Social Media & COVID-19:
A Global Study of Digital Crisis Interaction among Gen Z and Millennials

—

Key Insights

"We're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fighting an infodemic."

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General,
World Health Organization (WHO)
February, 2020.

A year on, the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic shows how the spread of misinformation - amplified on social media and other digital platforms – is proving as much a threat to global public health as the virus itself.

It has resulted in a blatant disregard of public health directives, the promotion of useless or dangerous "cures" and conspiracy theories, and the exacerbation of racial and political tensions. The constant bombardment of conflicting information can be overwhelming and cause some to stop paying attention even to crucial health news and guidance.

Our international study investigates where Gen Z and Millennials in pandemic hotspots are getting their COVID-19 information, who they trust as sources, what they worry about and their awareness of false news. It also looks at the size of their social media networks and how likely they are to share unverified information.

As we move into the next phase of the pandemic, we hope these findings will help health organizations, governments, media, businesses, educational institutions and others sharpen their health communication strategies.

This ground-breaking study covers approximately 23,500 respondents aged 18-40 years in 24 countries across five continents who were reached on their mobile devices between late October 2020 and early January 2021. This is a joint study by Wunderman Thompson, The University of Melbourne and Pollfish, in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO).
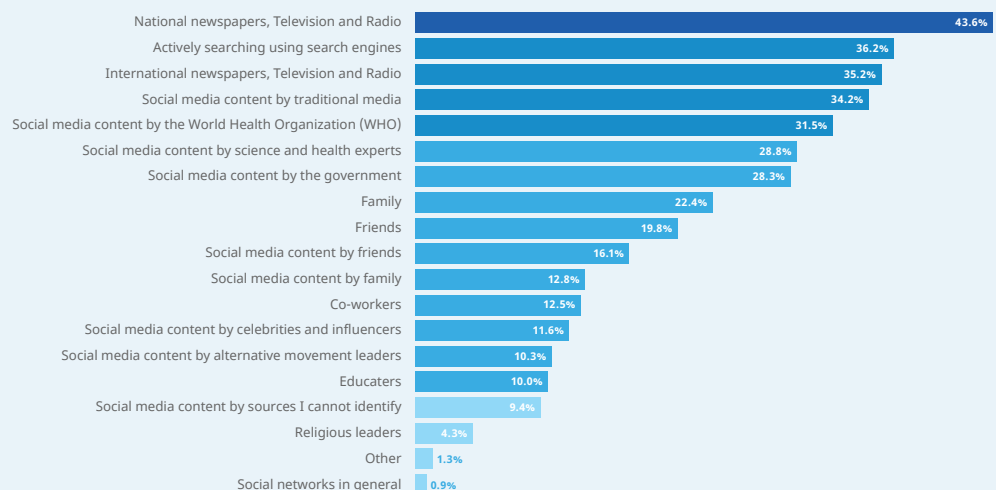
A fuller report will be published in April by the University of Melbourne, with the technical support of the WHO. Given the urgency of the situation, we are sharing key insights and takeaways below. The survey data is also available on this interactive dashboard.
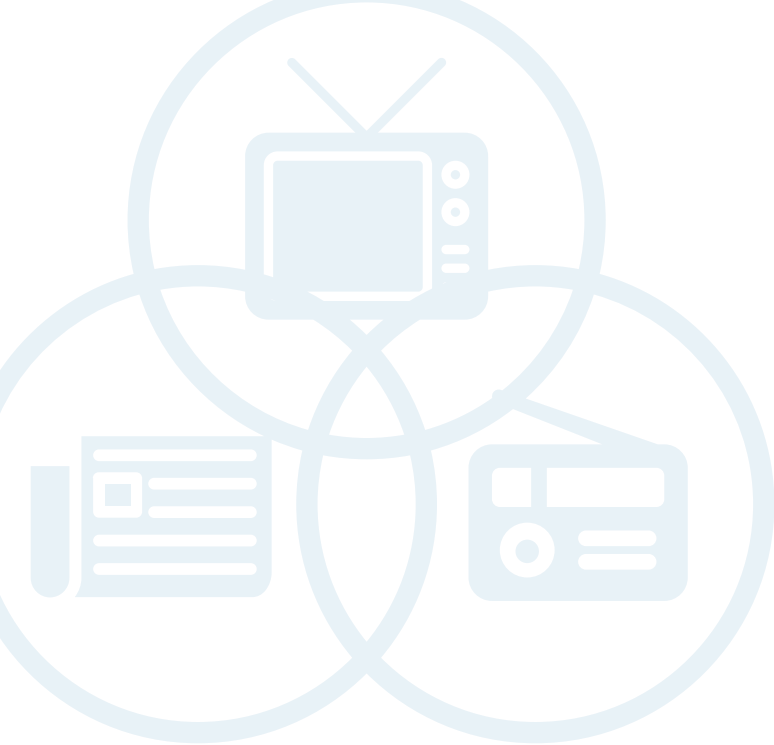
Key Insight #1

Gen Z and Millennials rely on multiple sources for their COVID-19 information, but national mainstream media is still tops

Sources for COVID-19 News and Information

Source	Percentage
National newspapers, Television and Radio	43.6%
Actively searching using search engines	36.2%
International newspapers, Television and Radio	35.2%
Social media content by traditional media	34.2%
Social media content by the World Health Organization (WHO)	31.5%
Social media content by science and health experts	28.8%
Social media content by the government	28.3%
Family	22.4%
Friends	19.8%
Social media content by friends	16.1%
Social media content by family	12.8%
Co-workers	12.5%
Social media content by celebrities and influencers	11.6%
Social media content by alternative movement leaders	10.3%
Educaters	10.0%
Social media content by sources I cannot identify	9.4%
Religious leaders	4.3%
Other	1.3%
Social networks in general	0.9%

When asked where they go first for Covid-19 news and information, 43.6% of respondents overall say national newspapers, TV and radio; 36.2% say they actively search on search sites and 35.2% pick international news media.

Social media content by traditional media (34.2%) is also popular as is social media content from WHO (31.5%). This "multi-source" environment also includes health and science experts (28.8%) and government sources (28.3%).

Personal interaction ranks lower in terms of sources of information

22.4%
from family

19.8%
from friends

16.1%
from friends'
social media

Personal interaction ranks lower, with 22.4% getting COVID-19 information first from family, 19.8% from friends and 16.1% via their friends' social media content.

There are differences among countries, perhaps relating to national media landscapes and trust in institutions as well as local culture.

In India, Mexico and Nigeria, the WHO's social media channels are the most popular initial destination for COVID-19 news and information, while in Egypt, Indonesia, Russia and South Korea, search platforms are the first choice.

In Turkey, social media content by science and health experts ranks as the top source of COVID-19 information, while in Russia the most popular choice is search sites followed by interaction with family and friends.
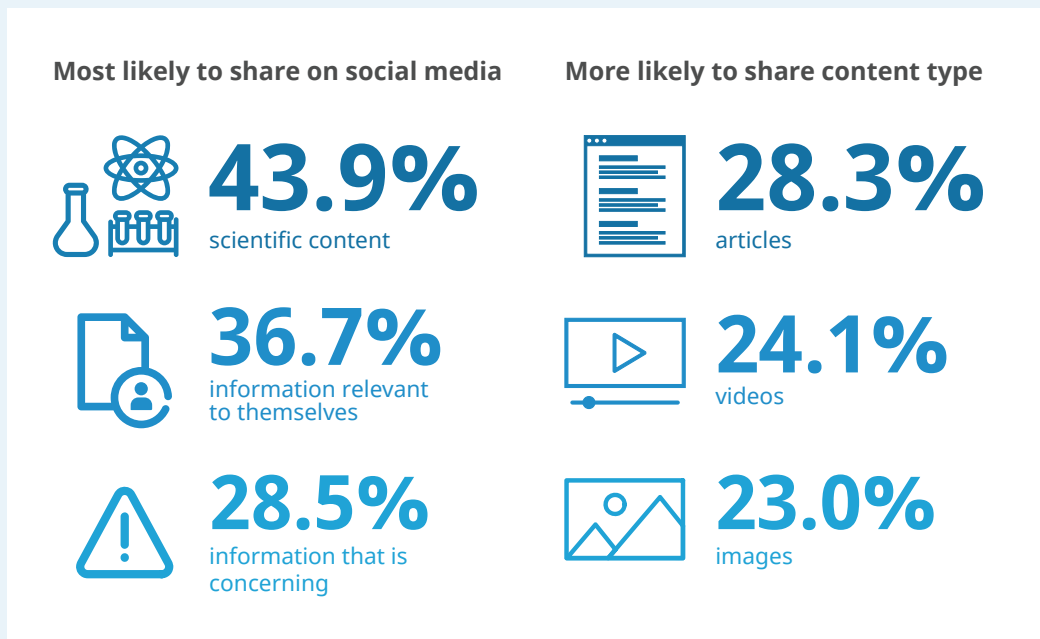
Takeaway
National mainstream media as well as their social media platforms continue to be trusted channels for reaching Gen Z and Millennials. However, in a handful of countries, respondents rely more on the WHO and other alternative sources over national media.

Key Insight #2

Science content is seen as shareworthy

When asked what COVID-19 information (if any) they most likely post on social media, 43.9% of respondents say "scientific" content - the top choice for both male and female respondents. This is followed by information "relevant to me" (36.7%) and content that is "concerning" (28.5%). In addition, 28.3% say they most likely share content that includes an article, followed by posts that include a video (24.1%), image (23.0%), narrative (20.8%), creates an emotional reaction (18.2%) and is humorous (18.1%).

Most likely to share on social media

43.9%
scientific content

36.7%
information relevant to themselves

28.5%
information that is concerning

More likely to share content type

28.3%
articles

24.1%
videos

23.0%
images

There are also differences among countries. Respondents in Nigeria and Japan are most likely to share content on social media that "is concerning." In China, while scientific content is also deemed most shareworthy, this is followed by content that "has a lot of shares/likes/retweets".

Takeaway
Science rules when it comes to sharing COVID-19 content. This shows the digital literacy of Gen Z and Millennials in the pandemic and appears to buck the general trend on social media where funny, entertaining and emotional content spread fastest.

Key Insight #3
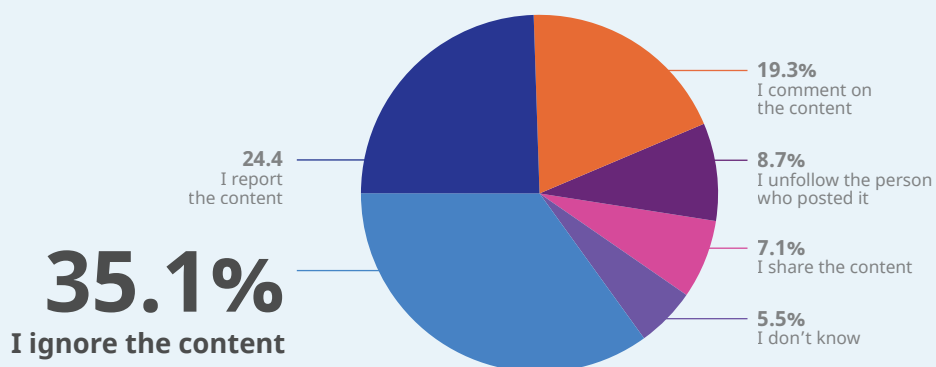
Awareness of false news is high, but so is apathy

More than half (59.1%) of those surveyed indicate that they are "very aware" of "fake news" surrounding COVID-19, with a further 33.4% "somewhat aware."

This awareness extends to what they share: 40.8% say they always make sure content is accurate before posting it on social media, while 36.6% say they do so "most of the time." Just over a third (37.5%) admit to having shared content on social media that they later found was incorrect. Of these, 87.1% say they later corrected or deleted the content.

About a third (35.1%) respondents say that when they encounter false content, they ignore it, while 24.4% report the content and 19.3% comment on it. Only 8.7% unfollow the account that shared it.

How one reacts to fake news
How do you react to COVID-19 information - shared by others on social media/mesaging apps - that you know is false?

19.3%
I comment on
the content

8.7%
I unfollow the person
who posted it

7.1%
I share the content

5.5%
I don't know

24.4
I report
the content

35.1%
I ignore the content

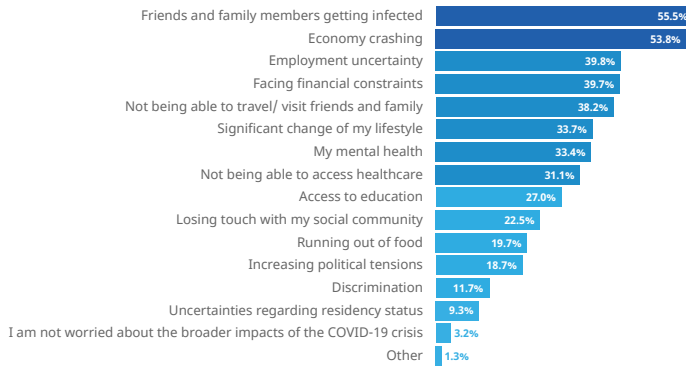**Takeaway**
Many Gen Z and Millennials are aware of false news and they can often spot it. However, the challenge is in recruiting them to actively counter it, rather than letting it slide.

Key Insight #4

Gen Z and Millennials have multiple worries beyond getting sick

Top Concerns During the Pandemic

| Concern	%
Friends and family members getting infected	55.5%
Economy crashing	53.8%
Employment uncertainty	39.8%
Facing financial constraints	39.7%
Not being able to travel/ visit friends and family	38.2%
Significant change of my lifestyle	33.7%
My mental health	33.4%
Not being able to access healthcare	31.1%
Access to education	27.0%
Losing touch with my social community	22.5%
Running out of food	19.7%
Increasing political tensions	18.7%
Discrimination	11.7%
Uncertainties regarding residency status	9.3%
I am not worried about the broader impacts of the COVID-19 crisis	3.2%
Other	1.3%

Overall, the risk of friends and family members contracting COVID-19 was the top concern of respondents (55.5%), closely followed by the economy crashing (53.8%). In fact, a crashing economy is the top concern of respondents in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Italy, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey.

Intertwined with the economic concerns are worries surrounding employment uncertainty (39.8% overall and the top concern in India), and facing financial constraints (39.7%). Respondents also indicated anxieties surrounding the social impacts of COVID-19, including not being able to visit friends and family (38.2%), significant changes to lifestyle (33.7%), and losing touch with their social community (22.5%). Concerns surrounding mental health (33.4%), access to healthcare (31.1%), and access to education (27.0%) were also raised.

Takeaway
Gen Z and Millennials are grappling with multiple concerns when it comes to COVID-19. Health communicators need to be aware that these concerns can be interlinked and/or competing, and to acknowledge perceived trade-offs – for example, between lives and livelihoods.
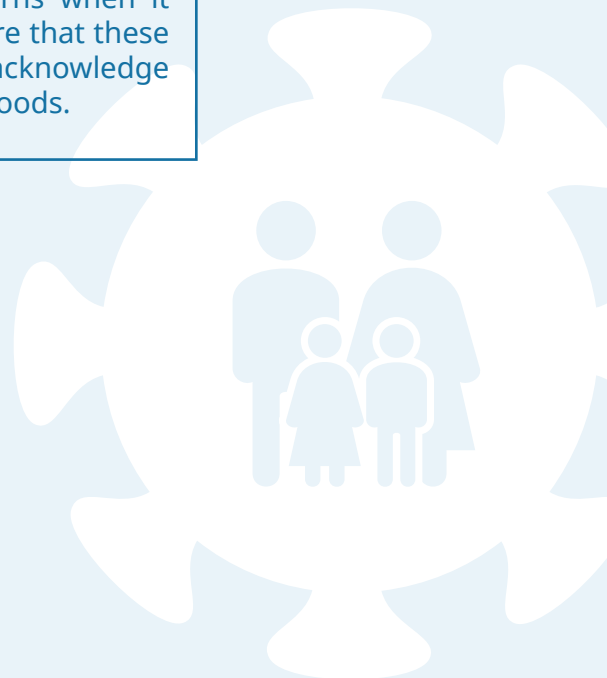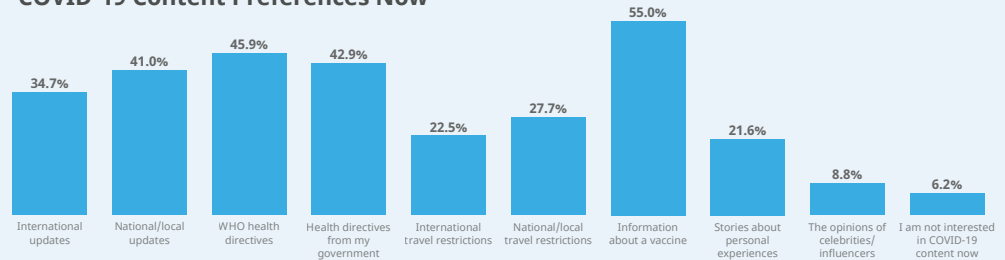
Key Insight #5

Interest in vaccines is soaring

Interest in vaccines leapfrogged from third place to top place amongst COVID-19 related topics since the start of the pandemic.

The survey shows that 55.0% of Gen Z and Millennials are interested in information regarding a COVID-19 vaccine now, versus 45.6% at the start of the pandemic, and 41.9% said social media content by the WHO would be their first source.
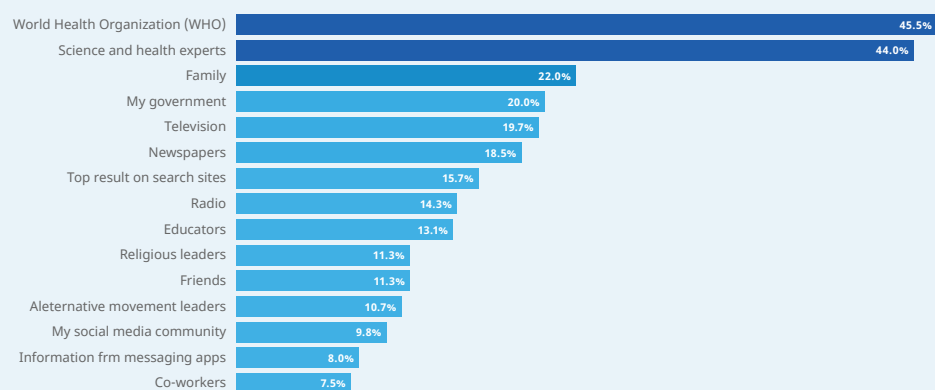
COVID-19 Content Preferences Now

Category	%
International updates	34.7%
National/local updates	41.0%
WHO health directives	45.9%
Health directives from my government	42.9%
International travel restrictions	22.5%
National/local travel restrictions	27.7%
Information about a vaccine	55.0%
Stories about personal experiences	21.6%
The opinions of celebrities/influencers	8.8%
I am not interested in COVID-19 content now	6.2%

By contrast, interest in the opinions of celebrities and influencers on COVID-19 ranked low both at the start of the pandemic and now. Despite their influence over many areas of people's lives, when it comes to facts/health they don't rank highly.

More broadly, the WHO is the most highly trusted source of public health information (45.5%) followed closely by science and health experts (44.0%).

Trusted Sources of Information

Source	%
World Health Organization (WHO)	45.5%
Science and health experts	44.0%
Family	22.0%
My government	20.0%
Television	19.7%
Newspapers	18.5%
Top result on search sites	15.7%
Radio	14.3%
Educators	13.1%
Religious leaders	11.3%
Friends	11.3%
Aelternative movement leaders	10.7%
My social media community	9.8%
Information frm messaging apps	8.0%
Co-workers	7.5%

Takeaway
As governments around the world roll out immunisation programs, interest in vaccines is likely to continue to be high. Health communicators have a critical opportunity to shape public receptiveness to vaccines, allay fears and increase uptake. But don't rely on celebrities or influencers.

Key Insight #6

So much information, yet not the full picture

More than half (58.3%) of the Gen Z and Millennials surveyed strongly or somewhat agree that they are overwhelmed by the amount of information out there on COVID-19 and 52.0% have stopped paying attention. They have their own slate of multiple sources, yet remain sceptical: they feel that the media is not "telling me everything" (59.3%); their government is not giving the full picture on the pandemic (57.1%).

58.3%
are overwhelmed
by information

51.9%
have stopped paying
attention to COVID-19 news

Resourceful sceptics

59.3%
feel the media is not
telling them everything

57.1%
feel that their government is not giving
the full picture on the pandemic

About half of the respondents overall feel that their government is not doing enough to control the pandemic and about half feel that their government is overreacting.

However, 56.9% feel optimistic about the future, with about the same proportion saying things would go back to normal with a vaccine.

Takeaway
Pandemic fatigue is setting in and people are overwhelmed. They also yearn for things to go back to normal. This is a critical window for health communicators to emphasize that things can only get back to normal if people staying vigilant and comply with health guidelines whether it's wearing masks, social distancing or getting vaccinated.

Methodology

The online survey of 23,500 citizens aged 18 to 40 was conducted by Pollfish in 24 countries. The included countries are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States with 1,000 responses from each country except South Korea with a sample of 500. After additional verification the final number of responses is 23,483.

Citizens were reached via their mobile devices between 24th Oct, 2020 to 7th Jan, 2021.

The sampling was designed to balance representation across gender and age groups. Overall gender split is 50.2% males and 49.8% females, with 21 of the 24 markets having near 50/50 split.

For more information, please visit:
http://covid19-infodemic.com

Contacts

Sarah Hess
Technical Officer, Health Emergencies Programme
World Health Organization
hesss@who.int

Ellie Brocklehurst
Head of Marketing & PR, APAC
Wunderman Thompson
ellie.brocklehurst@wundermanthompson.com

Thomas Brauch
Chief Data Officer, APAC
Wunderman Thompson
thomas.brauch@wundermanthompson.com

Professor Ingrid Volkmer
Digital Communication and Globalization
Faculty of Arts
University of Melbourne
ivolkmer@unimelb.edu.au