

PANDEMIC STORIES:
SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

by

Marina Alojants

Presented to the
Department of English & Communications
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

American University of Armenia
Yerevan, Armenia

May 17, 2020

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Literature review	7
Research questions	11
Methodology	12
Research Findings	17
Online survey	17
In-depth Interviews	20
Conclusions	34
Limitations and Avenues for Future Research	35
Works Cited	36
Appendices	41
Appendix 1	41
Appendix 2	43
Appendix 3	46

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to my family, my friends, and my professors who supported me throughout my studies. I am ever grateful to my capstone supervisor, Dr. Mica Hilson, who guided me, turned my typing mistakes into jokes that would brighten my nights while editing, and was always ready to give a word of advice no matter how plain or repetitive my questions were. Seeing a glimpse of people's lives and being trusted with their personal stories was a wonderful experience, so, I am especially thankful to all those who participated in my research interviews.

Introduction

“Ignorance is bliss,” — Thomas Gray.

The English poet’s words ring true when it comes to emotional stability. Yet, the 2019 pandemic seems to prove that staying in touch in times of crisis, particularly through social media, has its benefits. Humans have been reliant on the spread of information since the beginning of time and were endlessly perfecting their communication skills. When it comes to a global pandemic like COVID-19, being aware of recent news, health guidelines, and legal regulations can save your life and the lives of those around you. In situations such as these, staying informed and maintaining communication can become a survival skill and a burden.

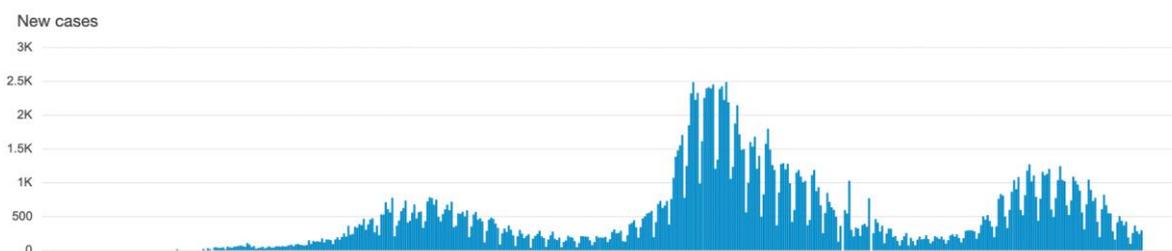
According to WHO (2020), Coronavirus or COVID-19 is an “infectious disease” that causes the development of a moderate to severe respiratory illness. Coronavirus is a common disease found in various animals, yet its transmission to humans was rare (Sauer, 2020). The first cases appeared in China in the winter of 2019. In a matter of months, WHO officially announced a pandemic, “a worldwide spread of a new disease,” on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Daily cases are at a steady rise worldwide, and statistics show that some countries are even experiencing a second or third peak in Corona cases (The Visual And Data Journalism Team, 2020).

Countries all around the world implemented a set of policies and regulations to reduce the infection rate. However, these measures affected a great deal more than the risk of catching the virus; it re-shaped people’s lifestyles and decision-making processes. Some of the policies were (UNAIDS, 2020): restricted gathering sizes, 6ft social distancing, face

masks, curfews, a limited number of people per transport vehicle, and travel restrictions (U.S. Embassy, 2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic has been closely monitored around the world ever since it sparked in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). It affected millions of people in terms of health, economy, social life, and communication. We may even call it a unique phenomenon: a global pandemic happening in a time of technological advancement and diverse communication methods. As a result, we can trace its progress in a way that we were never able to do centuries back.

For instance, contemporary data collection allows us to observe live infection rates rise and fall. At the time this capstone is written, May 2021, there are 220,729 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 198,135 recovered patients, and 4,314 deaths registered in Armenia alone (WHO, 2021). The graphs provided by WHO clearly show how Armenia, similar to European countries, is experiencing a third, gradual wave of the virus spread [Figure 1]:



[Figure 1]: Number of new cases in Armenia from March 2020 to May 2021 (WHO, 2021).

In response to the pandemic, a massive part of the world's activity shifted into a digital realm. The effects of this shift are still being studied in real-time. To understand this transition, we need to start by looking at how the pandemic changed our lives. Unfortunately, many other factors affect people's routines alongside Coronavirus, such as occupations, family emergencies, or seemingly distant international affairs.

During the pandemic, a significant disturbance in Armenia was the 44 Day War over the Nagorno-Karabakh region and Armenian borders (Amnesty International, 2021). The war broke out on September 27, 2020, and ended with the signing of a trilateral peace agreement by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on November 9, 2020 (EVN, 2020).



[Figure 2]: Number of casualties during the 44 Day War from Sept. 27 to Nov. 9, 2020 (Crisis Group, 2021).

Undeniably, these devastating events took their toll on families and individuals who experienced loss, stress, and post-war trauma. Presumably, the military crisis would have also exacerbated the effects of online communication and the lack of physical contact with those who could provide comfort. I acknowledge that such experiences can obscure people's pandemic experiences and considered these effects in my capstone project. However, in view of my research, the war holds a somewhat secondary role, albeit one that practically displaced the importance of the pandemic.

Before analyzing the effects of social media use during a secondary crisis, it is crucial to first understand what people experienced during the pandemic overall. How had their lives changed during COVID, if at all? The use of online means of communication is directly linked to people's lifestyles, needs, and emotional wellbeing. Seeing as the pandemic crisis

predated and outlasted the war, people's attitudes and experiences towards the military clash were probably very different than if they did not have to worry about other health risks.

Therefore, my main research focus is on identifying the impacts that the pandemic had on people's social lives and the role of social media. To begin with, let us consider the effects Coronavirus had on the world.

Literature Review

We may consider the Coronavirus to be a plague of the 21st century, which makes it an unprecedentedly monitored phenomenon during a time of enhanced communication and digital connectivity. But, to truly understand the pandemic experience, we need to consider the global impacts the virus had on the world and how that rebounded on people's social lives.

Pandemic Impacts Through Data Analysis

The global pandemic led to a spectrum of changes in various regions, population groups, economies, and communication methods. A United Nations report published in May 2020 gives a detailed statistical account of a rapid increase in unemployment rates as businesses went bankrupt. Such extensive workforce shortening worldwide resulted in a 10.5% loss in working hours (UN, 2020). This information, grouped with the fact that most countries enforced quarantines and lockdowns, suggests that large population groups were forced to stay at home with potentially more free time and dependence on social media. School closures and transitions to online lectures further support the idea that digital communication became a critical part of life during the pandemic (UN, 2020).

Understandably, data analysis involves a great deal of reading between the lines, and most deductions are only assumptions. Nonetheless, other statistics and data can be used to support such hypotheses. For instance, a statistical publication by Amy Watson (2020), assessed data from 13 countries and found evidence of rising trends in media consumption. The data showed a 21% increase in social media use during the pandemic and other online activity, such as a 36% rise in news consumption (Watson, 2020). Digital entertainment also received much more attention during the pandemic since there was an increase in movie streaming service usage by 27% and an 18% rise in computer game use.

The fact that a wide range of digital media experienced a significant spike supports the idea that lockdown conditions and unemployment could have initiated the world shift into the digital world. Even though both the report and the publication were based on just the first four months of the year 2020, the pandemic's impact on economies, social lives, not to mention the spiking death toll, was considerable.

I acknowledge that statistical data is best for revealing general trends, yet it lacks the confirmation needed to declare a correlation between such trends and their effects. For instance, we may see that the use of social media rose during the lockdowns, but the research did not ask whether people communicated out of pure boredom or because their relatives moved abroad.

Social Effects Through Psychological Analysis

The sudden quarantine limitations and restrictions enforced around the world caused a great deal of psychological strain. The stress following social distancing proves the importance of Tajfel's 1979 Social Identity Theory (Northumbria University, 2020). The psychological theory states that humans are highly social beings that rely on social groups

and the feeling of ‘belonging’ to construct their own identity. Being pulled away from ordinary social interactions is likely to push people towards digital communication, primarily social media.

According to the American Psychological Association, it is desirable to sustain social connectivity to decrease stress levels in times of crisis (Wiederhold, 2020). Thus, more online activity can keep people informed, preserve a sense of normality, and provide the much-needed support of friends and family. The Coronavirus pandemic can, indeed, be categorized as a crisis that has affected people’s daily lives and routines. In essence, this psychological concept suggests that we would be inclined to continue communicating, shopping, working, studying, receiving medical aid, following fitness training, and even traveling virtually. The pandemic regime truly pushes human communication abilities to the limit.

Growing Social Media Usage Trends

Preliminary studies of digital communication during the pandemic unanimously show an increase in social media use. Nguyen et al.’s (2020) research analyzed how people’s digital communication practices change during the pandemic using survey data from 1374 US adults. The study found a 35% increase in social media use, while only 8% of the participants decreased their online activity (Nguyen et al., 2020). These findings are also echoed by Gao et al.’s study of 5851 people from 31 Chinese provinces, as 80% of participants frequented social media sites (Gao et al., 2020). The growing pattern resonates with Tajfel’s Social Identity theory and confirms the link Wiederhold drew between traumatic experiences and the need for communication.

Ohme et al.’s study of smartphone usage among 2778 Flemish adults in Belgium further supports the growing trend as it found a 72% increase in social media use (Ohme et

al., 2020). Moreover, it registered a 64% rise in messaging application use, which implies that people mainly used their time to communicate with others and not simply scroll through news posts to stay informed.

Adverse Effects of Increased Social Media Use

Although digital communication is the only remaining option during a quarantine lockdown, studies conducted during the COVID-19 outbreak found a correlation between increased social media use and emotional instability. Gao et al.'s research in China found that 48% of those whose social media use increased reported symptoms of depression (Gao et al., 2020). While Wiederhold's article states that panic or anxiety caused by misinformation is easily countered by communication of any form, the Chinese study suggests that the theory is difficult to implement in real-life scenarios.

A study conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq adds to the Chinese study findings. It assessed 516 self-reported questionnaire responses, the majority of which confessed feeling agitation and panic after using social media. The researchers believe that the cause of such adverse effects of social media use is the "infodemic" and surge of misinformation (Ahmad and Murad, 2020).

COVID-19 and its effects are still being studied as it is yet a new and tragic page in history. The pandemic changed the lives of millions of people worldwide. Lockdowns are continuously renewed, and, therefore, studies are mainly based on quantifiable data obtained at a distance.

A similarity among most international pandemic studies is that they solely rely on quantifiable data to assess social media trends. Scholars mainly deviate in their opinions on the effects of social media use during the lockdowns. Some believe social media use is bound

to increase during lockdown for its psychological and informative benefits, while others strive to unveil its link with rising depression and anxiety rates.

On the one hand, empirical research helps paint an objective picture of Coronavirus's effects on our lives. On the downside, such studies lack personal connection with their participants and the reasons behind their media use or emotional states. My research looks at the missing pieces by investigating pandemic experiences and applying the “why?” question to their social media use and communication patterns.

Statement of Central Research Question

The capstone research bridges the gaps identified in the literature review by analyzing pandemic stories and answering the following questions: How did the pandemic affect social lives? What was the role of social media?

During my research, I investigated how people's daily lives have changed following the Coronavirus outbreak to understand the importance of communication methods and their impact. The study also uncovers the overall trends in digital communication during the pandemic and the reasons behind people’s preferences. Such data sheds light on the importance of certain social media during a crisis, people’s reasons for abstaining from online media, and whether digital communication improved or worsened their mental health.

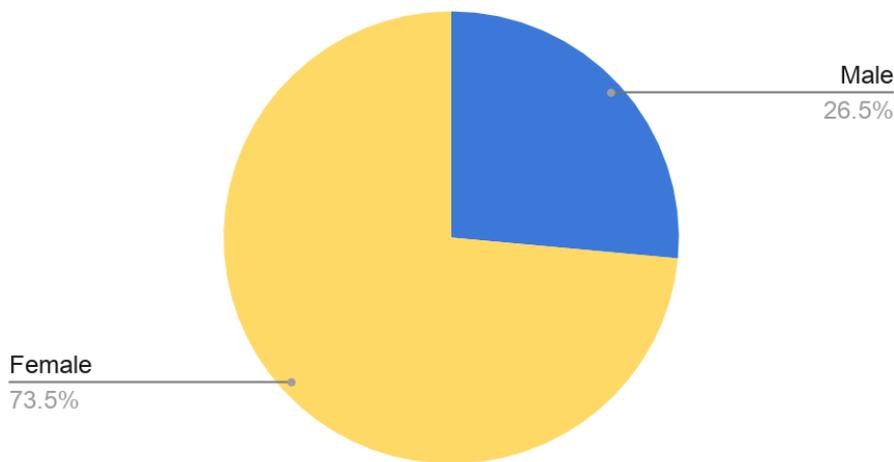
Methodology

My study has a dual approach that includes quantitative and qualitative research. Both methods will be applied to a sample of people living in Armenia during the pandemic. I chose to focus my research on one country to assess participants who shared a similar pandemic experience in uniform lockdown conditions.

Quantitative research

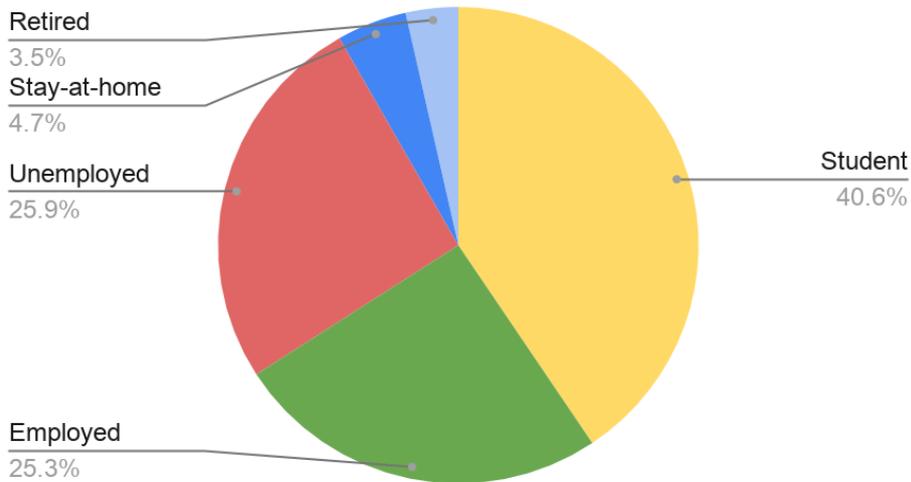
To gather information about people's communication trends during the pandemic, I opted for a quantitative research method: an online survey. It successfully collected data from 170 participants residing in Armenia. Some of the data reveal the survey's demographic reach, including gender, age groups, residence, and occupation. For example, of all participants, 73.5% were female, and 26.5% were male.

Gender



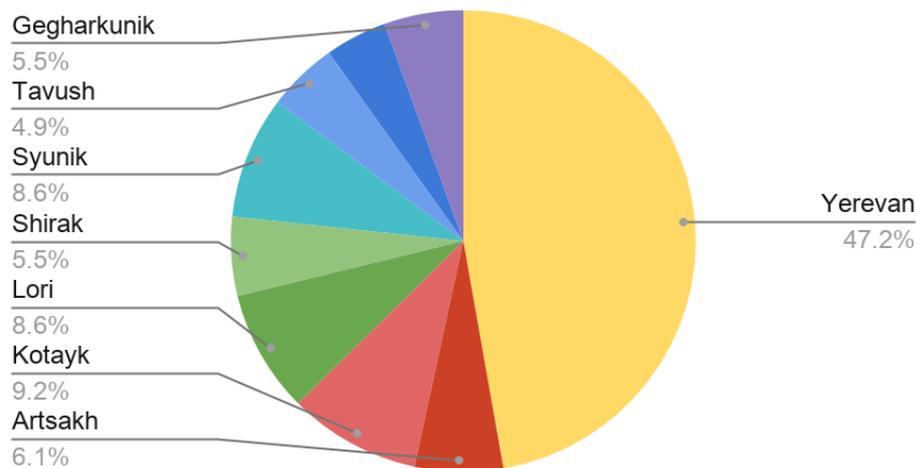
Thankfully, there was a better balance among the age groups, ranging from those under 15 years of age to those over 60; yet, 16-19-year-olds (23.5%) and 20-25-year-olds (27.1%) were visibly more active. Perhaps, this would explain why the majority of participants were students (40.6%) and unemployed (25.9%) or employed (25.3%) adults.

Occupation



Although the survey included participants from all 9 Armenian provinces, it is unsurprising that most participants resided in the capital, Yerevan (47.2%). Meanwhile, the other provinces had an average representation of 4.3%-9.2%.

Residence



Considering the diversity of languages spoken in the country, the questionnaire was available in two languages, English and Armenian. It was posted on my personal Facebook profile, Facebook pages, and LinkedIn profile to ensure maximum exposure to a broad

audience. I applied no age restrictions for the survey to be as representative of the Armenian population as possible.

Yet, encouraging people to allocate 5 minutes for an online survey is not an easy task since it is estimated that people in the digital age often need up to just 2 seconds to decide whether they are interested in a post or not (Roda, 2011). To ease the data analysis and make the survey appear more attractive to prospective participants, I made sure that the online survey mainly consisted of short multiple-choice and 5-point Likert scale questions [\[Appendix 2\]](#). Nonetheless, some of the priority questions also provided room for additional comments or alternative answers; since the more information I received, the more accurate my analyses would be. For example, along with existing multiple-choice answers to the question, “Why do you think your social media use increased?” participants also had the option to input an alternative answer in the “Other” box.

Both the English and Armenian versions of the survey started with a debriefing message, informing each participant of the study’s purpose and their rights. Participants then gave their consent by clicking the button “Next” to proceed to the questions. I incorporated two kinds of questions in the online survey: secondary and primary.

The secondary questions provide some background information about the research sample to help identify existing correlations between the sample demographics. These questions were at the beginning of the survey, as an introductory stage, followed by the primary questions aimed at identifying social media usage trends during the pandemic. Here is a sample:

1. Please rank how often you use these Social Media Platforms.
(1 = “Not at all” 5 = “All the time”)

2. Please rank your reasons for using social media platforms.
(1 = “Not a reason” 5 = “Main reason”)
3. Why do you think your social media use increased?
(Check all that apply)

Qualitative research

The second half of my research was conducted using in-depth interviews. They focused on the overall pandemic experience and delved into people’s decision-making processes and emotional states. The sample was mainly based on voluntary participants, but I made sure to control the sample to represent various age groups, genders, occupations, and locations within Armenia.

The sampling method started with a Facebook announcement for volunteers to participate in an in-depth interview about their pandemic experience and social media use. The announcement brought 18 interview participants, of which 9 were male and 9 were female, ranging from 9-year-olds to those over 40. Although the sample was formed on a first-come-first-serve basis, it was fairly diverse: people from different provinces and villages and different occupations.

All interviews were conducted in English or Russian, based on the participants’ preference. Each participant was thoroughly debriefed, and oral consent was obtained before proceeding with the interview. Most discussions lasted around 15 to 20 minutes, although participants were free to exceed this time.

The in-depth interviews aimed to reveal how the pandemic affected people’s communication styles, how they adjusted to the new challenges, and how their experiences impacted their mental and emotional health. The interviews were semi-structured to guide the

interviewees but still provided enough room for participants to dive into details. Like the online survey, the interview questions had secondary questions and open-ended primary questions to focus on the capstone topic. A master list of questions was created in advance and was later adjusted to suit each participant [\[Appendix 3\]](#). Here is a sample:

1. Did the pandemic change your daily routine? If so, how?
2. How did the pandemic affect you professionally/education-wise? (If applicable)
3. How did the pandemic impact you emotionally? What helped you cope with this?
4. Did the pandemic change your communication style? If so, how?

Considering the COVID situation in Armenia, all interviews were held online, over the software program Zoom, as a safety precaution against the possible spread of the infectious virus. I chose Zoom as the meeting platform for quick access because participants can join a call by simply clicking a shared link. This choice also provided flexibility for the participants to schedule the interview time based on their availability.

During the interviews, I noticed a common thread in people's responses about the content they followed online and its effects. To better understand their pandemic experiences without the limits of a structured interview, I sent follow-up questions and requests to a select group of people who were willing to add to our discussion.

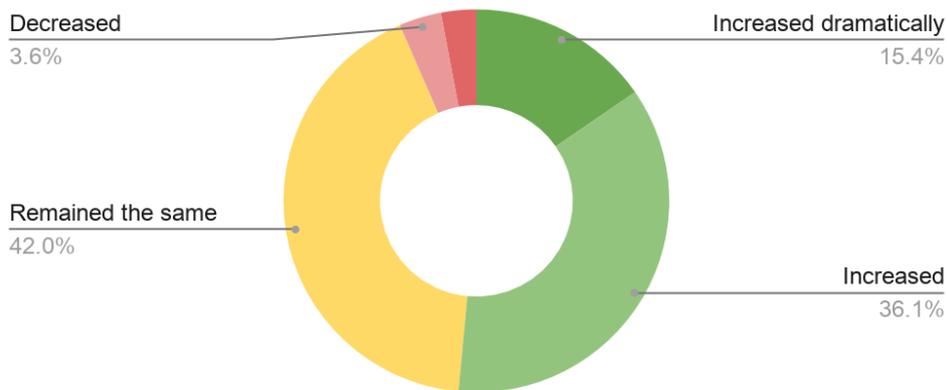
Research Findings

Online Survey

As mentioned, the purpose of the online survey was to gather information about people's communication patterns during the pandemic. Most existing studies focused on general social media usage trends and whether usage rose or fell. My survey confirms

Nguyen et al. (2020), Gao et al. (2020), and Ohme et al.'s (2020) findings because, as it turns out, social media use rose among Armenians as well. The survey showed that 51.5% of the 170 participants noticed an increase in their social media use during the pandemic, of which 15.4% felt a dramatic increase. Only 3.6% of participants reported a decrease in their social media use, while 3% felt a “dramatic” drop.

Social Media Usage



These results echo the trend that spread across the world: the shift into a digital world. True, 42% of participants did not detect a change whatsoever, but we cannot deny that most people spent more time on their social media platforms than the pre-COVID time. Further analysis uncovered that females were 9.1% more likely to increase social media use than males.

Although this data is important to understand the scope of change in a country, I also intended to learn which social media platforms were used and with what purpose. The survey showed that participants mainly used social media platforms during the pandemic to browse for News (76), find or share fun posts (52), and talk to people (69).

The rise of news consumption through social media was likewise mentioned in a 2020 Digital News Report based on data collected from “six continents and 40 markets” (Newman, 2020). For example, it said that Instagram use for news has doubled since 2018. We can agree that Armenian news consumption from social media sites is not different from the global trend.

Another global trend that will not come as a surprise is the use of social media as a means for social engagement and interaction. The concept is in the name itself, “social” media: “forms of media that allow people to communicate and share information using the internet or mobile phones” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Although the theoretical purpose of social media is clear, looking at the different platforms used can partially explain how people communicated during the pandemic and why their use increased.

Based on my survey, the most common platforms used during the pandemic were Facebook (89), Messenger (81), and Instagram (63). Research shows that around 71% of people in the US consume news from social media, Facebook being at the top of the list, explaining its popularity in my findings (Shearer, 2021). Yet, Facebook has other uses aside from news.

Another way the platform could be used, as suggested by the 52 of 170 survey respondents, is the spread of entertaining posts, jokes, memes, and comedic videos. In times of crisis, humor often becomes a coping mechanism that people use to help themselves and others to lighten stressful experiences. Humor therapy is even used by doctors and psychologists in helping cancer patients cope with their disease (NIH, 2021).

With the coming of the COVID-19, popular meme culture shifted its satirical force against the virus. A Jordanian study of over 1200 participants found that COVID-themed

jokes were in high demand during the pandemic: “mocking the virus,” government actions, and lockdown “living conditions” (Hussein, 2020). Perhaps, with humor as a weapon, people simply united against a common enemy.

The Messenger app, owned by Facebook, further helps sustain social connectivity as it provides an easy way to connect with people and spread much-desired positivity. The app saw several updates in its layout and function during the pandemic, adding an even larger sticker and gif archive as well as new COVID links to government health organizations (Messenger, 2021).

Another Facebook-owned platform, Instagram, was the third most common social media site used by the survey respondents. Although it was a fast-growing social media platform in 2018, its usage is forecasted to decline from 10.1% user growth to 1.8% in 2023 (Tankovska, 2021). If so, why do people use it? Perhaps it is another method of sustaining connectivity to the outside world by viewing people’s photos, sharing experiences, and traveling virtually. Self-reported reasons for increased SM use further help explain people’s communication choices.

Contrary to my expectations, the reasons for people’s increase and decrease in social media use were the same. The top three common reasons that stood out were: boredom, online classes, and the 44 Day War that took place in Armenia during the pandemic. Based on these findings, I can conclude that it was not the reason for the change that mattered but rather the motivation behind it.

Perhaps some people were bored during the lockdown and consumed more social media, while others became bored of social media itself, which resulted in less online activity. As for the online classes, some students could have used social media to interact

with classmates once classes started, while others reduced their SM use to focus on their studies. Similarly, the 44 Day war in Armenia may have pushed some people to find or share news on social media, whereas others tried to stay away from the negative information flow.

Indeed, these are only assumptions based on the data collected. Survey data is somewhat limiting, dealing with numbers and values that do not explain people's reasoning, experiences, and emotions. For that very same reason, I searched for answers to how and why people's communication styles changed during the pandemic using in-depth interviews.

In-depth Interviews

Many lives were divided into pre- and post-COVID periods. Yet, people's experiences, attitudes, and communication styles also changed throughout the pandemic itself. This section analyzes self-reported information from 18 interview participants (9 males and 9 females) about their pandemic stories, challenges, triumphs, and social lives. The interview findings were very rich and influenced by many factors, such as age, professional occupation, or the 44 Day War, so I chose to present the analysis in thematically separated chronological fractions.

The Start of the Outbreak

Although the Coronavirus was first detected towards the end of 2019, most interviewees mention that their online activity only changed with the virus's arrival to Armenia on March 1, 2020 (Reuters Staff, 2020). In total, 13 of the 18 interviewees confirmed that they started using social media platforms much more frequently during the first two months of COVID's presence in Armenia.

The primary reason for the rise in social media use was the increased demand for COVID-related news. Thirteen interviewees mentioned that they started actively searching for information about the virus as soon as the first infection case was announced by local Armenian news. The main reason for online COVID news consumption was, as a university student (23) said, *“to be prepared to identify the first symptoms and know what to do next.”* These findings go hand in hand with the online survey results, where 76 people said they mainly used social media to find and share news.

Another similarity between the interview and survey findings was the popular use of Facebook. Just as hypothesized from the survey data, most interviewees used the platform to find frequently updated information on COVID-19. Such information included details about the virus, the countries it spread to, the number of cases and deaths, and relevant governmental actions. Such readily accessible news was one of the triggers for change in people’s hygiene habits and shifts towards the new norm of social distancing and the use of facial masks.

However, not all interviewees received their news through social media. Among the respondents, 3 people specifically searched for official news and healthcare sources such as The Guardian, CNN, Fox News, the WHO, and various Armenian news agencies. Another 3 people, who happened to be working offline during the pandemic, received news about Coronavirus through word of mouth. In the latter case, the interviewees complained that they had less control over their exposure to the distressing news of rising COVID cases, making them feel *“vulnerable,” “anxious,”* and *“exhausted.”*

Hence, increased awareness about the virus does not necessarily reduce people’s fear of an unknown threat. In fact, psychologists believe that it may also be the cause of later emotional distress. In their study of fear during the pandemic, researchers found that “fear or

anxiety can be brought about both by knowing or having more information and by fear of the unknown related to the virus” (Coelho, 2020). As a result, actively following news about a distressing topic could be equivalent to having greater exposure to the crisis even in the safety of one’s disinfected home. More often than not, such exposure has negative impacts on people’s physical and emotional states.

This hypothesis was confirmed by 9 of the people interviewed. They had increased their social media news consumption and felt considerably distressed at the same time. Although the participants were interviewed roughly a year after the pandemic's start, they still preserved negative impressions of their early experiences. Some of the phrases the interviewees used during the discussion were: *“I felt panic,” “fear,” “uncertainties,” “depression,” “I felt tired physically and mentally,”* and *“scared.”*

Others claimed that they followed local and world Corona statistics to stay up to date and know how quickly the pandemic would end. The majority of the participants mentioned that they were unaware of the seriousness of the situation at first. So, the information received through social media searches did not immediately change their offline and online behavior. They continued to meet up with friends in public spaces, work in offices, and attend public events just the same.

The first two months seem to have been the breaking point for most interviewees as they were pushed to re-evaluate their routines, relationships, and emotional stability. As a result, 13 interviewees reported having a positive shift in their lifestyle choices, 3 people significantly struggled to adapt to the post-COVID changes, and only 2 people said their lifestyles barely changed.

Lifestyle Changes

Aside from triggering a rise in social media news consumption, the pandemic also pushed other daily activities into an online realm. One of the main shifts was in the educational activity. Through the in-depth interviews, it became apparent that the transition from in-person studies to online lectures was challenging for practically all students. Yet, some were able to adjust to studying from home and find benefits better than others.

One of the positive lifestyle changes mentioned by 4 students was the absence of travel time, so every aspect of education could be accessed without leaving their rooms using Zoom, Google Meet, and educational websites. Many expressed having better experiences organizing group work and presentations using Facebook Messenger chats and Zoom instead of arranging physical meetings with their peers. Online communication even boosted some people's interaction levels during class time as they felt more comfortable and spoke up more in class.

Of course, not all participants had such enthusiasm about their online studies. The majority said they found it extremely difficult to manage their time and concentrate on assignments because of the digital format. Interviewees described the situation thus: *"I often felt like giving up on assignments," "I had no energy," "no motivation," "read less," "couldn't focus."* As Lusine (20) said, there was a *"feeling like nothing was done in the day because your body didn't move."* This helplessness pushed many of them to spend more time engaging in different kinds of social media platforms in an attempt to create a feeling of activity.

Some students believed that their social media use faced a rapid increase, specifically because of their online studies. However, they also reported spending more time on social

media for recreational purposes. The more time people had on their hands, the more they thought about “what to do with it?” Over half of the interviewees mentioned that they found new ways of filling their extra time with online and offline activities for self-improvement.

For example, one student (21) mentioned that books, yoga, cooking, and open-access museums helped her self-development, although she still used applications like Snapchat out of “boredom.” Another student (21) said that they became hopelessly addicted to sustaining their Snapchat photo streaks, a kind of record, which disappears if a photo is not sent to the recipient each day.

In some cases, people tried to fill every waking hour with an online activity due to heightened anxiety and lack of interaction. As recounted by another student, Maryam (20):

“I sort of fell into a sense of passivity for a little while, and I felt very trapped... I felt like I wanted to meet people, I wanted to hang out, but I did not know how to get out of there... I have an ever-present sense of anxiety, a kind of fear of missing out.”

As a result, Maryam found comfort in safe volunteering opportunities and extracurricular clubs which she found after reactivating Facebook, where she could access social events and university announcements. In addition, she mentioned using YouTube to fill the remaining gaps created by lack of connection to the outside world as she mainly chose to watch videos presenting people’s lifestyles and activities. Another interviewee (21) confirms that he often caught himself watching people’s Vlogs on YouTube more often than any other content.

Interview results showed that Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform as 10 out of 18 respondents used its universal functions for messaging, news, and entertainment. YouTube was the second common platform used by 5 of 18 interviewees,

which mainly had the role of an engaging or educational distraction. The use of YouTube holds not only for the students of the sample but also for employed adults. For example, Davit (38) started using YouTube more frequently to find tutorials that could be a distraction and useful training for his work.

Based on the interviews, those who worked from home usually had families to help overcome the lockdown blues. One participant (39) stated that they started to separate their professional and personal lives better, meanwhile spending more time with their partners and children. A reason for such productivity was, as Davit noticed, the fact that business meetings became much more “laconic” in structure. People simply joined a business Zoom or Google Meet call and immediately proceeded to discuss relevant topics.

The lack of face-to-face communication was especially challenging to overcome for those who worked and/or studied online. One coping mechanism was texting people more. It is worth mentioning that the interviewees also changed how they communicated over social media aside from texting. Findings showed that people started actively using varieties of visual media such as GIFs, stickers, and emojis. Moreover, most people started feeling more comfortable using audio messaging as well as audio and video calls to stay connected with friends and family.

Such change in preference could explain the growing popularity of a new social media platform 3 participants mentioned using often, Clubhouse. Aside from allowing users to freely communicate with audios upon invitation, the platform’s differentiating feature from Zoom and Google Meet is that it can host up to 5000 participants in one room. Hence, people actively use it as an alternative for group meetings and parties. As Anton (39) said:

“Clubhouse is perfect for the Coronavirus time when you are not going to parties, and you are not going to meetups, etc. But, you can talk to people, ask questions, listen, even with drinks, and feel like you are at some party or event. This is a thing that may become mainstream.”

Unsurprisingly, those who were employed and stayed offline felt different effects of the COVID situation. Based on some accounts, their lifestyles barely changed, apart from taking new health precautions. As a result, they had enough face-to-face communication and did not have the same feeling of isolation. However, some still had reduced interaction with friends and family who were sick or extra cautious.

The Burdens of Connectivity

Unlike most participants, interviewees whose work or studies interacted with or relied on COVID claimed that they spent the same amount of time on social media as they did before the pandemic. In most cases, they received Corona-related news through peers or colleagues rather than social media platforms like Facebook.

Consequently, a participant (28) complained that *“not a day went by that I did not hear information about the COVID situation or how many people died last night.”* The closer their occupation was tied to the virus outbreak, the longer their shifts became, and, contrary to other interviewees, they wished to spend more time at home or with their families because they were *“extremely tired.”*

Those who obtained their COVID information from online sources were lucky to have the option of clicking the ‘Unfollow’ or ‘Unsubscribe’ button to silence the news feed. At one moment, people stopped using Facebook even for messaging purposes to avoid knowing events happening in the country. One person (31) specifically limited their time spent on

social media because they noticed that it started affecting their emotional and physical health. The downside of having easy access to news is that not all information is worth knowing. People became more selective about the information they consume at the pandemic's peak, which could be the reason behind the drop in the interviewees' social media usage rates.

On the other hand, some people deactivated specific applications because of the negative effects they had on them. One such platform was TikTok. An interviewee (22) explained that he started using the application because it was popular, trending, and many of his friends suggested it. After 4-5 months of use, he noticed that instead of distracting them from stress and negativity, TikTok started worsening their insecurities. Most of the content he followed featured young people who were financially stable, living in grand and well-furnished environments or wealthy neighborhoods. Continuous exposure to such content made them feel as though they do not fit into the 'ideal' lifestyle that was promoted. As a result, they closed their account and even unfollowed pages on FB because of their depressing and demoralizing content.

Meanwhile, others had a less drastic way of fighting negativity; they used humor. Even the survey findings showed that 52 of 170 respondents used social media to share entertaining content. My hypothesis was proven correct as humor clearly helped people overcome the crisis. For example, as Ernest (28) said:

"I used to get angry at and annoyed with the COVID situation and the government's actions. Tough times and politics pushed me to share more dark humor and sarcasm on Facebook. Now, I usually reshare old memories and humor that are not related to negative things. It takes my mind off things and is also out there so others can see it and relax."

Others spread humorous COVID-themed jokes, mainly related to lockdowns and people's creative ways of coping with the pandemic. By avoiding 'serious' posts, people tried to alleviate their stress from all the regulations governing their lives. The images below were courteously provided by the interviewees. Image 1 displays a typical online work meeting from home, during which people might only appear to look professional while, in fact, being partly dressed and otherwise occupied.



[Image 1]: A person working from home.

Other humorous content was in the form of memes, images, or text which are given new meaning and spread across the internet. In some cases, people took snapshots from news, popular movies, or other content and, instead of focusing on the serious matters, added humorous COVID context.

**Когда Си Цзиньпин
чихнул во время встречи**



[Image 2]: “When Xi Jinping sneezed during the meeting.”

This meme is based on an uncanny screenshot of state leaders at a meeting when they happen to look to one side. This meme shows how people’s reactions to hearing a sneeze or cough have changed.

**ПЕРЕХОДИ НА ТЁМНУЮ СТОРОНУ.
У НАС ЕСТЬ МАСКИ И РЕСПИРАТОРЫ**



[Image 3]: “Come to the dark side. We have face masks and respirators.”

A screenshot from one of the Star Wars movies doubled with a text that reveals what people value most in the pandemic: health and safety items.

Уйдите! Уйдите все на работу...



[Image 4]: “Go away! All of you, go to work...”

This meme shows the frustration of a pet tired of being in lockdown with everyone working from home. The joke is probably also relatable to people who are now spending more time with their family members at home.



[Image 5]: A meme about parents’ frustration at closed schools during lockdowns.

This meme was provided by a mother of 3. Lockdowns forced schools to close, which led to

online learning from home. As a result, many parents had to manage work, the household, and children simultaneously.

Therefore, despite the negative effects of online connectivity, social media allowed people to create and share remedying humor. Such content also reveals what troubles different age groups, what lifestyles people have, and people's reactions to the pandemic in general. Unfortunately, humorous posts do not always counter the influx of negativity that social media platforms carry.

The Impacts of War

Another reason for a sudden drop in social media use was the 44 Day War in Armenia. However, most people spoke of a curve in their online activity during the war as they were very active at first and then dramatically reduced their social media presence.

Curiously, the new crisis had a similar effect as COVID-19 did at the start of the pandemic. First, people's social media news consumption skyrocketed, and then it gradually plummeted. The main difference between the two crises, the war, and COVID, was that the war had a more immediate and detrimental effect on social life, which is why people's social media use changed in absolute extremes.

One cause of heightened online activity was the use of new social media applications like Telegram. People could receive information from official sources and gather in groups to reshare such information and spread awareness. According to Alexander (31), "*another new thing was that there are independent news channels in Telegram, and I discovered that during the war.*" A student mentioned that the COVID-related information pages on Telegram swiftly switched their content into war-themed data.

Similarly, people started opening and reactivating Twitter to reach world communities and raise awareness to spread a message of peace. One university student (20) even shifted to a new Armenian messaging application, Zangi, as a patriotic stance.

The in-depth interviews soon revealed a sharp decline in social media use towards the peak of the military conflict as interviewees became overwhelmed by the amount of negative news they received. People experienced wartime anxiety and avoided social media because platforms like Twitter “*became depressive.*” Those who did not cut their social media use completely substituted stressful applications such as Facebook with more neutral platforms like Telegram, where the news flow is easily controlled.

The Current Situation

One of the most significant consequences of social media news use was that people became somewhat desensitized and apathetic towards the information they saw or heard. Nonetheless, such apathy is not necessarily applied to interpersonal relationships.

During 3 interviews, participants mentioned an interesting change in people’s social behavior. They noticed that, in recent times, “*people started reaching out more,*” “*caring more about others and appreciating others,*” and that they became “*more patient.*” Although these were self-reported observations, it could be explained by the fact that people have limited opportunities to interact and wish to preserve more positive and kind connections. It could also be that they had already lost family members to the virus.

Out of 18 interviewees, 16 were certain that their social media use continues to drop below the amount they used to have before the pandemic. Most participants said that they are no longer following COVID and political news to avoid further anxiety. A mother of three (47) stated that she even limited her habit of liking or reacting to posts on Facebook to be less

emotionally involved. A university student (22) recalled that the posts from official Armenian news pages he followed on Facebook stopped appearing on his news feed, although the settings remained the same. He noted that it takes *“more effort to find information now compared to the start of the pandemic.”*

The other reason why news consumption may have fallen is the relaxed attitude people have towards the pandemic in 2021. Partly because they became desensitized towards all the information and partly because of the war situation that was seen as a more significant, immediate crisis compared to which COVID was less of a threat. Because of this and more relaxed lockdown conditions, many started resuming in-person communication with friends and colleagues. Some students began taking evening walks more often or going running with friends. Practically no one stresses over wearing a face mask in public.

Such growth in offline communication could have tipped the scales in interpersonal connectivity, making social media a secondary communication method once more. Interviewees reported receiving COVID-related news through face-to-face communication instead of searching online. Students started to use social media to organize gatherings, parties, and offline study groups. Facebook was a popular choice for event creation and search.

Nonetheless, the majority of interviewees preserved the new habits they acquired during the pandemic communication online. People continue using video calls, audio messaging, Messenger and WhatsApp texting, and group Zoom calls. Some said that the pandemic made them feel more flexible and confident in their choice of communication instead of relying on offline meetups, phone calls, or emails.

Conclusions

The primary research I conducted uncovered the grey areas within existing studies of people's communication during the pandemic, which mainly focused on a statistical representation of social media usage trends rather than their reasons. As such, my research inadvertently analyzed the effects of two crises, the 44 Day War and COVID-19, on people's wellbeing and communication methods.

The findings showed that a crisis tends to cause an increase in social media usage for three reasons: news consumption, human connectivity, and distraction. Unsurprisingly, the most common social media platform used by the sample of participants was Facebook, which allowed users to satisfy all three goals of online activity. However, people's online activity did not continue rising, nor did it stagnate. As soon as the crises reach their peak, people become tired and emotionally unstable from continuous exposure to sensitive or negative information. Although this change in attitude resulted in falling social media use, some people simply substituted undesired platforms like Facebook with more neutral messaging applications such as Telegram. By doing so, they divert their focus from negative news posts towards positive human interaction.

The study likewise revealed previously unexplored effects of people's backgrounds and occupations on their pandemic experience and digital communication. Interview findings showed that people working offline during the COVID outbreak were perhaps even more exposed to negative news carried through word of mouth than people who read such information online. As a result, they were less likely to use social media for news consumption and human connectivity.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Although the study assessed both qualitative and quantitative data, the interview sample of 18 people is too small for the findings to be representative of Armenia's 2,958 million population. Unfortunately, the sample does not include people from provinces located further from the capital city because of pandemic limitations, seeing as the interviews were conducted via Zoom video calls. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample in terms of backgrounds and age, to include people over the age of 50.

Another limitation was that two separate surveys were used to gather data, an English and an Armenian version. This method created problems in collecting the information into one data bank for analysis. Future research on the topic could use one survey with a language option at the beginning to avoid such drawbacks. An alternative platform to Google Forms, such as Survey Monkey, might also improve the analysis process for better result filtering opportunities.

Now that there are findings regarding social media usage trends and people's experiences, the study generated new questions to consider. Future research can investigate:

- How does the social media content people share change throughout the crisis?
- Are there differences in the reasons for increased or decreased social media use between males and females?
- What kind of COVID-related humor was shared during the pandemic, to whom, and why?
- How did COVID-related humor change people's emotional/mental states?
- Did the purpose of social media platforms change during COVID? What effects did they have?

Works Cited

Ahmad, A. R., Murad, H.R. (2020). The Impact of Social Media on Panic During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iraqi Kurdistan: Online Questionnaire Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(5), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.2196/19556>

Amnesty International. (2021, January 14). Azerbaijan/Armenia: Scores of civilians killed by indiscriminate use of weapons in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/01/azerbaijan-armenia-scores-of-civilians-killed-by-indiscriminate-use-of-weapons-in-conflict-over-nagorno-karabakh/>

Cambridge Dictionary. (2021). Social Media. *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/social-media>

Coelho, C. M., et al., (2020). On the Nature of Fear and Anxiety Triggered by COVID-19. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.581314>

Crisis Group. (2021, May 7). The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer. *International Crisis Group*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer#1>

EVN. (2020, November 10). War Ends, What Follows? Live Updates. *EVN Report*. <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/war-ends-what-next-live-updates>

Gao, J., et al. (2020). Mental health problems and social media exposure during COVID-19 outbreak. *PLoS ONE*, 15(4): 1-10.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231924>

Hussein, A. T., Aljamili, L. N. (2020). COVID-19 humor in Jordanian social media: A socio-semiotic approach. *Helyon*, 6(12), 1-12.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05696>

Messenger. (2021). Messenger Coronavirus ((COVID-19. *Messenger*.

<https://www.messenger.com/coronavirus>

Newman, N. (2020, April). Executive Summary and Key Findings of the 2020 Report. *Reuters Institute*. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>

Nguyen, M. H., et al. (2020). “Changes in Digital Communication During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic: Implications for Digital Inequality and Future Research.” *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 1-6.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255>

NIH. (2021). Humor Therapy. *National Cancer Institute*.

<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/humor-therapy>

Northumbria University Newcastle. (2020). 5 Ways Psychology Explains Our Changing Behaviour During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Northumbria*.

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/study-at-northumbria/courses/msc-psychology-distance-learning-dtdppy6/social-psychology-coronavirus/>

Ohme, J., et al. (2020). Staying Informed and Bridging “Social Distance”: Smartphone News Use and Mobile Messaging Behaviors of Flemish Adults during the First Weeks of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 6, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120950190>

Our World in Data. (2020). Policy Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic. *Our World in Data*. <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid>

Reuters Staff. (2020, March 1). Armenia reports first coronavirus infection. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-armenia-idUSKBN2001A5>

Roda, C. (2011). Human Attention in Digital Environments. *Cambridge University Press*. <https://doc.lagout.org/Others/Cambridge.University.Press-Human.Attention.in.Digital.Environments.2011.RETAiL.EBook.pdf>

Sauer, L. M. (2020). What is Coronavirus? *Hopkins Medicine*.

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus>

Shearer, E., Mitchell, A. (2021, January 12). News Use Across Social Media Platforms in 2020. *Pew Research Center*.

https://www.journalism.org/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/?utm_source=AdaptiveMailer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=21-01-12%20Social%20Media%20Update%20General%20Distro&org=982&lvl=100&ite=7690&lea=1696518&ctr=0&par=1&trk=

Tankovska, H. (2021, January 27). U.S. Instagram user development 2017-2023. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/426533/instagram-us-user-growth/>

The Visual And Data Journalism Team. (2020, May 14). COVID-19 pandemic: Tracking the global coronavirus outbreak. *BBC News*.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105>

UNAIDS. (2020). Rights in a Pandemic. *Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS*. https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/rights-in-a-pandemic_en.pdf

United Nations. (2020, May 15). Data tells the story on how COVID-19 is changing the world. *Department of Economic and Social Affairs*.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/statistics/data-tells-the-story-on-how-covid-19-is-changing-the-world.html>

U.S. Embassy in Armenia. (2020, May 14). COVID-19 Website Notice — Embassy Yerevan. *COVID-19 Information*. <https://am.usembassy.gov/u-s-citizen-services/covid-19-information/>

Watson, A. (2020, June 18). Media consumption increase due to the coronavirus worldwide 2020, by country. *Statista*.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1106766/media-consumption-growth-coronavirus-worldwide-by-country/>

WHO. (2020, April, 27). Archived: WHO Timeline COVID-19. *World Health Organization*. <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>

WHO. (2021, May 16). Armenia. *World Health Organization*.

<https://www.who.int/countries/arm/>

WHO. (2020). Coronavirus. World Health Organization. *World Health Organization*.

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

WHO. (2021, March 26). Social media & COVID-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among Gen Z and Millennials. *World Health Organization*.

<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/social-media-covid-19-a-global-study-of-digital-crisis-interaction-among-gen-z-and-millennials>

WHO, (2010, February 24). What is a pandemic? *World Health Organization*.

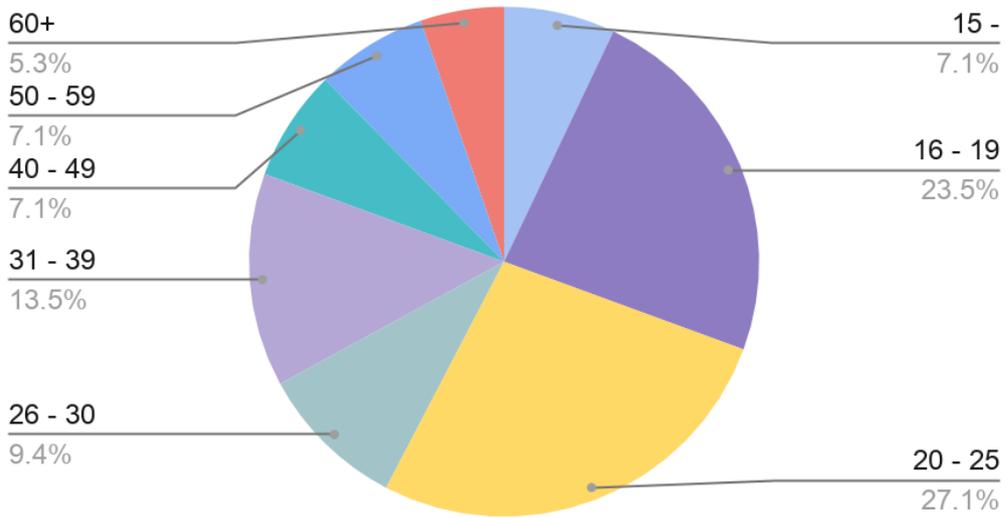
https://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/pandemic/en/

Wiederhold, B. K. (2020). "Using Social Media to Our Advantage: Alleviating Anxiety During a Pandemic." *Cyber psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 23(4), 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.29180.bkw>

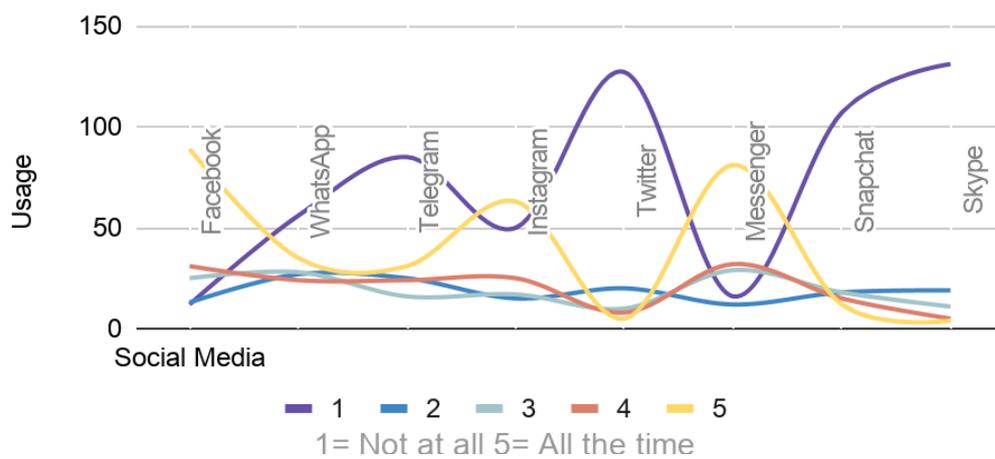
Appendices

[Appendix 1] Online Survey Findings

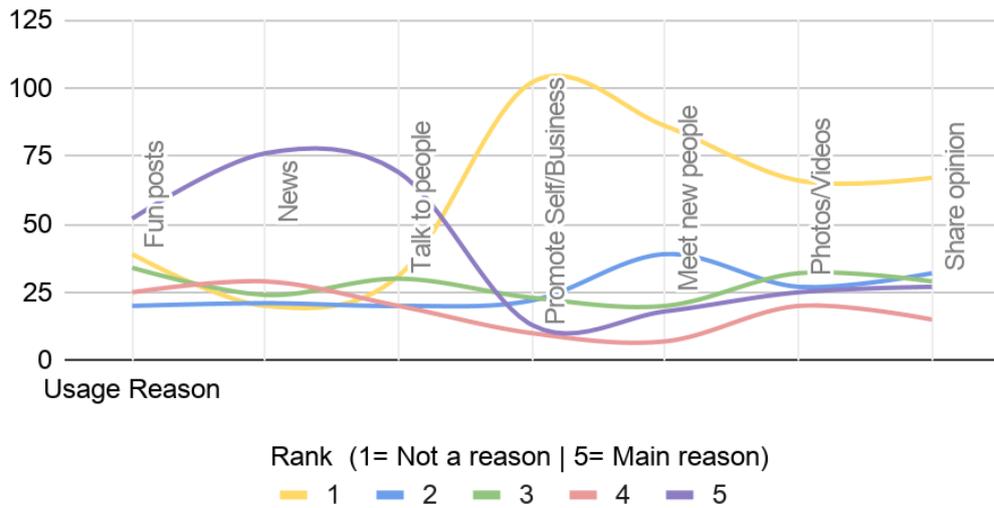
Age



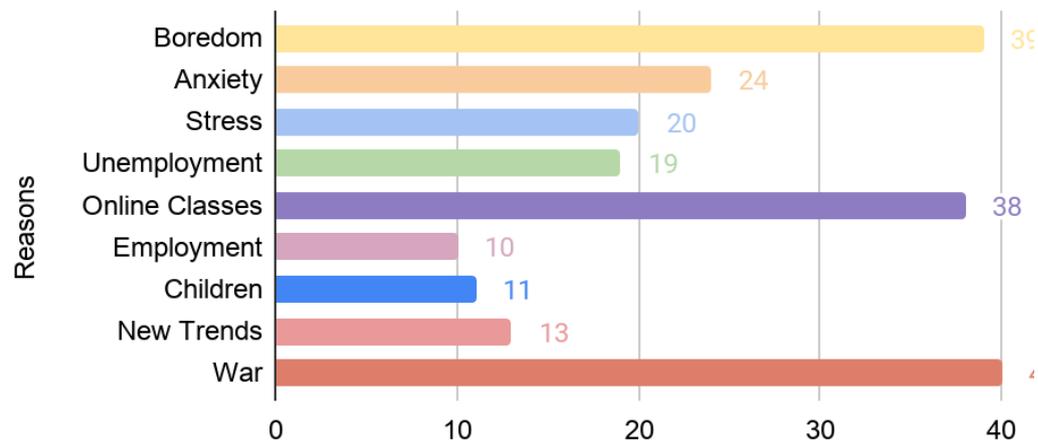
Social Media Usage



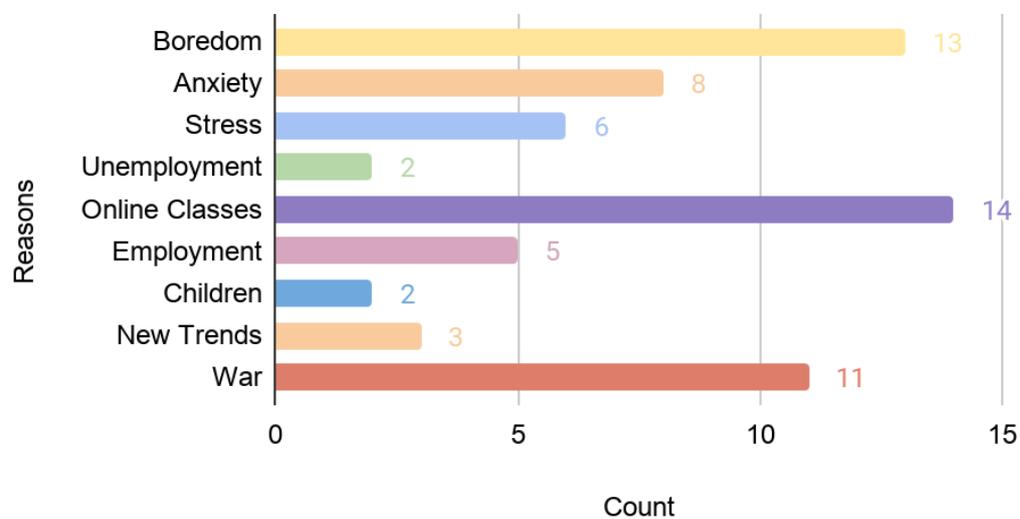
Social Media Usage Reasons



Reasons for Social Media Usage Increase



Reasons for Social Media Usage Decrease



[Appendix 2] Survey Questions

Social Media During the Pandemic

Hello!

My name is Marina Aloyants and I am a Senior BA English and Communications Student at the American University of Armenia.

The purpose of this survey is to gather information about social media use during COVID-19 in Armenia for my Capstone research paper "Pandemic Stories: Social Media Use in Times of Crisis"

CONSENT FORM

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation is voluntary, you are aware that you may choose to withdraw from the survey, and that your responses will be kept anonymous.

The capstone director is Dr. Mica Hilson of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (email: mhilson@aua.am).

* Required

Let's begin!

1. 1. Age *

Mark only one oval.

- 15 and younger
- 16 - 19
- 20 - 25
- 26 - 30
- 31 - 39
- 40 - 49
- 50 - 59
- 60+

2. 2. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female
- Other: _____

3. 3. Where do you stay?

Mark only one oval.

- Yerevan
- Artsakh
- Gegharkunik
- Kotayk
- Lori
- Shirak
- Syunik
- Tavush
- Vayots Dzor

4. 4. Primary occupation *

Mark only one oval.

- Student
- Employed
- Unemployed
- Stay-at-home parent
- Retired

5. Please rank how often you use these Social Media Platforms. (1 = "Not at all" 5 = "All the time") *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
Facebook	<input type="radio"/>				
WhatsApp	<input type="radio"/>				
Telegram	<input type="radio"/>				
Instagram	<input type="radio"/>				
Twitter	<input type="radio"/>				
Messenger	<input type="radio"/>				
Snapchat	<input type="radio"/>				
Skype	<input type="radio"/>				

6. Please rank your reasons for using social media platforms. (1 = "Not a reason" 5 = "Main reason") *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
Find/share fun posts	<input type="radio"/>				
Find up-to-date news	<input type="radio"/>				
Talk to people	<input type="radio"/>				
Promote yourself/business	<input type="radio"/>				
Meet new people	<input type="radio"/>				
Share photos/videos	<input type="radio"/>				
Share your opinion	<input type="radio"/>				

7. Your time spent on social media from the start of the pandemic: *

Mark only one oval.

- Increased dramatically Skip to question 8
- Increased Skip to question 8
- Remained the same Skip to section 5 (Thank you for participating!)
- Decreased Skip to question 9
- Decreased dramatically Skip to question 9

Increased

8. Why do you think your social media usage increased? (Check all that apply)

Check all that apply.

- Boredom
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Unemployment
- Online classes
- Employment
- Children
- New trends
- War

Other: _____

Decreased

9. Why do you think your social media usage decreased? (Check all that apply)

Check all that apply.

- Boredom
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Unemployment
- Online classes
- Employment
- Children
- New trends
- War

Other: _____

Thank you for participating!



[Appendix 3] Interview Questions

“My capstone/diploma is about communication practices during the pandemic, its title will be *Pandemic Stories: Social Media Use in a Time of Crisis*. I will be writing a research paper based on my findings from a Survey and in-depth Interviews.”

CONSENT

- You are aware that the questions might relate to personal opinions and experiences
- You have the right to withdraw at any moment, even after the interview is finished.
- You consent to recording this interview
- You consent to have your name mentioned in the capstone
- You consent to have the information from this interview included in the Capstone

1. Could you please introduce yourself? (Name, age, occupation)
2. Please tell me about your pandemic experience.
 - a. How did you feel? What helped you cope with this?
 - b. How did the pandemic change your daily routine?
3. How did it impact you professionally/education wise?
4. Did it change your communication style? How?
5. What role does Social Media play in your life?
6. What kinds of Social Media platforms do you use and why?
 - a. Were there specific media types you stopped using? Why?
 - b. Any that you started using more? Why?
7. Have the ways that you communicate on social media platforms changed?