



## Social Media and Spreading the News of Covid-19 Pandemic in the Arab World

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**ABSTRACT:** In most previous studies, it is discernible that dearth of descriptive research explores the respondents' perception of the first media outlet to spread Coronavirus news. Moreover, there is a lack of extensive study, which also seeks to know the respondents' perception of media most used to obtain news and information related to Coronavirus. Lastly, the study attempts to explore, which is the social media most used to get news and information about Coronavirus. Therefore, this study proposes to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence leading to advancement in the understanding of the first media outlet in spreading the Covid19's news, the media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona Virus as well as understanding the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona Virus. Thus, a survey was distributed electronically on a sample of 1274 Media users in Arab countries, namely United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, and Sudan, selected using non-random sampling methods. The limits of this study are related to the lack of previous studies on the research topic in the Arab world, in addition to some technical issues. This study revealed that social media is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Coronavirus. Further, the findings show that social media is the most used to obtain news and information related to Coronavirus compare to other media like Newspapers, Radio, Television, and News sites. The study found that WhatsApp is the most used to obtain news and information related to Coronavirus. The results of this study are useful when designing awareness campaigns against the Coronavirus. By knowing the media that are most followed by the public during the pandemic, awareness campaigns can be designed and disseminated through these means, which guarantees the preservation of individuals' lives.

**Keywords:** Arab Countries; COVID-19; Social Media.

### I. INTRODUCTION

With its differentiation and diversification levels, Social Media Platforms are one of the most influential and influencing means in the users' public life. It possesses enormous capabilities in information production that crystallizes the cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses of the users. In light of the development of the social media, users have the ability to interact immediately. As well as, forming groups regardless of their social, economic, and cultural levels, which made them more up to date with the news whether it was local or international [1]. Social media platforms encourage users to provide and share information on various issues, which contributed to the production of content by users (UGC) regardless of the validity of this information. In the Arab world, more than (264) million, with a rate of (62.4%) of the total population, use the internet applications [2]. Which indicates a continuous increase in the number of users.

The world is currently facing a new crisis in the name of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) which originally emerged in Wuhan City, Hubei province in China in December 2019, but has now found its way across the globe, affecting the people worldwide and killing thousands [3]. The WHO officially announced on January 30, 2020, that the virus constitutes a public health emergency of international concern, and on March 11, 2020, confirmed the virus's transformation into a pandemic. Until July 6, 2020, the number of cases infected with the virus reached nearly (11.5) million infected cases. COVID-19 has been

reported in more than 188 countries, including more than half a million deaths [4].

In the Arab world, social media users interacted with the Coronavirus information, which led to disparity effects. Previous studies exploring media usage during crises founded inconsistent results. While some studies report a positive effect of media usage [4]. Others find a negative effect [5] or little effect [6]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the respondents' perception of the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus. Further, it also seeks to know the respondents' perception of media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. Lastly, the study attempts to explore which is the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.

This study contributes in different ways to the literature. First, it seeks to bridge the gap in the literature by providing a descriptive study on the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus and which is the most media are used by people. The current study is very unique as it is covering respondents from various Arab countries, namely United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan. Expanding the scope of the study to a multiple number of respondents to different countries increases the reliability of the study and it is possibilities to generalize the results. Further, the study has an important contribution to the practical field. The study may help news organizations and journalists in promoting their news pieces. With consideration, the spread of news on media has its outcomes, such as

making public feel overloaded with information, leading them to expose themselves to specific news sources selectively.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have provided many ideas regarding how information or news is spread within societies. For example, there are theories that focused on the role of public opinion leaders in the transmission of information and news, which is called the two-stage information transmission model [7]. Also, the role of personal and public communication in disseminating innovations [8]. With the emergence of social media platforms as the latest communication medium tool, theories and interpretations of interconnecting between personal and mass communication began, in addition to monitoring the role of technical developments and users in spreading news.

Social media is being increasingly leveraged by both a range of professionals as well as members of the public as an information source to learn about the latest developments and current affairs. The use of social media has been found useful in numerous different domains; News Gathering, Emergencies and Crises, Public Opinion, and Financial/Stock Markets [9].

Indeed, Social media has become playing multiple roles more than just being a means of communication between individuals, friends and families, and even communicating with strangers for the purpose of chatting and acquaintance, especially in light of crises and major events. A survey conducted in 2020 has found that more than 70 % of respondents from Kenya, Chile, South Africa, Bulgaria, Argentina and Greece reported that they used social media as a main source of obtain the news. In comparison, fewer than 40 % of adults in the United Kingdom France, Germany, Netherlands and Japan mainly used social media as a main source of obtain the news [10].

Regarding Corona virus, Gallup /Knight conducted in April 2020, a study which indicated that (46%) of the respondents said that all or most of the news they see on social media sites related to the Corona virus, while (37%) said About half of what they see on social media is related to the virus [11]. In Morocco, (93%) of respondents use social media platforms during the Corona pandemic, (49%) of respondents use platforms daily for more than two hours to talk about this pandemic, (77%) use WhatsApp network, followed by

Facebook (49%), then Twitter (11%) [12]. In Algeria, the positive role of media in developing health awareness and combating fake news about the COVID-19 through three means: strategies to face fake information, media instructions on the importance of adhering to quarantine, and positive health attitudes of the new media and adherence to cautious measures [13]. In Egypt, (39.7%) of respondents said that they follow very large news and information related to the corona virus on social media, and (27.7%) follow largely it. The study also indicated that (49.7%) of the respondents said that they benefited very much from following this news on social media and (40.2%) benefited greatly from it [14]. Also, The results of the latest research conducted by the Pew Center indicated that digital news and social networking sites continue to grow, as (67%) of Americans indicated that they receive at least some news from social media sites, and the results also indicated that mobile phones are among the most Common ways for Americans to get news [15]. So, over the years social media platforms news consumption has greatly grown. In this regard, the study seeks for getting the respondents' perception on the following questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>. Which is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus?

RQ<sub>2</sub>. Which is the media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus?

RQ<sub>3</sub>. Which is the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus?

## III. RESEARCH METHODS

### A. Data Collection and The Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This study adopts the questionnaire survey method to seek the viewpoints of respondents on their perception of the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus, the media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus and the Social media most used to obtain news and information about Corona virus. The questionnaire was prepared based on prior studies [16, 17]. In 2020, the total population across all the Arab countries is 423 million [18]. As a result of the mandatory lockdown, unavailability of sampling frame, and not seeking to estimate statistically the characteristics of the population from the sample, snowball, self-selection, and convenience non-probability sampling techniques were used.

**Table 1: Analysis of answers on demographic characteristics.**

Demographic element	Characteristics	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	546	42.86
	Female	728	57.14
Age	Less than 18 years	0	0
	Between 18 to 35 years	595	46.70
	Between 36 to 50 years	532	41.76
	More than 50 years	147	11.54
Education	Below Secondary	14	1.10
	Higher than Secondary	77	6.04
	Bachelor's degree	854	67.03
	Postgraduate degree	329	25.82
Country	United Arab Emirates	14	1.10
	Bahrain	483	37.91
	Saudi Arabia	413	32.42
	Oman	56	4.40
	Jordan	21	1.65
	Iraq	7	0.55
	Egypt	231	18.13
	Morocco	7	0.55
	Sudan	42	3.30
Using Social Media	Less than three years	21	1.65
	Between 3 to 5 years	126	9.89
	More than 5 years	1127	88.46

The questionnaire was distributed to respondents electronically by mail and WhatsApp groups of friends and acquaintances of the authors using Survey Monkey with a request to further disseminate it to include as many participants as possible. Collection of data was done in April- May 2020. A total number of 1274 of Media's users in Arab countries, namely United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan, was analyzed. Table 1 shows that a majority of the respondents are male (546; 42.86%), between 18 to 35 years of age (595; 46.70%), having bachelor's degree (854; 67.03%), from Bahrain (483; 37.91%), using social media more than 5 years.

#### B. Measurement of Variables

To investigate the respondents' perception on the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus, we have asked the respondents to identify the first media outlet through which they first learned about the Coronavirus. This question has adapted from [16]. However, we listed five media to them; printed newspapers, the radio, the television, news sites, social media. Regarding to the media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus, we have asked the respondents to identify the media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. This question has adapted from [17].

However, we listed five media types to them; printed newspapers, the radio, the television, news sites, social media to determine the frequency of use for each of them "always, sometimes, rarely". Concerning the social media most used to obtain news and information about Corona virus, we have asked the respondents to identify the Social media most used to obtain news and information about Corona virus. This question has adapted from [19]. However, we listed several networks to them; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tik Tok, other networks to determine the frequency of use for each of them "always, sometimes, rarely".

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

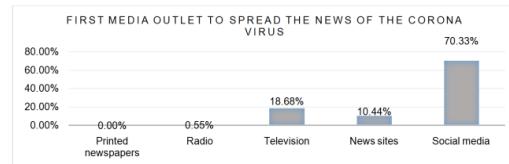
#### A. The First Media Outlet To Spread The News of The Corona Virus

Table 2 shows that 896 respondents (70.33%) agree that social media is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus. Social media has become playing important roles in spread the news, namely Corona virus, more than just being a means of communication between individuals, friends and families. It seems that the majority of people now follow social media more than the other media such as printed newspapers, radio, television, news sites in getting new information. Only 7 (0.55%), 133 (10.44%), 238 (18.68%) of respondents are agreed that radio, news sites and television is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus, respectively (see Figure 1).

For additional analysis, the study split the respondents by country. The study found that social media is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus in all countries, except Iraq and Morocco. Appendix 1 shows that 7 of United Arab Emirates' respondents (50%), 350 of Bahrain' respondents (72.46%), 252 of Saudi Arabia' respondents (61.02%), 42 of Oman' respondents (75%), 14 of Jordan' respondents (66.67%), 196 of Egypt' respondents (84.85%), 35 of Sudani' respondents (83.33%) agree that social media is the first media outletto spread thenews of the Coronavirus.

**Table 2: Analysis of answers on first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus.**

Question	Media	Responses	
		No.	%
First mediaoutletto spread the news of the Corona virus	Newspapers	0	0.00
	Radio	7	0.55
	Television	238	18.68
	News sites	133	10.44
	Social media	896	70.33



**Fig. 1. Analysis of answers on first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus.**

#### B. The Media Most Used To Obtain News and Information Related To Corona Virus

Table 3 reveals that respondents' perception of the Media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus, namely, Printed newspapers, Radio, Television, News sites and Social media. The weighted average of frequency usage of the printed newspapers, Radio, Television, News sites and Social media is (1.35 out of 3), (1.38 out of 3), (2.36 out of 3), (2.37 out of 3) and (2.79 out of 3), respectively. This indicate that social media is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. It seems that social media is being increasingly used by the public as an information source to learn about the latest developments and current affairs.

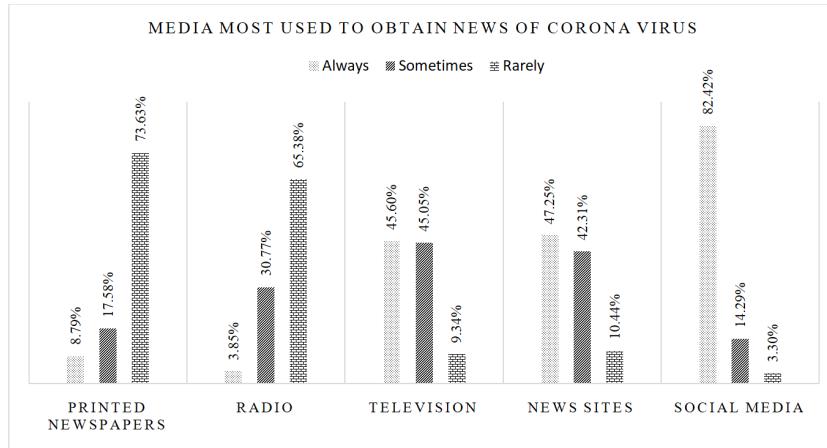
Table 3 shows that majority of respondents are always used the social media to obtain news related to Corona virus, 1050 of respondents out of 1274 with a percentage of 82.42%. The result of the study is consistent with the study of [12] that conducted in other country such as Morocco, where 93% of respondents are found to use social media platforms during the Corona pandemic. Further, the same study found that a high percentage of respondents (49%) were using the social media platforms in a daily use for more than two hours to talk about COVID-19 virus pandemic.

Regarding the other media usage to obtain news related to Corona virus, the current study found that 602 respondents (47.25%), 581 respondents (45.60%), 112 respondents (8.79%), 49 respondents (3.85%) are always used News sites, Television, Printed newspapers and Radio, respectively. Compare these results with the usage of social media we can confirm that social media is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.

For additional analysis, the study split the respondents by country. The study found that that social media is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus in majority of selected countries. Based on Appendix 2, respondents in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Sudan agreed that media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus is the social media with weighted average of frequency usage (2.84 out of 3), (2.84 out of 3), (3 out of 3), (2.82 out of 3), (3 out of 3), respectively. However, the respondents of other countries such as Iraq and Morocco agreed that media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus are the social media, Television, News sites with the same weighted average. In contrast, respondents in United Arab Emirates mostly used Television to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.

**Table 3: Analysis of answers on media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.**

Media	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Total No.	Weighted Average %
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
Newspapers	112	8.79	224	17.58	938	73.63	1274	1.35
Radio	49	3.85	392	30.77	833	65.38	1274	1.38
Television	581	45.60	574	45.05	119	9.34	1274	2.36
News sites	602	47.25	539	42.31	133	10.44	1274	2.37
Socialmedia	1050	82.42	182	14.29	42	3.30	1274	2.79



**Fig. 2.** Analysis of answers on media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.

### C. The Social Media Most Used To Obtain News and Information about Corona Virus

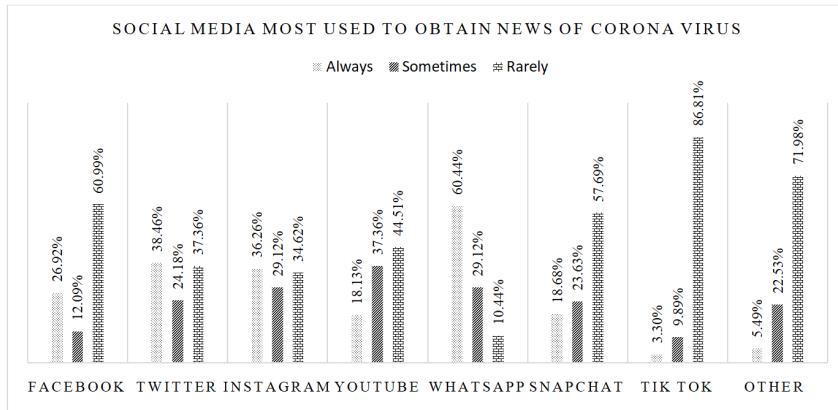
Table 4 reveals that respondents' perception of the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus, namely, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tik Tok, others. The weighted average of using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tik Tok, others is (1.66 out of 3), (2.01 out of 3), (2.02 out of 3), (1.74 out of 3), (2.5 out of 3), (1.61 out of 3) (1.16 out of 3) (1.34 out of 3), respectively. This indicate that WhatsApp is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. Higher percentage of usage of WhatsApp in the current study is inline with previous study of [12], who found that majority of his respondents (77%) were using WhatsApp network.

In more detail, the current study found that the majority of respondents are always used WhatsApp, 770 out of 1274 with a percentage of 60.44%. However, 490 respondents (38.46%) are always used Twitter, 462 respondents (36.26%) are always used Instagram, 343 respondents (26.92%) are always used Facebook, 238 respondents (18.68%) are always used Snapchat, 231 respondents (18.13%) are always used YouTube, 42 respondents (3.30%) are always used Tik Tok and 70 respondents (5.49%) are always used other platform of the social media.

For additional analysis, the study split the respondents by country. The study found that respondents' perception in the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus is different amongst countries. Based on Appendix 3, respondents in Saudi and Sudan agreed that WhatsApp is the most social media used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus with weighted average of (2.59 out of 3) and (3 out of 3), respectively. Furthermore, the respondents in Oman agreed that WhatsApp and Twitter are the most social media used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus with the same weighted average of 2.5 out of 3. The respondents in Iraq agreed that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most social media used to obtain news related to Corona virus with the same weighted average of 3 out of 3. However, the respondents in Bahrain and Jordan agreed that Instagram is the most social media used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus with the weighted average of 2.62 out of 3 and 2.67 out of 3, respectively. Lastly, the respondents in United Arab Emirates and Egypt agreed that Facebook is the most social media used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus with the weighted average of 3 out of 3 and 2.73 out of 3, respectively.

**Table 4: Analysis of answers on Social media most used to obtain news and information about Corona virus.**

Social Media	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Total No.	Weighted Average %
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
Facebook	343	26.92	154	12.09	777	60.99	1274	1.66
Twitter	490	38.46	308	24.18	476	37.36	1274	2.01
Instagram	462	36.26	371	29.12	441	34.62	1274	2.02
YouTube	231	18.13	476	37.36	567	44.51	1274	1.74
WhatsApp	770	60.44	371	29.12	133	10.44	1274	2.5
Snapchat	238	18.68	301	23.63	735	57.69	1274	1.61
Tik Tok	42	3.30	126	9.89	1106	86.81	1274	1.16
Other	70	5.49	287	22.53	971	71.98	1274	1.34



**Fig. 3.** Analysis of answers on Social media most used to obtain news and information about Corona virus.

## V. CONCLUSION

In recent decades, the increasing popularity of internet and mobile news channels and the sharp fall of newspaper distribution and network news ratings have led many analysts and executives in the media industry to speculate that modern media will gradually replace conventional news and information outlets. The purpose of this study was to examine the respondents' perception of the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus. Further, it also seeks to know the respondents' perception of media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. Lastly, the study attempts to explore which is the social media most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus.

The majority of respondents agreed that social media is the first media outlet to spread the news of the Corona virus. Further, the majority of respondents agreed that social media is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus compare to other media like printed newspapers, radio, television and news sites. The study found that WhatsApp is the most used to obtain news and information related to Corona virus. The research provides a substantial contribution to the functional field. It would allow news organizations and writers to spread their news stories. With consideration, the spread of news on media has its outcomes, such as making public feel overloaded with information, leading them to expose themselves to specific news sources selectively.

## VI. LIMITATIONS

There are drawbacks to this research that can hinder the generalization of its results. One of the limitations of the study is that considering a few numbers of respondents for some Arabic countries. Therefore, future study may embark on investigating the same issue by considering a high number of respondents. Further, some important issues have been neglected in the current study. Thus, it is fruitful for future study to investigate other issues related to social media in the Arab countries.

## VII. FUTURE SCOPE

Based on the results of this study, we have the following future plan and suggestions: (i) diffusion of Rumors: How social media users respond to fake information about the COVID-19; and (ii) Country's media institutions in dealing with Coronavirus: Reasons for the spread of rumors and ways of combating.

**Conflicts of Interest.** No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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