

Usage of social media in finding information related to COVID-19

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Problem/theoretical outline

During a pandemic situation, searching and retrieving relevant and accurate health information is a crucial factor. Nowadays with the technological development, people have so many different ways to access information in many formats. However, the Internet was identified as the source that used more commonly to search for health information (Fox & Duggan, 2013). The evolution of the Internet provided social media platforms that are very popular among the general public in the creation and sharing information with anyone, anywhere, anytime. Some researchers have identified that people are using social media in disaster communication (Bunce, Partridge, & Davis, 2012; Jayasekara, 2019) and health communication (Bannor, Asare, & Bawole, 2017; Lim, 2016). COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2. Due to the severity and fast spreading of COVID-19, World Health Organization categorized COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Hence, the COVID-19 situation is a worldwide health crisis.

Sri Lanka is a small island situated in the Indian Ocean with roughly 22 million population. To prevent the disease spreading, the Sri Lankan government announced an island-wide lockdown. As a result of that, Sri Lankans have to rely on online and digital media for searching information related to COVID-19. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the social media usage of Sri Lankans during the COVID-19 pandemic situation to retrieve information related to Coronavirus.

Design

Primary data for this study was obtained through an online questionnaire prepared using Google forms. Five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never). The questionnaire link was distributed among Sri Lankans using Facebook,

WhatsApp, and email. Data were collected through two months period. The survey was anonymous. Since Sinhalese is the mother tongue of Sri Lankans, Sinhalese was the language used in the questionnaire. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2010.

Findings

There were 244 respondents. Respondents were mostly female (59.8%) than males (40.2%). In studying the age composition, the majority of the respondents (52%) fell into the age group 30-49 followed by age group 19-29 (37.7%). In terms of education level, respondents were highly educated with 42.2% of the respondents with Bachelor's degrees and 20.1% with Master's degrees. The majority of the respondents were from the Western province (47.5%) followed by Southern province. Sri Lankans always used Facebook (54.5%) and YouTube (12.3%) to gather COVID – 19 information. Meanwhile, almost a third of respondents often used Facebook (34.4%) and YouTube (27.5%) to fulfill their information requirement. A significant proportion of respondents replied that they never used Flickr (74.2%), Pinterest (70.9%), Instagram (61.9%) and Twitter (60.7%). A large majority of respondents believed that social media is providing moderate (42.6%) and good (40.6%) quality COVID-19 information. The reasons behind using social media to retrieve and share COVID-19 related information as follows; quick method, easy to retrieve information, access to more variety of types (ex. Text, Images, Videos) and access to a large amount of information at one time.

Practical implications

In conclusion, Facebook and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms among Sri Lankans to retrieve COVID-19 related information and Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter are the least used social media platforms. Respondents were satisfied with the quality of the information on social media. Thus it is suggested that Sri Lankan government institutes and news channels should concentrate on launching their information sharing activities using Facebook and YouTube in crisis situations to reach a large number of Sri Lankans.

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