

Dwelling in a pandemic world: The role of new media in fostering anxiety and fear about Covid-19 pandemic in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The Covid-19 virus first discovered in February 2020 has defied borders by domesticating itself in all countries around the globe. Like in all other countries, the Covid-19 pandemic even though at first a health crisis has impacted all spheres of social life in the UAE from the economy to education as well as professions and their practices. The spread of infectious diseases is also known to live behind anxiety, fear, and general psychological distress among people. Government and health agencies in the UAE have embarked on public education and engagement to curb the spread of the virus as well as mitigate some of its adverse psychological consequences including anxiety and fear. The development of the Internet and new media has provided health authorities with channels for reaching out to the public on desirable health behavior. The discourse on digital divide for instance, has, among others, questioned technologically deterministic views about the novelty of the Internet by pointing at the divides or barriers it has created in society. While the UAE is reported to be the most digitally connected country in the MENA region in terms of the spread and access to Internet and broadband facilities thus overcoming the first level of digital divide, this study uses both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to explore Internet and social media use patterns, and extent of reproduction of the second and third levels of digital divide among communities in the country during Covid-19 pandemic.

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Keywords

New media, Covid-19, digital divide, perceived locus of causality (PLOC), fear, anxiety, UAE.

Introduction

The upsurge of Covid-19 pandemic has affected the world in many ways, and the fear of this health catastrophe is unprecedented across the globe (Mertins et al, 2020). The development of the Internet and its attendant capabilities especially social media is facilitating online conversations about the effects of coronavirus and its aftermath on the public's health and general aspects of life. Therefore, optimists view social media as one of the helping tools to navigate through this crisis by facilitating information sharing and reflecting on how people in different societies are perceiving and reacting to this crisis.

Such novelty of the Internet, however, seems to be predicated on an assumption that humanity has equal access to and use of the Internet and its dividends. The discourse on digital divide, for instance, has, among others, questioned technologically deterministic views about the novelty of the Internet by pointing at the divides or barriers it has created or consolidated in society. In this regard social media as means of disseminating Covid preventive measures require resources or what Bourdieu calls 'capital', both financial and cultural. In this study we examine how these two variants of capital shape digital divide among communities in the UAE.

Recently, several scholars have documented the ways social media is influencing people's attitudes about the pandemic (Cho et al, 2020); cultivating fear among them (Senturk et al, 2021; Marzouki et al, 2021; Zhao, & Zhou, 2020; Manzoor, & Safdar, 2020; Ali et al, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies in the United Arab Emirates investigating the role of social media in shaping fear and anxiety among citizens and residents.

Between the time of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020 to the 29th of January 2021, the UAE has recorded 293,052 cases and a total number of 819 mortalities. The number of recoveries is put at 267,024. As well as affecting the UAE's tourism and trade, Covid-19 pandemic has triggered fear among residents in the country. Because of its seriousness, UAE authorities have raised concerns about activities that would trigger anxiety and fear among the people. For instance, Gulf Business Report quotes the UAE's attorney-general (Hamad Saif Al Shamsi) warning that, "spreading fake information and rumours is a crime punishable by law. Such material triggers unnecessary

fear and panic among residents” (Hamad Saif Al Shamsi cited by Gulf Business 2020)².

While UAE is reported to be the most digitally connected country in the MENA region in terms of the spread and access to Internet and broadband facilities thus overcoming the first level of digital divide, this paper wants to explore Internet and social media use patterns, and extent of reproduction of the second and third levels of digital divide among communities in the country during Covid-19 pandemic.

The media landscape in the United Arab Emirates has changed dramatically over the years, evolving into a dynamic and diverse industry that reflects the country’s rapid development and globalization. The UAE media sector plays an important role in shaping public opinion and the promotion of cultural exchange.

One of the distinguishing features of the UAE media landscape is the presence of both traditional and modern media platforms. Traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television continue to be of great importance, especially to the older generations. The UAE has several Arabic and English newspapers and radio stations that provide a mix of local, regional, and international news. State-owned television channels such as Abu Dhabi TV and Dubai TV are well-known channels that appeal to a wide audience and disseminate informative and entertaining content. However, the advent of digital technology and the Internet has revolutionized media consumption habits in the UAE, leading to an increase in online and social media usage. The country has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the region and a tech-savvy population that readily embraces digital platforms. Popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook³, and Instagram⁴ are frequently used for breaking news, citizen journalism, and online interactions.

Literature review

In their study of the spread of Covid-19 in South Africa, Shifa et al (2021) explored how spatial inequalities have shaped the differential spread of the disease in a predictable way. Their central argument hinges on higher vulnerability to Covid-19 among poorer households in the country. They used

² Nagraj, A. UAE warns that spreading rumours about Covid-19 via social media is ‘punishable by law’. Gulf Business, March 17, 2020. URL: <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-warns-spreading-rumours-covid-19-via-social-media-punishable-law/>

³ Belongs to Meta company, banned at the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁴ Ibid.

these to measure the vulnerability of a household to Covid-19 and concluded that vulnerability increases as access to amenities or privileges decreases in households. The key findings in the study indicate that the percentage of the population residing in a congested dwelling is larger in rural areas, and also that across all the regions of South Africa, the poor remain the most vulnerable because of their living conditions. Other aspects of the findings that further confirm the vulnerability of the poor to Covid-19 infection are the fact that they largely work in sectors where remote work is not possible and, travel to such workplaces is by public transport where social distancing is rarely adhered to. On the whole, these findings indicate possibilities of stratified spread of the virus in South Africa but in reality, there is no data to indicate percentages of real infections along those lines of social status.

In India, Kumari (2021) acknowledges the role played by social media as a source of information through which people come to know about the Covid-19 virus and its spread as well as the importance of adhering to measures such as social distancing and sanitization. Yet both the speed and volume of information from social media have also created panic and anxiety. The panic according to Kumari's findings led to citizens buying and stocking supplies and food in excess surplus thereby creating shortages in a country of 1.3 billion people. Among those badly affected are workers including those in the healthcare sector who were also the ones expected to treat Covid-19 patients in the hospitals and healthcare centres (Sahoo et al, 2020). Many of them could not acquire food for themselves and their families and were either negatively affected at work or could not go to work at all (ibid).

Such popular message disseminated via social media included earlier one stating the virus could spread by air and capable of surviving in different surfaces (Shu et al, 2017). Such baseless rumors also began to affect people's mental health and contributing to increased cases of depression and anxiety (Shammi et al, 2020; Goyal et al, 2019). Kumari's study also disclosed that out of 884 non-Covid deaths in India, 25 were suicide cases due to either fear of infection or quarantine loneliness etc.

In his study of living in a Covid-19 pandemic situation in Ethiopia, Mohammed (2021) pointed at the twin factors of 'preparedness and response' at the grassroots level as a key. He justified this by arguing that well-prepared countries such as Belgium, New Zealand, and China are beneficiaries of this approach in containing the spread of the virus and thereby minimizing its impact. Preparedness and response are also therefore predicated on status and resource distribution. The poor resources in Ethiopia and their unequal distribution

could enhance vulnerability to Covid-19. Even with a well-laid-down strategy that recognized risk communication and community mobilization the response operations to Covid-19 in Ethiopia faced challenges of poor facilities like water, handwashing facilities, masks and PPE, poor home environment etc. that are all essential to the implementation of Covid-19 preventive measures including social distancing. In the end, though, the study revealed that the strategies failed largely because of failure in coordination. A generally under-equipped health system with severe shortages of both infrastructure and supplies also contributed to undermining preparedness.

In another study of response to Covid-19 pandemic in the UAE, Al-Hosani et al (2021) offered a 'public health perspective'. They acknowledged even though the pandemic is global there are variations in its handling across countries and regions of the world. The study particularly argued that the economic endowment of the country which, in turn, shapes the country's healthcare infrastructure and public health foundation, etc. is a very important factor. The study though, remains oblivious to the role of a digital divide in the dissemination of Covid-19 prevention initiatives.

Musa and Mansoori (2022) examined the role of social media in shaping attitudes towards Covid-19 vaccine among women in the United Arab Emirates. The study suggests that contrary to previous stereotype images of Middle Eastern, Arab Muslim women as passive and laid back, the use of social media has facilitated a change of attitude towards the vaccine among Emirati women in a way that has made them agents of social change.

In assessing UAE's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, Al-Hosani et al (2021) adopted World Health Organization's guidelines focusing on 'risk communication and public engagement'.

The key initiatives introduced by the UAE government as part of the risk communication and public engagement were largely smart technology-based and included the chat box introduced by the MOHAP (Ministry of Health and Prevention) called 'virtual doctor for Covid-19' that provides regular information and services on Covid-19 to the public. The 'Weqaya' platform introduced by NCEMA (National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority) is also for enhancing public awareness on Covid-19 health crisis. The ALHOSN⁵ UAE app is every citizen and resident's companion app through which one receives Covid-19 test results and status on their smartphones. The app also

⁵ ALHOSN is the official UAE app for contact tracing and health testing related to COVID-19 developed by the National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority. URL: <https://www.ncema.gov.ae/alhosn/index.html>

enables contact tracing, when vaccine administration started, it was also used to provide information on one's vaccination status. There is also a 'StayHome' app that supports and monitors the mandatory isolation.

Unlike in Ethiopia, India and South Africa where sanitary supplies and infrastructure are inadequate or are differentially accessible to the population along status lines, the UAE situation is one where such limitations do not exist owing to both economic endowment and proactive public health institutions. What is missing from Al-Hosani et al's study, however, is the lack of awareness of the second level of the digital divide among communities in UAE, a factor that may tend to undermine the realization of the goals of the initiatives.

Theoretical framework

That the world is socially constructed has attracted academic attention to the basis or source of that construction. Berger and Luckmann (1966), for example, argued about how interpersonal face-to-face interaction was the point of the construction of the social. Subsequently, Hall (1982), Couldry and Hepp (2016) came to highlight the role of the media in the mediated construction of social reality. But Couldry and Hepp though have noted that the contemporary social space is fundamentally altered given the extent to which digital social media is embedded in everyday life.

In essence, what we are dealing with, in our effort to provide a theoretical context for understanding how both anxiety and fear are formed in modern society are, is the fact that there are two central variables in the process of human perception namely, the means or platform for communicative action on the one hand, and society itself on the other. On the one hand, our social world is a communicative construction where all the action, practices and their patterns contribute to the overall construction of the social. On the other hand, the technological transformation of the media of communication has brought digital platforms that have become central forms of popular culture given their importance in everyday life for a larger section of the population in the UAE. This is one of the central points in Couldry and Hepp's (2016: 6) call for a re-thinking of the social construction of reality in the contemporary digital age.

Accompanying Covid-inflicted insecurity on inhumanity today is a feeling of vulnerability that leads to different levels of anxiety, fear, and distress. Yet the level of anxiety, fear, and distress among people is an indication of their perception of the degree of risk brought about by Covid-19. Such perception of risk takes place in a social and cultural context. How we perceive risk and

what we perceive as risky is the result of a process by which we acquire or create interpretations (Pidgeon et al, 2003).

In the contemporary era both the acquisition and creation of interpretations of knowledge and perception are social processes involving the media as central actors. Yet, media constructions of perceptions are predicated on cultural contexts (Tsoy et al, 2021). Whereas earlier studies focus on role of conventional media in the construction of social reality (Maeroff, 1998; Spitzer, 1993; Wimmer, & Dominick, 1991; Wilson, & Wilson, 2001), our study is focusing on social media given their penetration and centrality in daily life of citizens and residents in the UAE (Gjylbegaj, & Abdi, 2019; Reyaee, & Ahmed, 2015).

The role of media in shaping public perceptions and opinions about major political and social issues has been among the most speculated and debated subjects in media and communication studies (McGregor, 2019; Katz, 2002; Halls, 2002). A consensus arising from such debates agrees that on issues and events outside our immediate, firsthand experience, our perspectives and views are shaped or even orchestrated by the way such issues and events are reported in the media. (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner et al, 1981).

In relation to the health risk humanity is exposed to as a result of Covid-19, we need to return to perception and its construction in everyday life. Risk perception itself is a communication process not only predicated on societal and cultural backgrounds (Pidgeon et al, 2003), but it is also a communication process along a chain from the sender to the receiver, with different stations in-between that may attenuate or amplify risk' (Bodemer, & Gaissmaire, 2015). The different nexus in the risk communication process highlighted by Bodemer and Gaissmaire could be individuals or media or even institutional as in political actions. But the terrain of our social world today is changed. Communicative action in the XXI century is mass mediated as the media have become the sources of information and perceptions, especially about distant events and experiences. In the contemporary world, the social world is hugely altered by developments in communication technologies. Today, digital and social media are deeply embedded in the social world so communicative action, including risk perception among a larger population is happening through social media. Consequently, a variant of the risk perception theory 'The social amplification of risk' will serve as a useful framework for understanding how the nexus between media infrastructure and symbolic construction creates a perception that heightens anxiety and fear about Covid-19 in the UAE.

In this paper, therefore, we contend that the role of social media in the creation of fear and risk of Covid-19 can be understood through the prism of risk

perception in particular, and especially the social amplification of risk model proposed by Kasperson et al (1988). The importance of social media in risk perception is predicated on two factors. First, is that social media are ubiquitous and widely accessible sources of news and information in the UAE (Gjylbegaj, & Abdi, 2019; Reyaee, & Ahmed, 2015). Second, Covid-19 was alien to the UAE and therefore falls in the category of experience and reality outside our immediate surroundings for which the media become the primary sources of information and perception. In their proposed framework of social amplification of risk perception Kasperson et al (1988) propose that social media function as ‘social amplification station’ in mediating social experiences about hazards and therefore shaping perception of risk arising therefrom, by either amplifying or reducing the extent of risk perception by the public (Kasperson et al, 1988).

Methodology

This paper employs a mixed methods approach combining questionnaire surveys and focus groups which offers valuable advantages in social science research. The use of mixed methods increases the depth and breadth of data, allows for triangulation and validation of findings, and promotes participant engagement and a deeper understanding of complex research topics. Researchers can harness the strengths of each method to produce more robust and insightful research findings.

Our study is first rooted in the qualitative methodology of focus groups which is defined by Tegan George as a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group is chosen due to pre-determined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest (George, 2023)

As our study is aiming to gain insights into the role of a phenomenon, i.e., social media in generating feelings and behavior among communities in the UAE, we have considered the Focus Group (FG) as an ideal method of generating information and data for our research. In addition to the focus group, the study will be complemented by structured interviews with 500 respondents, 100 each from the five communities that are sampled for the research.

By assembling members of various resident and local community groups such as Bangladeshi, Indians, Pakistani, Philipinos, and Emiratis we are aware and resolved that our information source is a group. Moreover, scholars have pointed out that such group interaction in FG research helps respondents recall as well as stimulates descriptions of what they jointly experienced (Tracy, 2013). As a methodology, FG is proven to provide researchers with the opportunity

to record responses about jointly experienced events or activities (Tracy, 2013; Acocella, 2012; Morgan, 1996). The role of the researcher as a moderator in the discussion is important in overcoming weaknesses such as differentiating between individual view and group view and making sense of non-verbal communication such as gestures.

As a technique of generating data through group interaction, FG has three key features from which it derives its strengths. First, FG is focused on information or data collection, second, it recognizes interaction as essential to the information and third, it also recognizes the active role of the researcher as moderator and seeker of information (Morgan, 1996). Interaction that is central to the process provides the researcher an opportunity, through the conversations, to ask further questions on feedback and therefore a deeper understanding of the subject of inquiry.

Using the qualitative method of focus groups discussion, therefore, this study investigates three research questions:

RQ1: What is the source of information on Covid-19 among communities in the UAE?

RQ2: In what ways is digital divide manifested among communities in the UAE?

RQ3: How does digital divide heighten anxiety and fear among communities in the UAE?

Recruitment and sampling

Participants for the various groups were recruited online from among Emiratis, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, and Philippine communities which, according to government records for 2022, constitute around 65% of population⁶. The population of other nationalities constituted less than 2% of each of the total country's population and were therefore not considered. Focus Group sessions were conducted on Zoom platform between March to June 2021 because these took place during the time of the government-imposed restrictions on movements and public gatherings. In order to ensure diversity, participants were selected from varying professional backgrounds and there were male-only as well as female-only groups from each community.

Survey respondents were sought among Emirati adults as well as adults from the other four communities of Bangladeshi, Indians, Pakistani and Philippines. All respondents were made aware that participation was voluntary and also given

⁶ The United Arab Emirates Population Statistics 2022. URL: <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-2022/>

the right to withdraw at any time they so desire. The FG discussion was initiated by an open-ended question ‘What is your source of information on Covid-19 and how have you been affected by the pandemic?’ One of the researchers facilitated the FG discussion by stating from the beginning that participants should feel free to express their opinions and views on the subject. They were assured confidentiality and protection of privacy. The facilitator’s involvement was largely in bringing participants back into the subject whenever they tended to veer away into other unrelated subjects.

Data collection/analysis

A focus group interview was held with ten groups from the Emirati, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Philippine communities. For each community group, we have a male-only and a female-only group of five participants each. The purpose of the focus group sessions is to gain insights into the extent of social media activity and its use as a source of information on Covid-19. In addition, the focus group interviews also aimed to deduce the manifestation of the digital divide among communities as well as levels of anxiety and fear in the communities.

What emerges from the interactive sessions is that all members of the ten groups across all the communities own one smart mobile phone or more, through which they access information, connect with friends and relations as well as access the Internet. All the groups disclosed that they depend on their mobile phones for information on the Covid-19 pandemic. Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities disclosed that they rely on shared information from friends both in the UAE and from their home countries. Emirati and Philippine groups expressed similar opinions but also added that they surf for additional written information from the Internet. The Indian community group had some relying on shared information on social media while others surfed for information from the Internet as well as brochures from the workplace. Other interesting features manifested among and between some of the communities. Members of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities manifest higher levels of anxiety and fear about Covid-19 than the Emirati, Indian and Philippines focus groups (see Table 1).

‘The arrival of Covid- is going to be the end of life for many of us because all workplaces are going to close and all workers will be made redundant. Already, people are dying in thousands back in Bangladesh. If you return from overseas everyone sees you and treats you as an importer and carrier of Covid virus because they call it the foreign disease. These fears are not allowing us to have normal sleep’.

(Jahid, member of the Bangladeshi male Focus Group)

Other members of the Bangladesh male focus group endorsed Jahid’s views and two of them even shared a WhatsApp video of testimonies they claimed are by returning workers who arrived in Bangladesh after losing their jobs in a Gulf country. The Bangladesh female focus group members summarized their anxiety as Husna stated that Corona robs them of ‘jobs and love’ because, after their eventual loss of jobs, they will have to return to their country where ‘every member of your family and the neighbors are running away from you because they see you as a virus importer and a burden they don’t want’.

Table 1

Expression of anxiety and fear

Communities	Yes / No
Emiratis	No
Indians	Yes / No
Pakistani	Yes
Bangladesh	Yes
Filipinos	No

Source: Authors.

Sitara, a member of the Pakistani female focus group team mentions that:

‘Corona has completely killed my dreams. I was working in three different places to supplement the income my husband makes, but now since this virus arrived, I cannot go to clean anyone’s house because people don’t want to open their doors to outsiders to come in and handle their utensils. Most members of our WhatsApp group have reported that their husbands have lost their jobs. People have said the virus will take five years to eradicate. We will die before that time’.

(Sitara, member of the Pakistani female Focus Group)

The anxiety and fear expressed by the Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups is not found among other groups such as Emiratis, Filipinos and Indians. There is, among these groups a shared optimism that the spread of the virus will soon be stopped.

‘All these restrictions on movement, testing, and wearing of mask is temporary. I have been following the news and updates from the government all the time. There are indications that vaccines will arrive and once that happens, we will resume normal life, God willing’.

(Saif, member of the Emirati male Focus Group)

Japhet from Philippines has the endorsement of his group members when he asserted that:

'People may get unnecessarily worried about the virus. But if you are following developments in the science community and WHO you will know that there is a lot of hope of finding vaccine and cure for the virus in a short time. I agree that world supply chain for goods is affected, and this will raise prices, but this is temporary.'

(Japhet, member of the Philippine male Focus Group)

The Indian female focus group members revealed that they have been sharing informative pamphlets about the virus such as methods of spread, measures to curb the spread, testing centers and efforts towards vaccine etc. They revealed that they get these pamphlets from the workplace and source other additional information online. Overall, they revealed that they are quite optimistic about the future in a way that the male Indian group was not.

Survey

In a survey of 500 respondents across the five community groups of Emiratis, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Philippines our study has used a structured questionnaire to ask about their media consumption habits. Questions on the survey were structured and sought information on the educational levels and gender of respondents, ownerships and uses of mobile phones including sources of information on Covid-19. A pilot study was conducted among twenty university students. The confidence level was over 95%, which guarantees the reliability and validity of our survey findings.

What emerges from the interviews indicates common traits as well as discrepancies in media and Internet use among the five communities of respondents. For instance, all 500 respondents across the communities indicate they own at least one smartphone with access to broadband Internet. While all respondents use their phones to make and receive calls, however, discrepancies emerge with regard to the other uses to which they put the smartphones. Between 79-100% of the respondents from Emirati, Filipino, and Indian communities indicate that they use their smartphones for entertainment, social networking, and surfing the net for information (see *Table*). Among Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities however, over 80% use smartphones for entertainment, social networking, and buying and selling as well as money remittances but less than 20% use them for information search on the Internet. A closer look at the respondents from each community reveals that 87-90% of Emiratis and Filipinos interviewees hold a minimum qualification of diploma and about 72% of Indian respondents hold the minimum qualification of diploma (see *Table*). Among

Bangladeshi respondents, 13% hold a minimum qualification of a diploma and that percentage among Pakistani respondents is 22%.

Regarding the use of social media platforms by respondents, as indicated in *Table 2*, the results show that the platform WhatsApp, which is unanimously used by almost all respondents. Facebook⁷ is mainly used by Indians, Filipinos and Pakistanis, while Twitter and Instagram⁸ are preferred by Emiratis and TikTok by Filipinos (see *Table 4*).

Table 2

Smartphone use					
Communities	Entertainment	Social Networking	WhatsApp	Money Remittance	Surfing for information on COVID
Emirati	✓	✓	✓		✓
Indian	✓	✓	✓		✓
Pakistani	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bangladesh	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Filipino	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

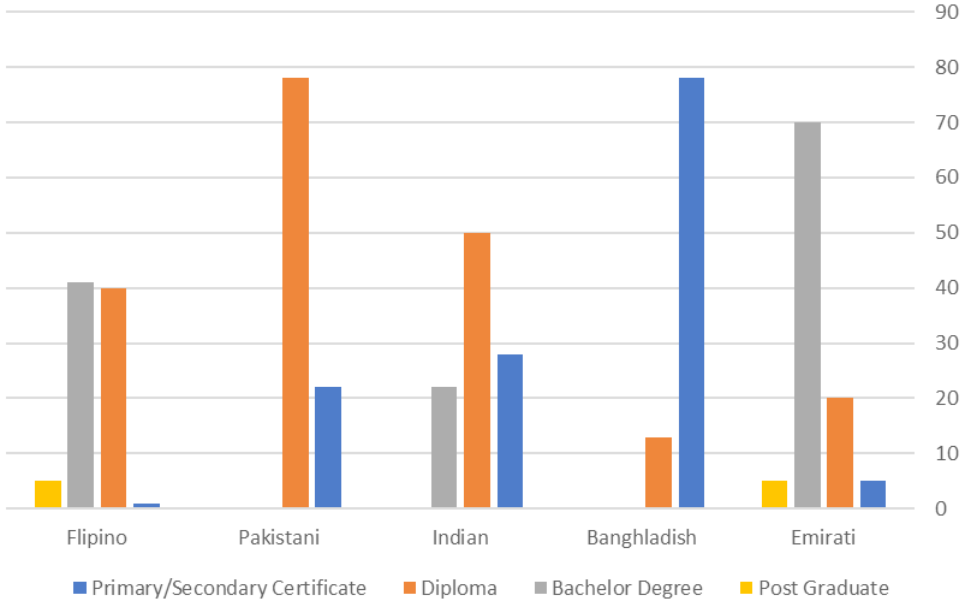
Source: Authors.

⁷ Belongs to Meta company, banned at the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁸ Ibid.

Table 3

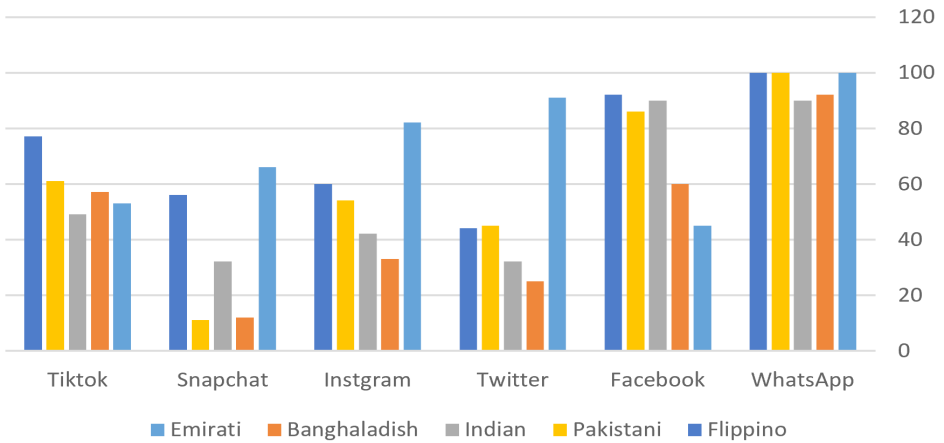
Qualifications



Source: Authors.

Table 4

Social media platform usage



Source: Authors.

Conclusion

What emerges from the study can be seen from both the focus group and the structured survey and points to different uses of new media by communities in the UAE and the consequences of such uses. First, among all the communities there is 100% ownership of smart mobile phones that are all connected to broadband Internet. Second, besides conventional telephone calls and receptions, Internet connection has enabled members of all communities to use smartphones for purposes ranging from social networking to entertainment and information seeking and or sharing as well as money remittances. However, at 79-100% there is a higher use of smartphones to surf the Internet for information during times of Covid-19 pandemic among Emirati, Indian, and Philippines communities, but less than 20% use smartphones for surfing the Internet in information-seeking among Bangladesh and Pakistani communities. Thus, in answering RQ1, the study points to different sources among different communities. Emirati, Phillipino and Indian communities get information from social networking sites as well as by surfing more widely on the Internet including websites of WHO. Among Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, the source of information is largely peer networking platforms such as WhatsApp. The correlation we make from this is that of digital literacy and level of education. This finding correlates with the that of (Islam, Das, & Tabassum, 2023), who among others, also point at digital literacy as a factor in information consumption (Siddique, 2022). Higher educational attainment among Emirati, Philippine and Indian communities tends to equip them with enhanced capacity for information seeking on the Internet.

In the structured interviews conducted among the five communities, it also emerged that a higher percentage (87-90%) of Emiratis and Philippines interviewed possess a college diploma and above. Those who possess a college diploma and above stood at 72% among Indians interviewed but 22% and 13% among Pakistani and Bangladeshis interviewed.

While classical Marxism sees the notion of capital in economic terms, Bourdieu has extended the concept to also include the cultural one (Bourdieu, 1977). What we are seeing in this study, therefore, is that economic capital is no barrier to access and use of Internet facilities in the UAE. However, the possession of cultural capital imposes a limitation on to type of use to which Internet resources are put. The higher educational qualifications among Emiratis, Philippines and Indians have enabled them more use of the Internet to surf for information on Covid-19 in a way that did not happen among Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities with lower cultural capital. This development answers RQ2.

Our premise on the digital divide hinges on its existence at three levels. At the first level, a digital divide is one informed by a lack of access to Internet facilities including broadband connectivity. This divide is a factor of financial resources that are differentially distributed around the world. At its second level, the digital divide is one that speaks to the intensity and manner of Internet usage. This divide is a factor of educational resources that is also differentially distributed within countries and around the world and such distribution, therefore, shapes digital literacies and capabilities. The quality of use gap speaks to a deficit arising from the lack of digital skills or literacies.

To elaborate further on RQ2 therefore, we can allude that there is no existence of a digital divide at its first level in the UAE as 100% of members of all five communities own at least a smart telephone device and other Internet-capable devices with broadband access. However, the level or intensity of usage differs. Emiratis, Philippines and Indian communities enabled by higher levels of education exhibit a more sophisticated usage and exploration of information on the Internet. Both the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities display a more limited usage of the Internet which does not include surfing for additional information on Covid-19. These two communities have lower educational attainment than the Emirati, Philippine and Indian communities.

RQ 3 seeks to find whether the digital divide (in this case, the secondary level), heightens anxiety and fear among the communities in the UAE. What is revealed in the data indicates that both Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups are the communities among whom Internet use has been minimal and does not include its exploration for additional information on Covid-19 or scientific break-through on vaccines, etc. Members of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities also appear more susceptible to unfounded claims such as that the virus will take ‘five years to eradicate’, ‘it is a foreign disease’, etc.

Indian female focus group shares optimism about finding vaccines as it ‘sources additional information online’. Japhet of the Phillipino focus group echoes optimism in finding a vaccine as well as normalization of activities. He indicated that he has been following developments in the science community including WHO.

Overall, we are able to make inferences from the focus group interviews and surveys as to how the digital divide is fostering anxiety and fear. For instance, confidence in finding a vaccine as well as restoration of normality is expressed among communities with higher digital competencies and who channel these into sourcing information on the Internet. Both anxiety and fear, therefore, are products of perception that is socially constructed through access or otherwise, to new media.

The feeling of anxiety and fear is expressed among communities that are not as endowed in digital skills and, therefore, rely on social networks made up of other peers in the community or home country. Such a network of digitally disadvantaged communities reinforces rather than alleviates anxiety and fear in the community.

Looking at the three levels of the digital divide (Nielsen, 2006; Gomez, 2018; Escudero, 2023) accessibility, usability, and empowerment, we would argue that 100% access to smartphones and broadband Internet connection among the five largest communities in the UAE has eradicated the first level of the digital divide. But given the unequal distribution of cultural capital among the communities has imposed limitations on the usability of Internet resources and therefore shows the existence of the second level of the digital divide in the UAE. The feeling of vulnerability, fear, and anxiety in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic could be seen as a manifestation of powerlessness and therefore the existence of the third level of the digital divide.

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