



Role of Social Media in Extending Social Support during the Pandemic

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Abstract: This study focuses on the role and impact of social media in extending and seeking social support during the pandemic. Throughout the global Covid-19 outbreak when people were restricted to their homes and were bound to follow social distancing and precautions for physical interactions, social media helped people stay connected; created public awareness; provided entertainment, business opportunities, educational facilities, information updates and emerged as a multipurpose platform. The study incorporated qualitative methodology and used both, primary and secondary data sources for analysis. Primary data were collected with the help

of an online survey through a questionnaire and focus group discussions. In context of secondary sources, we referred to data from news articles from publications such as The Hindu and The Times of India, Government of India portals such as the CoWin portal and Aarogya Setu app. A total of 484 responses were collected through random sampling method and majority of people asserted to the use of social media for either extending or seeking some type of social support.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Consumption, Social Support, Pandemic, Covid-19 Pandemic, Information Sharing.

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Introduction:

Since the onset of Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020, means of public interaction has changed. The enforcement of protective measures such as social distancing, quarantine and travel restrictions over the last year has minimised physical interaction and changed the fabric of society which has resulted in social media taking over the centre stage as a multipurpose medium. Social media during the pandemic was used to share information of various variety. The social media information has a wide effect on the individuals and groups that connect to the online world to seek information for families, friends, and the general public (Mageto, 2019).

Social support refers to the perception and actualization of available aid, help, or the degree to which an individual is integrated into social obligation

and network (Abbas et al, 2020). The sources of social support are co-workers, friends, family members, and organizations (Hairi et al, 2019). One of the major functions of social media is its usage in extending and seeking social support. This support may include physical and emotional care and nourishment, advice, a sense of belonging (companionship), financial assistance (tangible), and personal advice (intangible).

Social media and education: The effects of closure of schools, colleges and universities during the pandemic were less felt due to the use of social media as a platform for educational content. Social media provided an avenue for educational activities such as seminars, workshops, conferences, lectures, classes, assignments, and virtual examinations using internet and other multimedia software applications tools (Balarabe, 2020).

Social media and public awareness: Social media during the pandemic was used to create public awareness. It was used as a means to disseminate information not just by the people in authority but also by general public who amplified messages during Covid for wider outreach. Gokalp et al. (2020) state that social media changed the traditional one-way communication between the citizens and decision-makers, and it enables two-way dialogue between the stakeholders. Authors further state that social media is useful to change decision-makers' behaviours.

Social media and entertainment: During the pandemic because individuals were confined to their homes, our social lives were shifted online, and entertainment consumption had increased. People turned to services like TikTok, Instagram, and even YouTube for entertainment. With so much leisure time on their hands, artists looked for new methods to connect with others. Short films on Instagram reels and TikTok were made creating and showcasing content simple and enjoyable. Their accessibility and easy use made them ideal for passing time. Therefore, social media as an entertainment platform helped people combat the Covid blues and prevent mental health concerns.

Social media and commercial activities: As a result of extensive use of social media during the global coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, many new business

opportunities arose for general public via the use of internet.

The increased social media consumption due to stay at home instructions gave small business owners such as those selling home cooked food, art work, etc wider customer base. Furthermore, newer earning opportunities in form of brand engagement and product promotions for small scale bloggers and vloggers also arose.

Rationale

The unfolding of Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for relevant media sources for the dissemination of information. With the increasing dependence on media outlets during Covid-19 pandemic, different roles of different media types came into light. The role of traditional media during the pandemic is often talked about in both, positive and negative terms. However, social media as a potential media form used for dissemination of information and its role in fighting with the wide spread impact of pandemic is rarely talked about. This study is conducted with an aim of analysing and assessing the role of social media as a multipurpose media platform and in extending and/or seeking social support during Covid-19.

Objectives :

1. To study the role of social media in extending social support during the pandemic.
2. To analyse the credibility and authenticity of information shared through social media.
3. To assess the overall impact of social media during the pandemic.

Hypothesis: We hypothesize that social media platforms have been used to extend and/ or seek social support during the pandemic and the information circulated through social media was quite useful and credible in creating awareness about the global scenario.

Review of Literature: Zhang et al. (2020) examine the important areas of research on Covid-19 through the lens of social media for information system researchers. Bukhari, W. (2020) critically inspects both, the positive role and negative role of social media during the pandemic. Rosenberg et al. (2020) have discussed

the pros and cons of Twitter as a medium of dissemination of medical information during the first phase of the pandemic. Sahni et al. (2020) in their research paper critically analyse whether social media as a tool was used beneficially or had destructive implications. Liu et al. (2021) analysed the dark side of the social media which was used in UK among Generation Z (Gen Z) during pandemic lockdown between March and May 2020.

A thorough review of the literature revealed that although social media as a subject has been rigorously researched upon, but the social aspect of it still remains understudied. The current literature revolves around the analysis of the role/impact/effectiveness of social media in relation to misinformation, fake news, mental health, public awareness, information security, etc but its role in extending social support during global outbreaks is not researched upon. Such gaps in knowledge should be explored and therefore, it forms the basis of our study.

Methodology: This research was conducted in Patna district and applied both online and offline data collection method to cover a sample population of 484 participants. As the research aims to evaluate the role and impact of social media in extending social support during the pandemic, the quantitative method was employed. Both primary and secondary data are used in this study to fulfil the objective. A questionnaire, prepared after a systematic literature review was utilised wherein random population of people participated via the internet. Focus group discussions were also conducted to assess the social impact of social media during pandemic.

Data Collection : For this particular research data was collected in two parts which involved:

Primary Sources: The required information to fulfil the objectives of the study were collected with the help of an online survey through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was circulated on social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook) and respondents were asked to participate voluntarily. The questionnaire consisted of 4 demographic questions and 9 other questions to evaluate the social impact of social media use during the pandemic. A total of 470 responses of people of different age groups were garnered through the survey.

Focus group discussions were used to obtain a collective viewpoint on the various social aspects of role of social media during the pandemic. Two focus group discussions at different locations by different moderators were conducted. Group 1 comprised of 6 participants belonging to the age group 20 to 30 years and group 2 comprised of 8 participants belonging to the age group above 30 years.

Secondary Sources: News articles from publications such as The Hindu and The Times of India, Government portals such as the CoWin portal and Aarogya Setu app and web journals through Memento and Penzu were referred to.

Data analysis: Following is the analysis and interpretation of data collected through a questionnaire distributed via internet. The analysis shows a rough statistical derivation of the collected data in a population sample size of 470 respondents.

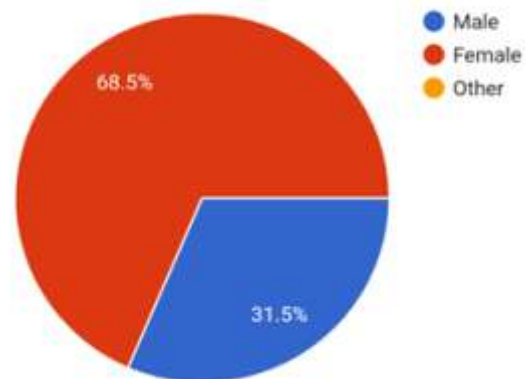


Fig. 1. Sex

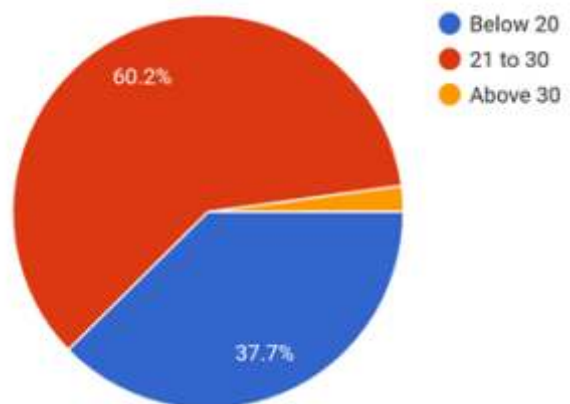


Fig. 2. Age

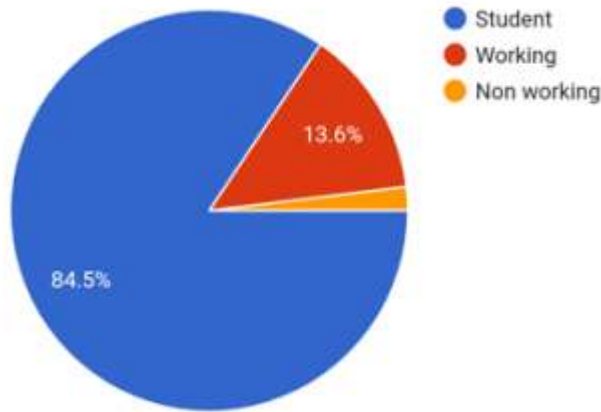


Fig. 3. Educational Qualification

Table 1. Details of Age, Sex and Education Qualifications of the respondents

Variable	Category	Count	Percentage
Sex	Male	148	31.5%
	Female	322	68.5%
Age	Below 20 years	177	37.7%
	20 to 30 years	282	60.2%
	Above 30 years	11	2.34%
Educational qualification	Student	397	84.5%
	Working	63	13.6%
	Non-working	10	2.12%

The above-mentioned table illustrates the demographic details of the respondents. A total of 470 respondents participated in the study, out of which 148 respondents were male and 322 respondents were female. The respondents belonged to different age groups. A total of 282 respondents belonged to age group 20 to 30, 177 respondents were below the age of 20 and 11 respondent were above the age of 30. 397 out of 470 respondents were students, 63 working and 10 non-working. From the stated statistics, we can infer that majority of the respondents who used social media were students aged between 20 and 30 years.

Q. 1. How many hours in a day did you spend on social media during the pandemic?

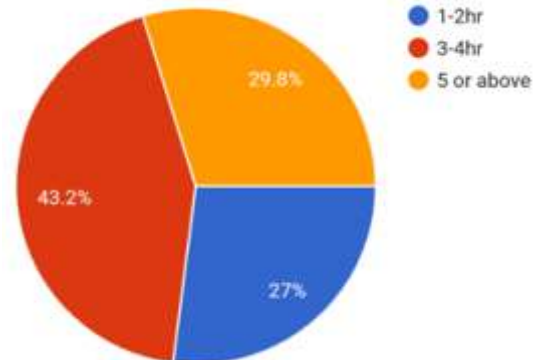


Fig. 4.

Table 2. Hours spent by the respondents on social media during pandemic

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
1-2 hours	46	76	5
3-4 hours	74	125	3
5 hours or above	57	81	3

The above-mentioned statistics indicate that a total of 343 respondents which make up approximately 63% of the sample size were consuming social media extensively during the pandemic and from the tabular data we can also infer that those 63% were people of ages below 30.

Q. 2. What was your motive behind using social media?

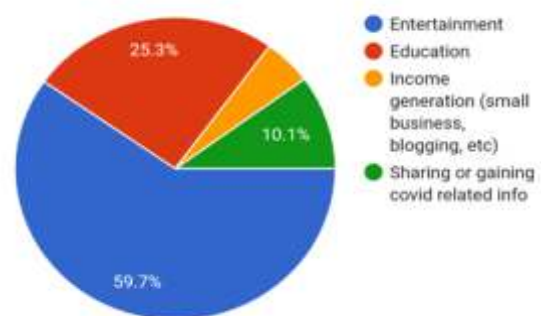


Fig. 5.

Table 3. Use of Social media for different purposes

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Entertainment	106	171	2
Education	55	58	2
Income generation	2	23	0
Sharing or gaining covid related information	14	30	5

The majority of the respondents (59.7%) used social media to combat with the lockdown blues and entertain themselves, 25% of the respondents used various social sites for educational purposes, 10% of the respondents used social media for sharing or gaining covid related information and a very small part of the sample size used social media as a source for income generation.

Q. 3. Did you use social media platforms to extend /seek support during pandemic?

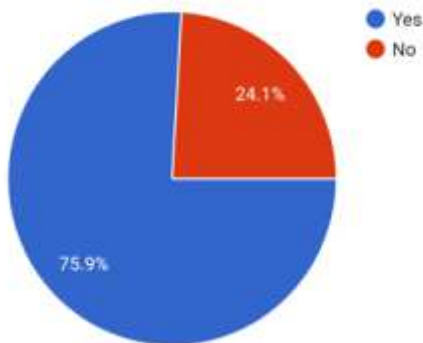


Fig. 6.

Table. 4. Details of use of social to seek support during pandemic

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Yes	125	221	9
No	52	60	2

The statistics show that majority of the respondents 75.9% did seek /extend support through various social media platforms during the pandemic and

24% of the respondents did not use any social media platform for seeking/extending support of any kind.

Q. 4. What kind of support did you seek/extend through social media during the pandemic?

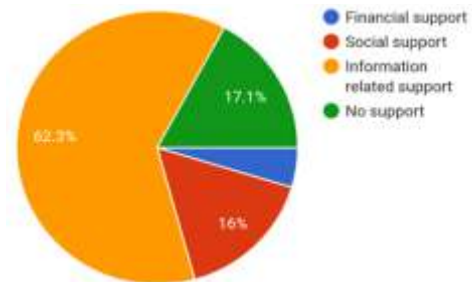


Fig. 7.

Table 5. Kind of support seek/extend through social media during pandemic

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Financial	7	14	2
Social	24	50	2
Information related	103	182	6
No support	43	36	1

The statistics indicate that a clear majority (62.3%) of the respondents used social media to seek/extend Covid related updates or information related support. A total of approx. 21% respondents used social media to seek/ extend financial and social support whereas 17.1% responded that they did not seek/extend any support through any social media platform.

Q. 5. Which social media platform did you use most frequently for extending/seeking support?

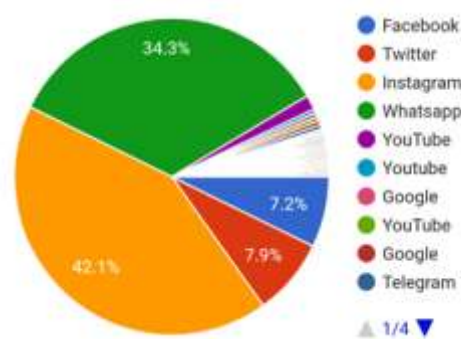
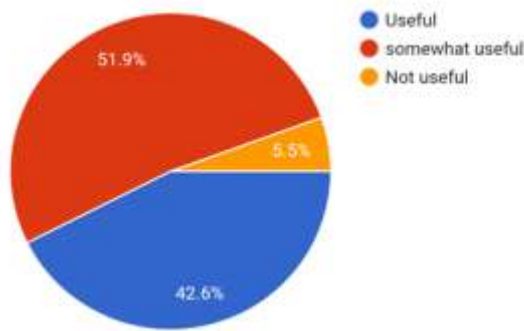


Fig. 8

Table 6. Type of Social Media used by the respondents frequently to seek/extend support

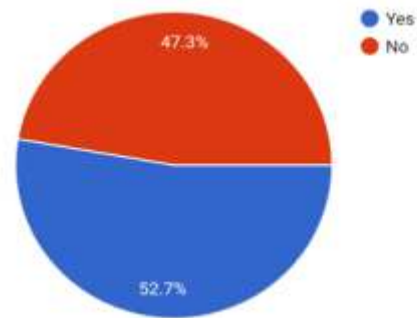
Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Facebook	3	28	3
Twitter	13	22	2
Instagram	81	115	2
WhatsApp	62	95	4
Others	18	22	0

From the above data we can infer that picture plus information forwarding sites (WhatsApp & Instagram) were more extensively used.

Q6: According to you how credible and useful was the Covid related information received through social media?**Fig. 9****Table 7. The Credibility of Information received through social media**

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Useful	76	119	5
Somewhat useful	80	158	5
Not useful	21	5	1

From the above-mentioned table, we can infer that approximately 95% of the respondents found the information received through social media useful and credible in some or the other way.

Q. 7. Do you think social media platforms were successful in filtering negative agenda driven information?**Fig. 10****Table 8. Success of Social media platforms in filtering negative agenda driven information**

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Yes	97	144	6
No	80	138	5

The difference in statistics for both for and against the opinion on the question of social media being able to filter out the negative agenda driven information is not very significant and hence drawing an inference on this aspect remains unclear.

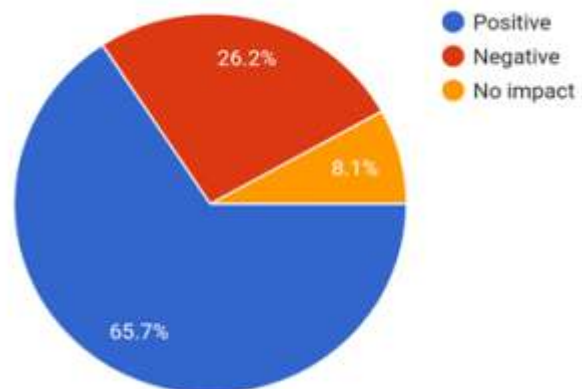
Q8: What according to you was the social impact of social media during the pandemic?**Fig. 11**

Table 9. Impact of Social Media During Pandemic

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Positive	106	196	6
Negative	53	67	3
No impact	18	19	2

The above-mentioned table indicates that 65.7% of the respondents are of the view that social media had a positive social impact during the pandemic, 26.2% believed that social media had a negative impact on social media and 8.1% were of the view that social media had no such significant impact neither positive nor negative on society.

Q. 9. Do you think your social media consumption was on rise during the pandemic?

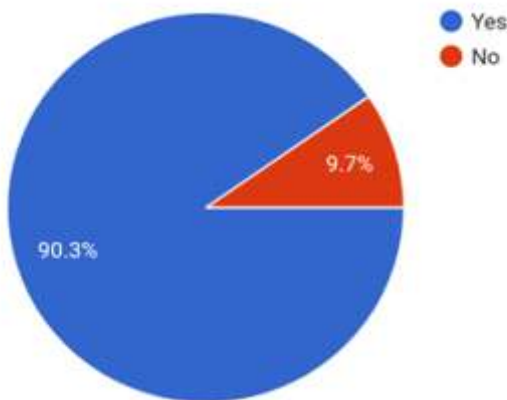


Fig. 12

Table 10. Consumption of social media during the pandemic

Options	Age below 20	Age between 20 & 30	Age above 30
Yes	150	265	9
No	27	17	2

The above-mentioned statistics indicate that the social media consumption of the majority of the respondents (90.3%) increased considerably during the pandemic whereas only 9.7% of the respondent's social media consumption remained unaltered during pandemic.

Following is the analysis and interpretation of data collected through focus group discussions which were used to access the impact of social media in extending social support during pandemic.

Focus group discussion was used to obtain indigenous information based on personal experiences of the respondents on the various aspects of role of social media during the pandemic. The discussion involved aspects such as the emerging role of social media as multipurpose platform during the pandemic (social media as platform for information sharing, entertainment) and role of social media in extending social support beyond region and religion. Focus group discussion aided in gaining a wider perspective of the middle aged and elderly as the earlier data collection methods involved random sampling technique and the respondents belonging to age group 30 and above was significantly less.

Table 11. Details of Respondents from Kankarbagh

Group 1:

Date	Location	Duration	Participants
03.12.2021	Kankarbagh	45 minutes	6 respondents (including both students and working professionals) belonging to age group 20 to 30 years.

Table 12. Details of Respondents from Patliputra

Group 2:

Date	Location	Duration	Participants
03.12.2021	Nehru Nagar, Patliputra	45 minutes	8 respondents (all working professionals) belonging to age group 30 and above.

Face to face discussion approach was used which offered an opportunity for detailed study of participant's viewpoint and the rationale behind their opinions. The focus group discussion was used primarily to gain a wider perspective of the middle aged and elderly people (age group 30 and above) on the role of social media in extending social support during pandemic and to study the difference in opinion and reaction of the two groups.

The findings indicate more or less a unanimous opinion with respect to the role of social media during pandemic, however the two groups of respondents seemed to differ in their perception at some points. The points of difference that can be inferred from the two groups include disparity in the opinion regarding the difference in the role of social media before and during the pandemic. The respondents of the first group (age 20 to 30) were of the opinion that social media emerged as a multipurpose platform during the pandemic and played an active role in fighting with the pandemic however, the respondents of the other group were of the opinion that social media as a platform has not changed much and continues to be what it was before the pandemic.

Findings: The findings of the study indicate that majority of respondents were youth (below 30) and the youth specially students were consuming social media on a more regular basis. The social media consumption was on rise during the pandemic and proved to be helpful in many ways. The findings of the study indicates that social media emerged as a multipurpose platform during the pandemic. When it comes to acting as a platform for seeking and extending support, social media has become the ultimate avenue for the people. The picture sharing sites (like Instagram) were sought after for sharing information, disseminating information, and educational purpose.

The findings of study also indicate disparity in opinion of middle-aged people and youth on the change in role of social media before and during the pandemic. Middle aged and elderly people were mainly of the view that social media's role has not changed much and still continues to be a platform that caters to the entertainment needs of people whereas the youth respondents were of the opinion that social media as a platform has evolved manifold and is not restricted to catering to entertainment needs of the people only. Instead, it has now become a platform for sharing information and updates and extending support beyond region and religion. Social media was successful in filtering out the negative agenda driven information and providing credible and authentic information to the people.

Limitations : Although social media as a subject has rigorously been researched upon, but this aspect of it is still understudied and thus related literature was difficult to gather. The population selected for online survey was of 470 respondents out of which majority turned out to be either students or working-class people and the online survey mainly comprised of participants aged between 21 and 30 and other age groups were not aptly represented. The study only concentrates on responses from urban Patna and rural population were not adequately represented.

Besides the narrow demographic population, the analysis mainly focuses on social networking platforms and not concentrates on other forms of social media such as social news platforms, microblogging platforms, bookmarking sites, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations: The Covid-19 outbreak brought the world to a halt. Nations across the world were forced to impose lockdowns and people were forced into isolation like never before. The virus outbreak not only affected the economy and working of nations but also the physical and mental well-being of its people. The Covid induced lockdowns left people into a situation of utter confusion and loneliness which led to an increase in consumption of social media.

This research identifies the role of social media in extending social support during the pandemic. Through the course of the pandemic, social media was no more restricted to its conventional definition of being a platform for entertainment but functioned as a social support system altogether. The findings of the study imply that social media was not only operational in sharing SOS messages and Covid related information but also extending financial, personal and social support. It was through various social media platforms that connecting with near and dear ones was possible, online learning and earning became possible. Social media platforms became the ultimate avenue for people to express their thoughts, seek help from various experts on issues like mental health, extend support beyond region and religion.

The findings of the research derived after analysing primary and secondary sources support our initial hypothesis and conclude that social media did play

an active role in extending social support in various ways as majority of people asserted to the use of social media for either extending or seeking some type of social support.

While useful, the results of the study must be viewed with caution because the research conducted had some limitations and hence, we recommend a more in-depth research and analysis on the topic with a more diverse demographic population.

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