 34 consumers in United Kingdom that were over 18 years of age, had used social media platforms for a minimum of two years, had a minimum of one active social media account at the time of the research and were willing to voluntarily offer research data);
- review of empirical evidence from the recent political economy literature;
- example of an efficient and rapidly disseminated infographic describing a practical intubation guideline for use in operating theatres and other critical care areas during a pandemic;
- literature search on MEDLINE and Scopus databases, using terms “social media” and “COVID-19, choosing articles and the relevant data from 100 publications that have appeared in the space of 4 months;
- comparative analysis of Social Media platforms;
- data collection & matching ability;
- text analysis
- epidemiological models
- linear regression coefficients.

The aforementioned methods were selected by the authors both for research effectiveness reasons (e.g., a telephonic interview extends the geographical scope for getting rich insights

and is more cost effective, saving time, travelling, and meeting spot expense) as well as due to existing restrictions during their research (e.g., quality data selection during the spread of COVID-19 and the consecutive social-distancing guidelines).

Furthermore, the data collection was both automated as well as manually conducted, the data was selected after a comprehensive literature search in reliable databases (MEDLINE and Scopus), choosing from a pool of articles spread in time but focused on the key words of ‘social media’ and ‘COVID-19’, data and text were analyzed as per the scope of the research, and scientifically tested methods (e.g., epidemiological models and linear regression coefficients) were used accordingly.

Finally, the empirical nature of the evidence reviewed, as well as the fact that the evidence came from the recent political economy literature, renders the findings reliable and up to date.

## **Results**

### Social media era

As per the literature reviewed by the present study, sociologically, it is only recently that we were able to speak about social relationships that cover all mankind. The world has become a common social system, as a consequence of the rising interdepending links that nowadays affect almost everyone (globalization); it is in this context that social media use introduces a drastic change in the way people, societies and organizations communicate (Tzavaras, 2020: 66-67). The use of social media is changing the way we think, learn and interact (Guanwardena, Hermans, Sanchez & Richmond, 2009: 8).

The contemporary way of living has contributed significantly to the development of social media. The shift of an increasing amount of people to the sector of service provision and to office jobs, the long working hours, the little free time in a society that moves on a fast pace as well as isolation are the main reasons that lead to the rise of social media use (Tzavaras, 2020: 69).

Online societies, in which people actively participate nowadays, have the power to shape opinion, to gather their members, to guide, even to instigate action. In the sector of information, social media have challenged the dominance of traditional media, both in terms of the featured news as well as regarding the dissemination of information. More importantly, through social media, a part of the power has been transferred to the people, who can now participate more actively in public life (Tzavaras, 2020: 141-143). And while social media can’t trigger the rise of a social movement on their own, they can however facilitate the creation of a social movement and the participation of people in it through their links to the political and economic reality (Rohr Lopes, 2014).

### Social media and disaster/health crisis

Authors have found that social media is an important element in disaster and health crisis related communication. The findings of the authors’ research (comments related to coronavirus from different geographical forums) have shown that people often suspected the real purpose and authenticity of media coverage and criticized the over-attention of epidemic reports rather

than rational cognition, while they also criticized the spread of fake news and exaggerating reports by different media. Furthermore, online comments claimed that communication on social media might cause misleading information, and more accurate information should be acquired from official sources (Yu, M., Li, Z., Yu, Z., He, J. & Zhou, J., 2021).

Risk perception and communication intensity experienced a dynamic change in communication on social media due to the rapid and unpredictable spread of the epidemic. This potentially challenges the classical four-stage crisis lifecycle (Fink, 1986) of prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution stages, as a series of issues including updated policies and measures can aggravate the health crisis. Compared with classical crisis lifecycle, more acute peaks of communications potentially occur when the health crisis is at a global scale (Yu, M., Li, Z., Yu, Z., He, J. & Zhou, J., 2021).

### Social media & COVID-19 – friend or foe?

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, social media has the potential, if responsibly and appropriately used, to provide rapid and effective dissemination routes for key information. It is likely that a lack of awareness and preparedness put healthcare workers at risk (e.g., well-designed infographics have the potential to provide concise and practical information to institutions and healthcare workers). Thus, delivering rapid, reliable information that addresses critical infection control issues is of key importance (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee & Joynt, 2020).

The challenge is how to transfer knowledge of current best practices to the people who need it most, at a pace equal to or better than the spreading epidemic. Generally, the literature shows that false news does spread through social media, and its spread is faster and wider than that of true news (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, & Enikolopov, 2020). There are limitations to dissemination of online resources, and before considering implementation, healthcare workers must critically appraise the information provided. Known risks of non-peer-reviewed materials disseminated via social media include the application of context-specific resources to unsuitable situations; engagement with biased knowledge within echo chambers' (groups consisting of only like-minded individuals) and algorithm-driven filter bubbles that selectively display information based on user preferences; and insufficient source information available to distinguish between valid and invalid information. In medicine, there is the additional risk of early adoption of unvalidated research or practice, and the risk of future medical reversal. Some of these issues are not unique to non-peer-reviewed resources, and peer-reviewed materials face similar challenges (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee & Joynt, 2020).

The greatest strength of social media platforms is also their principal limitation. Because information is widely accessible and immediately available, it may also not be immediately reliable. Information constructs based on flawed hypotheses can easily find their way to a naive audience through an unregulated maze, resulting in the establishment of many myths before facts can be presented. Health care providers making clinical decisions need to be trained in quickly surfing through a haystack to find the needle (Goel & Gupta, 2020).

Another worrisome finding is that the unprecedented level of real-time information on COVID-19 at users' fingertips can give them the tools they need to make smart decisions, but also make them more anxious about what is to come; experts say that may lead to panic buying or stockpiling of products. In 2021, consumer panic buying increased across the globe based on a socially constructed meaning of COVID-19 that led to stockpiling behaviour of consumers. Literature (Naeem, 2021) has tried to develop understanding about how social media generates social proof and offers a window into people's collective response to the coronavirus outbreak and shapes panic buying reaction. Naeem's study has provided a consumer panic buying theory based on the results of this study and on existing theories, such as global capitalism/information society risk society, social influence, and social proof. These theories help to understand how global logic is built due to the use of social media and how different social proofs are generated which developed the behaviour of consumer panic buying due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the authors have examined one of the potential costs of social media, with heavy political implications, which is their capacity to create echo chambers, or filter bubbles. Sunstein (2001, 2017) argues that the Internet and, lately, social media prevent people from learning about opinions different from their own. In terms Another sociopolitical effect examined by the authors is polarization, however, overall, the available evidence about whether social media increase political polarization is not conclusive (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, & Enikolopov, 2020).

## Discussion

The literature has concluded that social media play a pivotal role in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, acting both as an ally as well as an enemy to an undisrupted, socially equal reality. While it has become common knowledge that social media have this incremental impact on the way we interact, learn, mitigate pandemics or respond to crisis, it is questionable whether the contemporary social media users are aware of the 'power' social media have on their lives. It could be stated that 'we live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology' (Carl Sagan, 1996: 17) (Tzavaras, 2020: 65).

And while social media help achieve a 'social equality' (Tzavaras, 2020: 71-75), giving the 'microphone' to less powerful individuals as well, we shouldn't shy away from stating the obvious: that powerful individuals have by now the understanding of how social media work as well as the resources to use social media in ways that benefit their personal agenda, often clouding the judgement of less avid social media users, or event manipulating the sentiments of less educated, polarized groups of individuals.

Research and consecutive discussion could focus on the evolution of social media into a tool that can support the dissemination of reliable and peer-reviewed information in a way that is addressing all users, even the less educated ones, supporting and educating them to take informed decisions, using social media instead of being used by them. Recent times of crisis, whether it is a social, political or health crisis, call for a rapid adjustment of social media

# 3rd World Conference on Management, Business, and Economics



06 \_ 08 May 2022

Budapest, Hungary

communication strategies in this direction, and it is one of the mission of research to instigate a more sophisticated approach in the design of such strategies.

## References

- Chan, A. K. M., Nickson, C. P., Rudolph, J. W., Lee, A. & Joynt, G. M. (2020) "Social media for rapid knowledge dissemination: early experience from the COVID-19 pandemic", *Anaesthesia*, 75, 1579–1582. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anae.15057>
- Cinelli, M., Quattrocioni, W., Galeazzi, A., Valensise, C. M., Brugnoli, E., Schmidt, A.L, Zola, P., Zollo, F. & Scala, A. (2020), "The COVID-19 social media Infodemic", *Scientific Reports*, 10:16598. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>
- Goel, A., MD, MPH & Gupta, L., MD, DM (2020) "Social Media in the Times of COVID-19", *JCR: Journal of Clinical Rheumatology*, Volume 00, Number 00, Month 2020.
- Guanwardena, C. N., Hermans, M. B., Sanchez, D., Richmond, C., Bohley, M. & Tuttle, R. (2009) "A theoretical framework for building online communities of practice with social networking tools", *Educational Media International*, Volume 46, Number 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523980802588626>
- Naeem, M. (2021) "Do social media platforms develop consumer panic buying during the fear of Covid-19 pandemic", *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 58, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102226>
- Rohr Lopes, A. (2014) "The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: The New Opportunity and Mobilizing Structure", *Journal of Political Science Research*, 2-23, Creighton University.
- Sagan, C. (1996), *Skeptic*, 4 (4), 10-17
- Sunstein CR. (2001) *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Sunstein CR. (2017) *Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Tzavaras, P. (2020) *Understanding Social Media*. Athens: Ellinoekdotiki Publishing, December 2020
- Walther, J. B. (1996) "Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interactions", *Communication Research*, Vol. 23, 1-43
- Yu, M., Li, Z., Yu, Z., He, J. & Zhou, J. (2021) "Communication related health crisis on social media: a case of COVID-19 outbreak", *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24:19, 2699-2705, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1752632>
- Zhuravskaya, E., Petrova, M. & Enikolopov, R. (2020), "Political Effects of the Internet and Social