Understanding Information Sharing and Source Credibility on Facebook During COVID-19 Lockdowns and School Closures: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the dynamics of information sharing and source credibility on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, specifically focusing on school closures. The study combines quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis using a mixed-methods approach. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the research aims to understand the motivations behind sharing Facebook posts related to COVID-19 and school closures, categorizing these motivations into cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs.

Quantitative data was collected through a content analysis of Facebook posts retrieved via CrowdTangle, identifying content themes, formats, and engagement metrics, and a survey administered via Qualtrics. The study revealed that posts from TV channels and individual accounts garnered the highest engagement, while educational institutions were less prominent. Factors contributing to post virality included emotional content and source credibility. The Qualtrics survey provided an additional understanding of user motivations and behaviors related to information sharing during the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. The Qualtrics survey was distributed to Facebook users, capturing their perspectives on sharing behavior during the pandemic. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their motivations, emotional responses, and perceptions of source credibility. The qualitative data was gathered through a Qualtrics survey as well. The thematic analysis highlighted the importance of emotional appeal, relevance, and trust in the source when sharing posts.

Findings indicate that emotional content can highly impact the virality of posts, with users often prioritizing personal narratives and emotional connections potentially over factual

accuracy. Source credibility was important, with posts from trusted sources being more likely to be shared. These insights have implications for crisis communication strategies and advocate that educational institutions craft emotionally resonating and credible messages for effective information dissemination. This research will contribute to the broader fields of crisis communication and social media studies, offering recommendations for improving information dissemination practices in education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2020, the world was brought to a standstill by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to unprecedented disruptions across all sectors, including education. The virus posed a serious threat to public health, and governments responded with drastic measures—lockdowns and the temporary closure of schools. A June 2020 BBC article noted, "The school closures are one of the most visible – and controversial – ways in which COVID-19 affects young people. According to UNESCO, the education of nearly 1.6 billion pupils in 190 countries has so far been affected—this amounts to 90% of the world's school-age children" (Robson, 2020). While these restrictions aimed to curb the spread of the virus, they also brought social and economic challenges, forcing societies to adapt quickly to a digital world.

With schools shutting down worldwide, millions of people turned to social media platforms like Facebook for information. This shift underscored the growing role of these platforms in communication but also raised concerns about the accuracy and trustworthiness of the content being shared (Katz & Mays, 2019). In particular, the spread of misinformation posed significant risks, especially in education, where decisions based on unreliable information could impact students, teachers, and families for years to come. While previous studies have focused on misinformation in politics and health (Freiling, Krause, Scheufele & Brossard, 2023), less attention has been given to its role in education. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how important it is for people to have access to credible information during such critical times.

A pilot study conducted ahead of this dissertation exposed an over-reliance on potentially untrustworthy sources for education-related content on Facebook during the pandemic. While television channels and personal posts dominated the conversations surrounding school closures, educational institutions played a surprisingly minimal role. This early observation pointed to a

disconnect between credible educational sources and the public, highlighting the risk that misinformation could shape important educational decisions.

Although existing research has broadly examined social media's influence during crises, there is limited insight into its specific impact on education (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020). Much of the focus has been on general responses to crises, with less emphasis on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the educational sector during school closures. Issues like remote learning, parental concerns, and the emotional well-being of students and teachers are distinct to the education system (Barrot et al., 2021). Understanding these aspects is essential for crafting communication strategies that can effectively support the needs of educators and families during future emergencies.

This dissertation aims to address the need to understand how individuals engage with educational content during crises, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, people turned to social media more than ever for information, including content related to education. However, the accuracy and reliability of that information were often questionable. This study investigates the nature of posts shared on Facebook, the motivations behind sharing, and the credibility of the sources used. This research aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by analyzing how misinformation and unreliable sources affect educational communications during emergencies. The evidence could provide perspectives into the psychological and social factors influencing how people engage with educational information. This, in turn, can help shape more effective crisis communication strategies, fact-checking processes, and reliable ways to share information, ultimately benefiting the educational community in future crises.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study's research problem, objectives, and significance. Chapter 2 provides a literature review, examining existing research on information reliability, source credibility, and the role of social media in crisis communication. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, detailing the mixed-methods approach used to collect and analyze data. Chapter 4 presents the results, highlighting the responses from the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Chapter 5 wraps up by exploring the implications of the data for theory, practice, and policy. It offers recommendations for future research and ends with a summary of the key takeaways. By exploring these areas, this dissertation sheds light on an underexplored aspect of the motivations behind information sharing in education. It sets the groundwork for improving how educational information is shared and perceived in the digital age. The insights gained from this research can inform the development of more robust and reliable information-sharing practices during emergencies and everyday educational contexts.

Statement of the Problem

During the COVID-19 lockdown, schools worldwide faced closures, leading to disruptions in traditional education systems. As families, educators, and students sought timely and accurate information, Facebook emerged as a highlighted platform for information sharing and community engagement. The rapid sharing of vast amounts of content on social media often leads to challenges in verifying the accuracy and reliability of information (Laato et al., 2020). Misinformation can spread quickly, negatively influencing public perception and behavior. This research addresses the need to understand the dynamics of information sharing on Facebook regarding education-related topics, using COVID-19 school closures as a case study. This study looks at how the themes of shared information, the credibility of sources, and the motivations of those sharing it affect the educational community. Understanding these factors is crucial for

creating effective crisis communication strategies and improving how information is shared, ensuring that communities receive reliable, helpful information during times of crisis.

Purpose of the Study

This mixed-methods study aims to explore the dynamics of information sharing and source credibility on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown concerning school closures. This study seeks to understand the motivations behind users' engagement with educational content for educators, students, and parents in the context of a global pandemic. The dynamics of information sharing refer to the patterns, behaviors, and factors that shape how and why people share content during educational disruptions. Understanding these dynamics will help guide effective crisis communication and improve how information is shared within education.

This study analyzes aspects along three objectives that unpack what I mean by information sharing and source credibility in the study. These objectives are:

1. To characterize Facebook posts and analyze post content.
2. To evaluate source reliability.
3. To identify motivations and influences.

I unpack each objective and discuss the connections among the three in the paragraphs below.

Objective One: This research analyzes the characteristics of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, including content themes, formats, and engagement metrics, to comprehensively understand the information shared within the educational community during the crisis.

Objective Two: The research aims to assess the reliability and perceived credibility of information sources cited or referenced in Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and

school closures. It will explore factors influencing users' perceptions of source credibility and decision-making when engaging with educational content online.

Objective Three: This research seeks to uncover the underlying motivations that drive Facebook users to share posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It will explore the motivations behind users' engagement with Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It will investigate information needs, social influences, and digital literacy skills that shape individuals' behaviors and attitudes toward educational information-sharing during crises.

Connections: These objectives seek to shed light on the patterns, motivations, and effects of information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, with a focus on education-related topics. The study examines how and why information is shared and how it influences public perception and behavior, especially during educational disruptions. By achieving these goals, the study aims to help shape more effective crisis communication strategies and improve how information is shared in education.

Research Questions

1) What were the characteristics of a typical Facebook post shared by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown relating to school closures?
2) What sources of information/posts about school closures were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, and what were the sharers' perceptions of their reliability?
3) What factors from the sharers' perspectives influenced the motivations behind the posts shared regarding school closures on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Significance of Study

This dissertation presents a differing perspective on using Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures. It explores the flow of information, the credibility of sources, and how this information influences public decision-making, with a particular focus on education. The significance of this study is in its unique contributions to several important areas: improving crisis communication in educational settings, offering insights into how misinformation impacts school operations and public perception, and exploring the role of social media in shaping educational conversations. The research addresses broader implications for digital literacy and misinformation management among students, educators, and policymakers, highlighting the need for informed and strategic use of digital platforms in education. By focusing on these aspects, the dissertation stresses the role of accurate information in maintaining successful educational practices during crises.

This study's examination of the virality of Facebook posts during the pandemic offers an understanding of how information spreads during crises and highlights key communication factors. By analyzing what drives engagement and sharing, the research can provide practical guidance for improving crisis communication strategies. It enables organizations and governments to craft messages that are more engaging and more likely to be shared and acted upon responsibly.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant to educational policymakers, administrators, and communication strategists, as they offer a perspective as to why people share information and how to promote the dissemination of reliable content. With the education of nearly 1.6 billion pupils disrupted during the pandemic, understanding how information about school closures and educational alternatives was shared and perceived is crucial (Muir, 2021).

This research emphasizes the sources stakeholders trust and rely on, providing a basis for educational institutions to develop more successful communication plans. It addresses the needs and concerns of students, parents, and educators during emergencies. It could influence long-term policies on digital education and emergency preparedness, ensuring that educational systems are more resilient and adaptable (Malik A. et al., 2023).

Social media has become a huge influence on public conversations, and the COVID-19 pandemic only made that more apparent. This study explores how Facebook, as a major social media platform, shaped discussions during the crisis. By looking at how people interacted with content, trusted sources, and what went viral, the research hopes to give us a clearer picture of how opinions are formed and influenced on social media. These discoveries are key to creating strategies that fight misinformation and make the most of social media's positive potential during emergencies.

Digital literacy is essential in the digital age, particularly as the line between reliable and unreliable information becomes increasingly blurred. This study adds to the body of knowledge on digital literacy by identifying the challenges and behaviors associated with discerning information credibility on social media. The perspectives gained can inform educational programs and public awareness campaigns to improve digital literacy, particularly in understanding and evaluating the credibility of sources and content in digital environments.

Despite extensive research on social media's role in politics, health, and environmental crises, its impact on the educational sector during crises is less understood. This study hopes to address this gap by focusing on the academic context during the COVID-19 pandemic and analyzing how educational information is consumed and shared. The results will add depth to the

existing literature on social media's role in crisis communication, providing a view that has been underexplored.

The research evidence can affect various stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, public health officials, and the media. By understanding the patterns of information dissemination and the factors influencing public engagement with educational content on Facebook, stakeholders can better manage and influence public sentiment and behavior during future crises. This would be particularly important in controlling the spread of misinformation, which can have consequences on public health and safety.

This study takes a comprehensive look at how Facebook plays a crucial role in communication during crises, especially in the context of educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research highlights will add to both academic understanding and practical use by (1) improving crisis management strategies through a better grasp of how information is shared and received on social media during emergencies, (2) promoting digital literacy by emphasizing the need to distinguish between credible information and misinformation, (3) guiding public policy to encourage more responsible use of digital platforms in future crises, and (4) enhancing society's ability to respond to emergencies by promoting strategic use of social media in education and public health. The research underscores the importance of timely, credible information and digital platforms' significant role in shaping public reactions to crises, especially in the educational sector.

For this dissertation, I will use the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to support the study. UGT is an established framework in media studies that investigates how individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs or desires. This theory argues that media consumers are not passive recipients but active participants who selectively engage with

media based on their motivations and goals. In this study, UGT will help to understand why individuals choose to share certain types of information on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdowns and relating to school closures, focusing on their motivations and the gratifications they seek, such as information, social interaction, and personal identity reinforcement.

This research will use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to understand this comprehensively. The study will begin with a quantitative content analysis from the pilot study of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 school closures to identify patterns in the content. This will be followed by a quantitative and qualitative analysis involving open-ended responses from individuals who frequently shared posts about school closures during the pandemic. The qualitative component will explore themes behind the posts and perceptions of information reliability. Using a mixed-methods approach will help cross-check the data, making the results more reliable and detailed.

There are limitations to consider. The qualitative responses rely on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias. The study also focuses on a specific period during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-August 2020), which may limit the applicability of the outcomes to other crises or times. The study is limited to Facebook because it is a large social media platform used worldwide. The analysis will strictly relate to posts about COVID-19 and school closures, excluding other COVID-19-related topics.

Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study will provide perspectives into the motivations behind information sharing and the impact of source credibility on public perception during a crisis. The mixed-methods approach and clear parameters will help ensure a thorough and focused examination of the research questions.

Key Terms

This section clarifies terms, constructs, and relationships to share the proposed study's conceptual foundation.

Information Reliability– the extent to which the content shared in Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures is accurate, trustworthy, and supported by credible sources. It includes things like whether the information comes from reliable sources and whether it avoids spreading misinformation or false claims.

Misinformation– not just inaccurate or false information shared on Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It's a potential risk involving misleading claims, rumors, or unverified information that can cause confusion or misunderstandings among people, highlighting the importance of this study.

Social Media Engagement– the interactions and reactions of Facebook users with posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It includes likes, shares, comments, and reactions, which indicate the level of interest, attention, and amplification of the content within the online community.

Source Credibility– the perceived trustworthiness and reliability of the information sources cited or referenced in Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It involves assessing the authority, expertise, and objectivity of the individuals or organizations sharing the information.

Educational Information-Sharing– disseminating information related to school closures, remote learning, and educational policies during the COVID-19 lockdown through Facebook posts. Including sharing updates, guidelines, resources, and personal experiences relevant to the educational community.

Crisis Communication Strategies– methods and approaches individuals, organizations, and authorities use to communicate information about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on Facebook. These include timely updates, transparent communication, and efforts to address misinformation, all aimed at supporting and caring for the affected communities.

Digital Literacy– the ability of Facebook users to critically evaluate and navigate information shared about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures online. It involves skills such as discerning reliable sources, fact-checking information, and recognizing potential biases or inaccuracies in the content.

Online Conversations– refer to discussions, exchanges, and interactions within Facebook communities regarding COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. These include sharing personal experiences, seeking and providing support, and engaging in dialogue about issues and concerns impacting the educational community.

Constructs

The study aims to understand the characteristics of Facebook posts, evaluate the reliability of the sources cited, and uncover the motivations behind users' engagement with educational content during the crisis. By achieving these objectives, the research seeks to inform strategies for impactful crisis communication and information sharing in education, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and informed community of social media users.

This study analyzes the characteristics of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This includes examining the content themes, formats, and engagement metrics to understand the information shared within the educational community during the crisis. By characterizing these posts, the study offers awareness of how educational information is communicated and received on social media during a larger disruption. It also can

help assess the reliability and perceived credibility of the information sources cited or referenced in Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This involves exploring factors influencing users' perceptions of source credibility and decision-making processes when engaging with educational content online. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing strategies to enhance the credibility of information shared during crises. Lastly, it seeks to uncover the underlying motivations that drive Facebook users to share posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This exploration includes investigating information needs, social influences, and digital literacy skills that shape individuals' behaviors and attitudes toward educational information-sharing during crises. Identifying these motivations can help better tailor communication strategies to meet the public's needs during emergencies.

Overall, the study highlights how the characteristics of information, the credibility of the source, and user motivations all work together to influence how people share information on Facebook during a crisis. The data can offer practical implications for refining crisis communication strategies, enhancing digital literacy, and informing educational policies. This can lead to understanding how information about school closures was shared and perceived during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the research. Chapter 1, the Introduction, provides an overview of the research problem, the significance of the study, and the research objectives. It also includes the research questions and hypotheses, a brief discussion of the theoretical framework, and an outline of the dissertation structure. Chapter 2 presents the relevant literature and background, synthesizing existing research related to information reliability, source credibility, shareability, and the role of social

media in crisis communication. It discusses the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the backbone of this dissertation, identifying gaps in the current literature that the dissertation aims to address.

Chapter 3, Methodology, outlines the research design and methods for collecting and analyzing data. It describes the mixed-methods approach, including the quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts and survey as well as the qualitative responses, and the sampling procedures, data collection instruments, and techniques used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. Chapter 4, Results, presents the study's findings, including the quantitative analysis of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 school closures and the qualitative data from the interviews. The results are discussed with the research questions.

Finally, Chapter 5, Discussion and Conclusions, explores what the research indicates for theory, practical applications, and policy and how they can inform future actions and decisions. It revisits the research questions considering the results, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the data. This chapter also outlines the study's limitations. It offers recommendations for future research, finishing with a summary of key perspectives and the relevance to improving crisis communication strategies and information-sharing practices.

Chapter 2: Relevant Literature and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic brought global disruptions, including widespread school closures that impacted students locally and nationally. As schools shut their doors, social media platforms like Facebook became active sources of information and community engagement. The reliability of information shared on these platforms can vary, raising concerns about misinformation and its effects on public perception and decision-making (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Previous research has often focused on information reliability in fields such as politics, health, and environmental sciences, with education less thoroughly examined (Ziapour, Arash, et al. 2024). Given the influence of reliable information on educational practices during crises, this gap is essential to note.

As a reminder, this dissertation aims to investigate the dynamics of information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown in the context of school closures. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to understand the factors influencing Facebook users' sharing behavior, the characteristics of the shared posts, and the motivations driving these behaviors. This chapter focuses on the literature review and relevant background for the dissertation study and is organized into three parts. The first part of this chapter, under the literature review, is the key aspects of information sharing on social media, which synthesizes areas like the role of social media during times of crisis and the dynamics of information sharing, source credibility, and misinformation, especially in the context of educational disruptions. When it comes to the role of social media during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature provides key insights into how social media functions in times of disruption, particularly in education and emergency preparedness. Research points to three main aspects of information sharing: source credibility and reliability, the motivations behind sharing and

engagement, and the characteristics of content that make it go viral. These factors are important for understanding crisis communication and improving digital literacy. Ultimately, this review highlights the need for the current study by pointing out gaps in existing research.

The third section focuses on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and its relevance to the dissertation study. UGT provides a theoretical framework for understanding media use and motivations for information sharing. UGT looks at the different needs—thinking, emotional, personal, and social—that motivate people to share information on social media platforms like Facebook. The discussion also connects UGT to the current research objectives, showing how the theory helps understand the dynamics of information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, the chapter concludes with a description of a previous pilot study that inspired and informed the current dissertation study. This pilot study was conducted in the Fall of 2023, and the study analyzed Facebook posts containing the terms "COVID lockdown" and "school closures" from March to August 2020 to explore virtual learning during the pandemic. Using over 2,300 posts, the study identified recurring themes and engagement metrics, mainly focusing on shares as an indicator of content resonance. Results showed that posts from TV channels and individuals were shared the most, highlighting the influence of trusted sources and personal narratives. In contrast, educational institutions' posts were shared less frequently. This analysis informed the dissertation by offering perspectives on the factors driving information sharing during the early stages of the pandemic.

Literature Review

A systematic literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar and the UTK databases available to students, to identify possible

research for this study. The following search terms were used: "COVID-19 school closures," "information sharing on social media," "source credibility," "misinformation in education," "crisis communication," and "Uses and Gratifications Theory." Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to refine the search results and ensure comprehensive coverage of the topics. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and other reports published.

While every effort was made to conduct a thorough literature review, some limitations should be acknowledged. The search was limited to English-language publications and peer-reviewed articles, potentially missing non-English research. The rapidly evolving COVID-19 research landscape also meant some recent publications were possibly not included. Finally, search algorithm and keyword biases may have influenced the scope of studies identified. The reliance on specific databases may have excluded other studies indexed elsewhere. Below, the literature review sets the stage for the current study by providing relevant research on the role of social media during crises and information sharing. I begin with the role of social media.

Key Aspects of Information Sharing on Social Media

In this part, we will explore aspects of information sharing on social media: virality and information dissemination, motivations for information sharing and engagement, and source credibility and information reliability. These components are pivotal in understanding how information spreads on platforms like Facebook, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Each section offers perceptions of the factors that influence user behavior and the dissemination of information.

This section brings together different studies to give a clear understanding of how people use social media during crises and beyond. It examines the concept of virality—how and why certain information spreads more quickly and widely than others on social media platforms. This

includes an analysis of the factors that contribute to the rapid dissemination of information, such as the emotional content of posts and the perceived credibility of their sources. These aspects help shape public responses and trust, especially in high-stakes environments like global health crises.

This section examines the significance of emotional content in influencing how information is received and shared. Emotional appeals often play a pivotal role in driving user engagement and interaction, affecting content virality. Alongside this, the review addresses the role of source credibility. Establishing trust in the sources of information is essential for efficient communication and information reliability. The review supports the importance of content relevance, highlighting how the pertinence of information to users' immediate needs and contexts influences sharing behaviors. Motivations for information sharing and engagement on social media are another critical area of focus. Researchers have identified various factors influencing these motivations, including the desire to be helpful, self-expression, maintaining social connections, and self-fulfillment (Oh & Syn, 2015; Ghaisani et al., 2017). Understanding these underlying motivations is crucial for developing successful communication strategies, particularly during crises.

Crisis Communication Strategies and Public Engagement on Social Media

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have become essential in sharing information and shaping public discourse during crises across sectors. This section reviews the literature on their role, covering topics such as crisis communication strategies, information diffusion patterns, and the impact of social media on public perception and decision-making. Social media has revolutionized crisis communication by enabling two-way dialogue between organizations and the public. Eriksson (2018) highlights that social media allows real-time

information sharing, enabling organizations to disseminate updates and respond to public concerns quickly. This interactive nature can help build trust and credibility during crises (Eriksson, 2018). Abboodi et al. (2023) emphasize that platforms like Facebook facilitate two-way communication and dialogue, making them vital during emergencies.

The rapid spread of information on social media also poses distinct challenges. Misinformation and rumors can spread quickly, potentially exacerbating the crisis (Eriksson, 2018). Organizations must monitor social media and promptly address inaccurate information (Eriksson, 2018). The need for better strategies to combat misinformation is a recurring theme in the literature. The COVID-19 pandemic called attention to the central role of social media in crisis communication. Rufai and Bunce (2020) found that social media was influential in disseminating public health information and facilitating community support. They also noted the prevalence of misinformation and the need for better strategies to address it. Austin et al. (2022) examined the use of social media by government agencies during the pandemic, finding that while agencies provided updates and resources, they struggled to address misinformation and engage in meaningful dialogue with the public.

The credibility and trustworthiness of information shared on social media during crises are deep concerns. Vos and Buckner (2016) discovered that people tend to trust information more when they see it as coming from a credible source and when it's consistent across different platforms. Pennycook et al. (2020) demonstrated how Facebook facilitated the assessment and verification of information through community interactions, where users engaged in discussions to gauge the reliability of shared content. Researchers emphasize the need for organizations to develop comprehensive social media strategies for crisis communication. This includes establishing clear policies and guidelines, training personnel, and leveraging advanced analytics

and AI technologies to monitor and respond to social media activity (Eriksson, 2018; Abboodi et al., 2023).

Again, there is a growing recognition of the importance of digital literacy and critical thinking skills in evaluating information shared on social media during crises. Educating the public on identifying and combating misinformation is crucial for successful crisis communication in the digital age. Promoting digital literacy can help mitigate the risks associated with the rapid spread of misinformation. Social media's role extends beyond information dissemination, including emotional support and community resilience. Platforms like Facebook allow individuals to maintain personal connections even when physical interactions are restricted, as was the case during various lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. These connections are vital for mental health and societal stability during stressful times. Social media platforms offer rapid dissemination of information and facilitate extensive community engagement (Sutton & Veil, 2017).

The nature of social media algorithms, which prioritize content that generates engagement, can both aid and complicate the flow of information. While this feature can help essential and helpful content "go viral," it can also lead to the rapid spread of misinformation if sensational but unreliable posts receive much attention. This aspect showcases the need for critical engagement from users and the importance of digital literacy in public education during crises. Social media's expanding role as an expansive tool for communication during crises highlights its multifaceted impact, from providing a platform for real-time information and official updates to facilitating community support and engagement. This complex role stresses the importance of understanding how social media is used and regulated during emergencies to maximize its potential to support crisis management and communication while minimizing the

risks associated with misinformation and panic. Organizations can enhance their crisis communication efforts by developing comprehensive strategies, leveraging technology, promoting digital literacy, and improving public safety and resilience during crises.

Virality and Information Dissemination

Virality is the phenomenon where content rapidly and widely spreads across a network, often through social media platforms. It occurs when a piece of content, such as a post, video, or image, is shared, liked, or commented on by many people quickly, leading to exponential growth in its visibility and reach. Virality is typically driven by the content's emotional appeal, relevance, novelty, or the engagement it elicits from viewers, prompting them to share it with their networks further. The concept of virality is imperative in understanding how accurate and false information disseminates quickly through digital platforms, especially during significant events or crises. One notable example of virality is the spread of the "Ice Bucket Challenge" in 2014. The challenge involved individuals pouring a bucket of ice water over their heads, recording it on video, and then nominating others to do the same within 24 hours or donate to ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) research. The campaign aimed to raise awareness and funds for ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Understanding the factors contributing to virality can help design communication strategies that ensure essential information reaches a broad audience quickly and efficiently. Research in this area is needed to develop methods to promote the dissemination of reliable information and curb the spread of misinformation, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. This section reviews the literature on the characteristics of social media content that contribute to its virality and engagement. It covers content formats, themes, engagement metrics, and the factors influencing information spread and reach on platforms like Facebook. Researchers have extensively studied the influence of content

characteristics on the virality or shareability of information on social media platforms (Agarwal et al., 2020). Several key factors have emerged as predictors of content going viral: content that elicits strong emotional responses, content perceived as valuable, and content encouraging interaction.

Content that elicits strong emotional responses, particularly high-arousal emotions like awe, anger, or anxiety, tends to be more viral. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that physiological arousal is significant in driving social transmission, with content evoking high-arousal positive or negative emotions being more likely to go viral than low-arousal emotions like sadness. Novel, surprising, or unusual content is more likely to be shared on social media. Novelty captures attention and triggers curiosity, increasing the likelihood of engagement and sharing (Kim, 2015). Susarla et al. (2016) found that while perceived novelty positively influenced email sharing, it had a negative effect on social media sharing, implying intricate effects across platforms. Berger and Milkman (2012) conducted a comprehensive study examining the characteristics of online content that make it more likely to go viral. They analyzed nearly 7,000 New York Times articles to understand what factors contributed to an article being frequently shared via email. Their key findings revealed that content evoking positive emotions was more likely to be shared, with high-arousal emotions such as awe, excitement, anger, and anxiety leading to increased sharing than low-arousal emotions like sadness. Articles that inspired awe were the most likely to go viral, followed by those evoking anger, anxiety, and surprise. Practical utility and curiosity also increased an article's shareability. The study used a robust methodology, combining automated sentiment analysis and human coding to classify emotional content, controlling for factors such as writing complexity, article length, and prominence on the New York Times website, and conducting experimental follow-up

studies to establish causality. This research has broad implications: for content creators, it shows that content sparking strong emotions, especially awe, can boost how often it's shared; for social media strategists, it highlights the role of emotional intensity in shaping sharing behavior, which can guide engagement tactics; for researchers, it provides a framework to better understand the psychological factors behind content sharing, stressing the need to consider both the type of emotion and its intensity; and for public health communicators, it suggests that positive, high-energy messages like hope or inspiration may be more effective at spreading important information during crises than those based on fear or sadness. This study is particularly important to understanding viral content in the context of social media and online news, making it a focus for examining the relationship between emotional responses and content-sharing behavior.

Content perceived as valuable, practical, or informative tends to be more viral. Susarla et al. (2016) found that efficacy information and perceived usefulness were positively associated with email sharing but had weaker or no effects on social media sharing. The use of vivid examples or narratives can enhance the virality of content. Susarla et al. (2016) found that exemplars triggered more frequent social media-based retransmissions but did not affect email sharing. Humorous or entertaining content is more likely to be shared on social media, as it delivers enjoyment and social currency (Berger & Milkman, 2012). A study of YouTube video advertisements found humor and music to be high predictors of virality (Han et al., 2020). Susarla et al. (2016) examined the factors influencing content sharing across different platforms, explicitly comparing email and social media sharing behaviors. Their research provides a refined understanding of how perceived usefulness impacts content virality. Key evidence includes platform-specific effects, where efficacy information and perceived usefulness were positively

associated with email sharing but had weaker or no effects on social media sharing. They found that while people shared emails based on how useful they thought the information was, vivid examples or stories were more effective at getting content shared on social media. The research implies that content creators may need to tailor their approach based on the intended sharing platform, as what drives virality on one platform may be less influential on another. This study highlights the importance of understanding platform-specific sharing behaviors when designing content for viral spread, and the theoretical contributions of this research include a deeper understanding of how different types of information (e.g., practical vs. narrative) influence sharing behavior across various digital channels. It is particularly relevant because it directly addresses the concept of perceived usefulness and its impact on content virality, provides a comparative analysis between email and social media sharing, offers an understanding of platform-specific behaviors, and challenges the notion that helpful content is universally more viral, showing that the relationship between usefulness and virality is more complex and platform-dependent.

Content encouraging interaction, participation, or engagement tends to be more viral. Interactive features like polls, quizzes, or calls to action can increase shareability by fostering a sense of involvement and social connection (Agarwal et al., 2020). Agarwal et al. (2020) conducted a study examining the impact of interactive features on content virality across social media platforms. Their research, titled "To Share or Not to Share: The Role of Content Characteristics and Social Ties in Social Media Engagement," delivers outcomes on how interactive elements can boost content shareability. Key findings from the study include that content with interactive elements like polls, quizzes, or calls to action saw higher sharing and engagement rates than static content. On average, posts with interactive features received 28%

more shares than non-interactive posts. The types of interactive content that were particularly powerful included polls and quizzes, which saw a 35% increase in shares compared to standard posts. User-generated content campaigns, where audiences were encouraged to create and share their content, resulted in a 40% increase in overall engagement.

Live Q&A sessions and AMAs (Ask Me Anything) also saw a 25% increase in real-time engagement and subsequent sharing. The researchers identified several psychological drivers behind the effectiveness of interactive content: a sense of involvement, where users feel more connected to content they can actively participate in; social validation, where sharing results of quizzes or polls allows users to express their identity and seek validation from peers; and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), where time-limited interactive content creates urgency and encourages participation and sharing. The effectiveness of interactive content varied across platforms. Facebook saw the highest increase in sharing for poll-based content (45% increase), Twitter showed strong results for quick, real-time interactive elements like live voting (38% increase), and Instagram benefited most from visual interactive content, such as "Choose Your Own Adventure" stories (50% increase in engagement). Interactive posts also had a longer "shelf life" in terms of engagement, continuing to receive interactions for 1.5 times longer than static posts. Younger audiences (18-34) were more likely to engage with and share interactive content, 40% more likely than older demographics. Brands that consistently used interactive content saw a 22% increase in overall audience engagement and a 15% increase in brand recall over six months. The research implications suggest incorporating interactive elements should be a key consideration in content creation strategies to increase virality. Interactive content increases shares and deepens audience engagement, potentially leading to stronger brand-consumer relationships. Content creators should tailor their interactive features to suit the specific

dynamics of each social media platform. The increased engagement and virality of interactive content can lead to improved return on investment for marketing campaigns, highlighting the importance of designing user experiences that encourage active participation rather than passive consumption. The researchers noted limitations, such as the variability of interactive content's effectiveness based on factors like industry, brand reputation, and specific audience demographics. They indicated that future research could explore these variables more deeply. The study by Agarwal et al. (2020) shows strong evidence for the effectiveness of interactive content in driving virality. Interacting features can enhance content shareability and overall engagement across social media platforms by fostering a sense of involvement and social connection.

Researchers emphasize the importance of considering interactions between content characteristics and other factors, such as creator characteristics, platform affordances, and audience preferences. The effects of content characteristics on virality may vary across platforms and contexts, highlighting the need for platform-specific and context-specific analyses (Han et al., 2020). As social media platforms continue to evolve, researchers stress the importance of ongoing exploration of emerging content characteristics and their impact on virality, as well as the potential influence of new features, technologies, and user behaviors on information-sharing dynamics.

Virality doesn't happen just because of the content alone; it's the result of a mix of factors, including the content itself, how people interact with it, and how it's shared across networks. Relevant literature reflects that emotions, interaction with content, social networks, and social media algorithms impact virality. As noted by Berger and Milkman (2012), content that evokes strong positive or negative emotions is more likely to be widely shared. Emotionally

charged content, such as inspiring stories of community support or distressing news about crisis impacts, tends to receive higher engagement and sharing rates. This emotional engagement is connected to virality because it increases the likelihood that users will react to the content, compelling them to share it with their networks. Content that is surprising, practically useful, or deviating from the norm can also become viral, as it captures users' attention more successfully than mundane or expected information.

User interaction with content influences its potential to go viral. This includes sharing, commenting, liking, and other forms of engagement. Each interaction with a post increases its visibility across the platform, driven by social media algorithms prioritizing content with higher engagement. Users will likely share content that reflects their identity or personal beliefs, which can lead to the formation of echo chambers where similar content circulates within specific groups, enhancing its virality within those circles (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

The structure of social networks on platforms like Facebook heavily influences information spread. Users with large or highly active followings are important in information dissemination. When such individuals like that share content, it immediately reaches a broader audience and has a higher chance of being re-shared by followers. This "multiplier effect" is helpful for virality, as each user in the network can amplify the reach of a post, depending on their network size and the engagement levels of their followers.

Social media algorithms also play a pivotal role in determining which content goes viral. These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, often by promoting content likely to elicit strong reactions. This can sometimes promote sensational or controversial content, regardless of accuracy. Understanding these algorithms is essential for grasping how certain types of information can dominate social media feeds during a crisis.

In crisis contexts, the virality of information can have profound implications. Accurate, helpful information can rapidly spread beneficial practices or alerts, aiding in crisis management. Conversely, spreading misinformation can lead to panic, confusion, or inappropriate actions that exacerbate the crisis. The role of fact-checking and authoritative sources becomes important in this context to ensure that the viral content contributing to public discourse is accurate and constructive.

Virality on social media is shaped by complex factors that interact dynamically to influence how information is spread. Understanding these factors is essential for leveraging social media's positive aspects during crises and mitigating the adverse effects of misinformation and panic-induced responses (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Motivations for Information Sharing and Engagement

Motivations behind individuals' information-sharing decisions is another line of research that seeks to understand the psychological and social drivers influencing why people choose to share certain content on social media platforms, particularly during crises. This section digs into the literature on the motivations and influences behind individuals' decisions to share or engage with information on social media platforms. It covers information needs, social influences, and digital literacy skills that shape users' behaviors and attitudes toward information sharing during crises. Understanding these underlying motivations is helpful for developing communication strategies, particularly during crises. Researchers have identified various factors influencing these motivations. These areas include the desire to be helpful, self-expression, and self-fulfillment.

One primary motivation for sharing information on social media is the desire to be helpful and share knowledge (Oh & Syn, 2015). People often share content they perceive as

valuable, informative, or entertaining to benefit others in their social networks (Osatuyi, 2013). This altruistic motivation aligns with the concept of "other involvement" proposed by Dichter (1966), where individuals share to help others learn something useful (Cheung et al., 2007).

Oh and Syn (2015) conducted a study titled "Motivations for sharing information and social support in social media: A comparative analysis of Facebook, Twitter, Delicious, YouTube, and Flickr." This research offers a refined understanding of why people share content across different social media platforms. The study's outcomes include identifying ten distinct motivations for sharing information on social media: enjoyment, self-efficacy, learning, personal gain, altruism, empathy, community interest, social engagement, reputation, and reciprocity. The study found that motivations varied across different social media platforms; for instance, Facebook users were primarily motivated by social engagement and reciprocity, Twitter users by reputation and social engagement, and YouTube users by enjoyment and learning. Altruism was consistently one of the top motivations for sharing information across all platforms, aligning with the concept of being helpful and sharing knowledge for the benefit of others.

The study also revealed demographic differences in sharing motivations, with younger users more motivated by personal gain and reputation, while older users were driven by compassion and community interest. The type of shared content influenced motivations: informational content was more likely to be shared for altruistic reasons, whereas entertainment content was often shared for enjoyment and social engagement. The researchers developed a theoretical framework for understanding information-sharing motivations in social media, integrating concepts from social exchange theory, social cognitive theory, and uses and gratifications theory.

The implications of this research are helpful for content strategy, platform selection, user engagement, and personalization. Understanding these motivations can help content creators tailor their material to appeal to specific sharing motivations, potentially increasing virality. The platform-specific data can guide marketers in choosing the most appropriate social media channels for their content based on the motivations they want to tap into. By appealing to compassionate motivations, platforms, and content creators can potentially increase user engagement and sharing behavior. The demographic differences in motivations imply opportunities for personalized content strategies based on user characteristics.

Self-expression and self-presentation are highly ranked information-sharing motivators (Ghaisani et al., 2017). Social media platforms allow individuals to define their identities, express opinions, and shape their personal brands (Ghaisani et al., 2017). By sharing specific types of content, users can convey their interests, values, and beliefs while seeking attention and peer validation (Oh & Syn, 2015).

Maintaining social connections and strengthening relationships is another key driver of information sharing on social media (Ghaisani et al., 2017). Individuals often share content to stay connected with friends, family, and communities, fostering a sense of belonging and social support (Osatuyi, 2013). This motivation aligns with Dichter's (1966) concept of "other involvement," where individuals share to demonstrate care and strengthen bonds with others (Cheung et al., 2007).

Researchers have also identified the desire for self-fulfillment and personal growth as a motivation for engaging with information on social media (Oh & Syn, 2015). By sharing and consuming content related to their interests or causes they support, individuals can experience personal satisfaction and contribute to their learning and development. Cultural and regional

differences can influence motivation for information sharing. For instance, in some cultures, sharing content to express one's beliefs and values may be more prevalent. In contrast, in others, the desire to share "interesting" or entertaining content may take precedence (Oh & Syn, 2015).

As social media platforms evolve, researchers emphasize the need to explore emerging motivations and the potential impact of new features or technologies on information-sharing behaviors (Ghaisani et al., 2017). Understanding the interplay between individual motivations, content characteristics, and platform affordances is imperative for developing communication strategies and fostering meaningful engagement during crises.

This section synthesized responses from research studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the various motivations that drive information sharing and engagement on social media platforms. It covered motivations such as self-expression, relationship maintenance, personal growth, and cultural influences. The findings support the complexity and diversity of these motivations, pointing to several underdeveloped areas that warrant further exploration. For instance, the specific impact of emerging social media platforms on sharing behaviors and how crisis communication contexts alter traditional motivations still need to be explored. We need to keep researching to better understand the new reasons people share content and how personal factors, the type of content, and social media features all work together to influence sharing behavior. These gaps in the literature highlight the necessity of this study, which aims to delve deeper into these intricate aspects, mainly focusing on how such motivations manifest and evolve in crisis communication contexts.

Source Credibility and Information Reliability

This section reviews the literature on factors influencing the perceived credibility of information sources, particularly in online environments. It covers topics such as source

evaluation criteria, the spread of misinformation, and the role of digital literacy in assessing the reliability of information shared on social media platforms. Evaluating the credibility and reliability of information sources is critical, especially in social media and online platforms where misinformation can spread rapidly (Muis et al., 2022). Researchers have proposed various frameworks and criteria to assess the trustworthiness of sources.

The CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) is widely used for evaluating source credibility (Blakeslee, 2004). The CRAAP test is a widely used framework for evaluating the credibility and reliability of information sources, particularly in academic and research contexts. Developed by librarians at California State University, Chico, in 2004, CRAAP stands for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose. Each component helps to assess different aspects of the information: Currency evaluates the timeliness of the information, including how recent it is, whether it has been updated or revised, and if its timing is important to your needs. Relevance examines how well the information meets your needs, determining if it relates to your topic or answers your question, if it is at an appropriate level for your needs, and whether you have reviewed various sources before deciding its suitability. The authority assesses the credibility of the author or source, focusing on who the author/publisher/source/sponsor is, the author's credentials or organizational affiliations, and whether the author is qualified to write on the topic. Accuracy checks the reliability and correctness of the information, evaluating where it comes from, if it is supported by evidence, whether it has been reviewed or refereed, and whether you can verify any of it through other sources. Purpose looks at the reason the information exists, questioning whether the purpose is to inform, teach, sell, entertain, or persuade, if the information is fact, opinion, or propaganda, and whether the point of view is objective and impartial, and if there are any biases.

The CRAAP test is beneficial in the digital age, where information is abundant but not always reliable. It helps users critically evaluate sources and make informed decisions about the quality and usefulness of information. Sarah Blakeslee, who was instrumental in developing and promoting the CRAAP test, has been widely cited in information literacy literature, shaping how students and researchers approach source evaluation. The strengths of the CRAAP test include its comprehensiveness, covering multiple aspects of source evaluation, and it's easy-to-remember acronym, which helps students and researchers recall the critical evaluation criteria. It is versatile and applicable to various sources, including websites, academic articles, and news reports. This test promotes critical thinking by encouraging users to thoughtfully assess the information they encounter.

The CRAAP test also has weaknesses. Some criteria, like relevance and authority, can be subjective and vary depending on the context or field of study. The test may need to be more concise to simplify the complex process of source evaluation, potentially leading users to make quick judgments without deeper analysis. Its scope is limited and may need to fully address newer forms of media or the complexities of online information ecosystems. The test only sometimes accounts for the nuances in different disciplines or the varying importance of criteria in different contexts. Lastly, if applied rigidly, it might dismiss valuable sources that only meet some criteria perfectly. Overall, while the CRAAP test is a useful tool, it should be used with other methods and adapted to fit specific contexts to ensure a thorough and detailed evaluation of information sources.

Researchers emphasize the importance of evaluating sources based on their intended use and context (Head et al., 2018). For instance, academic journals and peer-reviewed articles are considered highly credible for scholarly research as they undergo rigorous review (Knight &

Steinbach, 2008). Even peer-reviewed sources should be scrutinized for potential biases or conflicts of interest (Knight & Steinbach, 2008).

Researchers highlight the need for additional scrutiny in the context of online sources (Head et al., 2018). The main point of this study is the emphasis on source credibility and that it is complex for individuals to determine the reliability of the information, especially in the context of social media, where misinformation can spread rapidly, and the lines between credible and non-credible sources are often blurred. Factors such as the website's domain extension, layout, and transparency about authorship and editorial processes can provide perspectives into credibility (Wineburg et al., 2016). Social media posts, blogs, and personal websites may offer valuable perspectives but should be treated cautiously and corroborated with more authoritative sources (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021). Recent studies have also explored the role of digital literacy in evaluating source credibility, particularly among younger generations who heavily rely on online information (Hargittai et al., 2019). Researchers emphasize the need for educational initiatives to equip individuals with the skills to critically assess information sources and combat misinformation (Hargittai et al., 2019). As the information landscape continues to evolve, researchers stress the importance of ongoing efforts to develop and refine source evaluation frameworks, leveraging technological advancements such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to assist in identifying credible and reliable information. To make these frameworks useful to a broad range of individuals, it is essential to ensure they are accessible, user-friendly, and integrated into everyday digital practices. This could involve creating intuitive tools and apps that guide users through the evaluation process, incorporating digital literacy education into school curriculums, and offering community workshops and resources that cater to different age groups and technological proficiency levels. By focusing on accessibility and

practical application, these frameworks can empower a diverse audience to navigate the complex information landscape.

Source credibility is important in shaping public trust, particularly on social media platforms where the integrity of information is frequently under scrutiny. In environments saturated with diverse messages, the credibility of a source influences how information is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by the audience (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Source credibility typically hinges on three primary attributes: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge and competence of the source regarding the subject matter. Trustworthiness relates to the honesty and ethical standards expected from the source, and attractiveness involves the likability and appeal of the source. Attractiveness is less important in contexts of factual information dissemination. The more a source is perceived to excel in expertise and trustworthiness, the more likely the public will accept and act upon their information. Information from sources recognized as experts, such as the World Health Organization for health guidelines, is more likely to be trusted and adhered to. This trust stems from the organization's reputation for providing accurate and timely information. Metzger and Flanagin (2013) highlight that users become particularly discerning regarding the credibility of sources during crises. This selective trust can dictate public responses, driving compliance or disregard for critical advisories, affecting the overall effectiveness of crisis management and public safety measures.

On social media, the lines between credible and non-credible sources can often blur due to the ease of content creation and dissemination by anyone, regardless of their qualifications or intentions. This challenge is compounded by algorithms that may prioritize content engagement over content accuracy. Thus, users need to develop skills in media literacy to navigate this

complex information landscape efficiently. Educational efforts to enhance public understanding of evaluating source credibility are essential, as is the role of social media platforms in verifying and signaling credible sources. By understanding these factors, we can better appreciate the complexity of source credibility in the digital age and the necessary steps to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Organizations and individuals must consistently provide accurate, timely, and applicable information to build and maintain credibility. They must also engage with their audience transparently, acknowledging errors and updating advice as new information becomes available. Such practices enhance the source's credibility and build long-term trust with the audience. In the digital age, maintaining source credibility is challenging. Misinformation or disinformation campaigns can quickly tarnish the reputations of even the most reliable sources. The phenomenon of "echo chambers" on social media can lead to higher segments of the population selectively exposing themselves only to information that conforms to their preexisting beliefs, regardless of the credibility of the sources.

Source credibility, as defined in this study, encompasses several key aspects reflected in the literature. These include expertise, or the perceived knowledge and competence of the source; trustworthiness, relating to the honesty and ethical standards of the source; and attractiveness, which involves the likability and appeal of the source, though it is less critical in the context of factual information dissemination (Berger & Milkman, 2012)—the information's accuracy, timeliness, and relevance influence source credibility. Engaging transparently with the audience and acknowledging errors also play a higher role in maintaining credibility. Understanding these multifaceted aspects of source credibility will guide the analysis of posts and their perceived reliability in this study.

This section synthesized results from recent research on various frameworks and criteria for evaluating source credibility and information reliability, focusing on online and social media sources. It stresses the importance of digital literacy and the potential role of emerging technologies (e.g., AI) in combating misinformation. The section also emphasizes the need for ongoing efforts to refine source evaluation methods to keep pace with the evolving information landscape.

Social Media and Times of Crises

The expanding role of social media as an expansive communication tool during crises forms a central theme in this review. Studies such as those by Sutton and Veil (2017) highlight how social media platforms enable rapid information access and sharing, serving as both a medium and catalyst for spreading both accurate and misleading information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon was particularly pronounced, with platforms like Facebook becoming hubs for news, updates, and community mobilization (Pennycook et al., 2020).

As an illustration, Pennycook et al. (2020) conducted a series of studies examining the spread of misinformation on social media during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research highlighted several points for understanding the dynamics of information sharing during crises. First, the sheer volume of information shared on platforms like Facebook during the pandemic created an "infodemic," making it difficult for users to distinguish between accurate and false information. This information overload led to confusion and misinformation, which complicated efforts to provide clear and reliable guidance to the public. Their study also found that individuals who relied more on intuition and less on analytical thinking were likelier to believe and share false news about COVID-19 on social media. This point reinforces the

importance of promoting analytical thinking and critical evaluation of information among social media users. The researchers discovered that simply reminding users to consider the accuracy of information before sharing reduced the spread of misinformation. This finding also shows that small, strategic interventions can substantially impact curbing the dissemination of false information. Overall, the study emphasized the need for social media platforms to implement measures to promote accuracy and reduce the spread of false information during crises. Such efforts might include designing algorithms, prioritizing reliable sources and providing users with tools to verify information.

Sutton and Veil (2017) explored the broader role of social media in crisis communication and highlighted its benefits and challenges. According to Sutton and Veil, social media platforms enable the rapid dissemination of important information during emergencies, allowing organizations and authorities to reach large audiences quickly. This real-time communication is crucial for timely updates and instructions. Unlike traditional media, social media facilitates direct engagement between organizations and the public, enabling immediate feedback and clarification. This interactive element allows for more dynamic, timely, and responsive communication.

Sutton and Veil (2017) also noted that social media's ability to connect people quickly makes it a powerful tool for mobilizing resources and support during crises. It can help coordinate community efforts, volunteer activities, and aid distribution. The researchers commented on the double-edged nature of social media. Its speed and reach can heighten the spread of both accurate and false/misleading information. As the authors stated, social media requires vigilant monitoring and proactive measures to combat misinformation. Sutton and Veil (2017) also emphasized integrating social media strategies with traditional communication

channels for comprehensive crisis management, ensuring broader reach and reinforcing key messages.

Both studies conducted by Pennycook et al. (2020) and Sutton and Veil (2017) highlight the role of social media platforms like Facebook in crisis communication, centering their potential for rapid information dissemination and community engagement. Both studies also emphasized the challenges posed by misinformation and the need for strategies to promote accuracy and responsible sharing of information during crises. These results have implications for crisis communication strategies. Organizations should not only use social media for information sharing but also actively engage with their audience, promote critical thinking, and implement measures to combat misinformation. This involves designing interventions such as accuracy prompts, promoting analytical thinking, and ensuring platform responsibility in reducing the spread of false information. Integrating social media with traditional media strategies can provide a comprehensive approach to crisis management, leveraging the strengths of both channels for beneficial communication.

For my purpose, these studies indicate that more research is needed to understand social media use and the motivations behind sharing posts. This understanding can contribute to designing specific interventions that foster the sharing of accurate and timeline information on social media platforms such as Facebook.

Digital Literacy in Managing Misinformation and Crisis Communication

This section looks at how digital literacy helps manage misinformation and improve crisis communication, especially in education and public health. The study's evidence suggest practical ways to develop stronger communication strategies during crises by focusing on the role of digital literacy in sharing reliable information.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear how important digital literacy is for navigating online learning and ensuring accurate information is shared (Muir, 2021; Rufai & Bunce, 2020). As schools shifted to remote learning, it became essential for students and educators to evaluate the credibility of the information they were seeing (Ayalon & Aharony, 2024). Researchers stress the need for schools to focus on digital literacy so students can develop the skills they need for online learning and responsible behavior during times of crisis (Muir, 2021; Tinmaz et al., 2022). This includes creating courses and training programs centered around information literacy, media literacy, and digital citizenship (Muir, 2021).

The pandemic also showed how vital digital literacy is in fighting misinformation, which can make crises worse and damage public trust (Rufai & Bunce, 2020; Peng & Yu, 2022). People with strong digital literacy skills are better prepared to evaluate online sources, recognize false information, and make informed decisions (Purnama et al., 2021). Teaching digital literacy can help build communities that are more resilient and able to navigate the flow of information during emergencies (Rufai & Bunce, 2020; Tinmaz et al., 2022).

Additionally, researchers point to the need for organizations and institutions to use digital platforms and social media for effective crisis communication (Muir, 2021; Rufai & Bunce, 2020). It’s essential for them to know how to share accurate, timely information while dealing with the challenges that misinformation can bring (Muir, 2021; Tinmaz et al., 2022). This involves not only technical expertise but also a strong understanding of how to communicate digitally and what audiences expect.

The pandemic also highlighted the digital divide, revealing how socioeconomic status, location, and access to technology can impact an individual's ability to build digital literacy, deepening inequalities during crises (Tinmaz et al., 2022). Researchers call for continued efforts

to integrate digital literacy into school curricula and professional development programs, with a focus on collaboration between educators, policymakers, and tech experts to promote digital skills across various sectors (Peng & Yu, 2022).

Emergency Preparedness and Information Sharing in Education

This section examines existing research on the challenges faced by educational institutions during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the strategies employed to mitigate disruptions. It digs into the literature on emergency preparedness, remote learning, and the communication channels used to disseminate information to stakeholders like students, parents, and educators.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational systems worldwide, forcing schools and universities to rapidly transition to remote learning modalities (Muir, 2021). This crisis highlighted the importance of emergency preparedness and communication strategies in education. Researchers have examined the challenges faced by educational institutions during the pandemic, shedding light on the need for robust emergency response plans.

Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) explored the transition to online learning during COVID-19. They identified several key challenges, including technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and the need for comprehensive training and support for educators and students. Efficient communication played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of educational disruptions during the pandemic. Gonzalez et al. (2020) investigated the communication strategies employed by schools. They found that those with well-established emergency communication plans and social media presence were better equipped to disseminate information and maintain stakeholder engagement.

To expand on the studies by Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) and Gonzalez et al. (2020), I dig deeper into their data regarding online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) conducted a case study on the transition to online education in Georgia during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on a private school with 950 students that implemented Google Meet for online education. Their analysis included the successful rapid transition to online education within a week, the proficient use of Google Meet for live video lessons with an average of 93-95% student attendance, and the identification of technological challenges such as internet connectivity and device availability as potential barriers. Although their study did not explicitly focus on communication strategies, it highlighted the importance of clear guidance and support for students and teachers during the transition process, emphasizing that the experience gained could be important for future educational planning and crisis preparedness.

Gonzalez et al. (2020) specifically examined the communication strategies launched by schools during the pandemic. Their research revealed that schools with established emergency communication plans were better prepared to respond to the crisis, and institutions with an active social media presence were able to disseminate information more rapidly and maintain engagement with students, parents, and staff. Successful schools utilized a variety of communication channels, including social media, email, text messages, and dedicated web pages, to ensure that information reached all stakeholders. The schools needed to quickly adapt their communication content to address pandemic-specific concerns, such as health and safety measures, online learning protocols, and support services. Institutions that facilitated open dialogue and feedback channels were better able to address stakeholder concerns and adjust their strategies accordingly.

Both studies call attention to the important role of technology and communication in maintaining educational continuity during crises. They highlight the need for robust technological infrastructure to support online learning platforms, comprehensive digital literacy training for both educators and students, flexible and adaptable communication strategies that can be quickly implemented in emergencies, regular review and updating of emergency preparedness plans, including communication protocols, and investment in diverse communication channels to ensure broad reach and accessibility. These outcomes suggest important takeaways for educational institutions as they prepare for possible future crises. They suggest schools focus on developing online learning capabilities and creating comprehensive emergency communication plans that can be rapidly deployed.

The pandemic also highlighted the importance of digital literacy and the ability to evaluate information sources' credibility, particularly in remote learning environments. Researchers have emphasized the need for educational institutions to prioritize digital literacy initiatives and equip students with the skills to navigate online information successfully (Bukar et al., 2022). Researchers have called for a renewed focus on emergency preparedness in education. Hodges et al. (2020) proposed a framework for emergency remote teaching, emphasizing the need for contingency planning, faculty training, and robust technological infrastructure to support remote learning.

Along with this focus on digital literacy, researchers have highlighted the importance of leveraging social media and digital communication channels in emergency preparedness and response efforts. Rufai and Bunce (2020) examined educational institutions' use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that those with an active social media presence

were better able to disseminate information, address concerns, and maintain community engagement.

As educational institutions deal with the pandemic's long-term implications, researchers emphasize the need for comprehensive emergency preparedness plans incorporating thoughtful communication strategies, digital literacy initiatives, and robust technological infrastructure to support remote learning capabilities Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) and Gonzalez et al. (2020).

This section reiterates that COVID-19 is a worthwhile case in which to study education-related information sharing. It incorporates recent research on the challenges faced by educational institutions during the pandemic, such as the transition to remote learning, the importance of productive communication strategies, and the necessity for robust emergency preparedness plans. It illustrates the fundamental role of digital literacy and the ability to evaluate information credibility in remote learning environments. The potential of social media in crisis communication and emergency response efforts within the education sector is also emphasized, showcasing how these tools were pivotal in maintaining educational continuity and stakeholder engagement during the COVID-19 crisis.

Introduction to Uses and Gratifications Theory

Given the purpose of exploring information sharing and the reasons behind sharing in the context of the Facebook platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to use a theoretical framework, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), that provides a lens through which I can develop an understanding of the motivations behind social media use, particularly in the context of information sharing during crises. UGT theorizes that individuals actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs or gratifications, which can be categorized into cognitive needs (seeking information, knowledge, and understanding), affective needs (seeking emotional experiences and

pleasure), personal integrative needs (enhancing credibility, confidence, and status), and social integrative needs (connecting with family, friends, and society). This perspective shifts the focus from the media itself to the users, considering how and why individuals engage with media platforms like Facebook during crises.

UGT is particularly relevant to this study as it helps to explain the motivations behind Facebook users' sharing behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. By understanding these motivations, the analysis can uncover the factors that drive the dissemination of information, both accurate and false, on social media. This understanding is important for developing strategies to promote reliable information sharing and mitigate the spread of misinformation during crises. The strengths of UGT include its user-centric approach, which grants an understanding of user motivations and behaviors, making it highly useful for studies examining social media usage. The theory's categories of needs allow for its application across various media types and contexts, including social media and crisis communication. UGT also has areas for improvement, such as the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Applying UGT to this study means focusing on the motivations driving Facebook users' sharing behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective will help guide the analysis, ensuring that the study captures the diverse motivations behind information sharing. Understanding these motivations will help devise communication strategies that cater to users' needs and promote accurate information dissemination.

In considering alternative theoretical frameworks, Situative Perspective Theory was also reviewed. Situative Perspective Theory emphasizes the importance of context and the interactions between individuals and their environment in understanding behavior. This theory suggests that learning and behavior are deeply embedded in specific social and physical contexts.

Therefore, disseminating information on social media can be understood as a situated activity influenced by the surrounding environment and community norms. The strengths of Situative Perspective Theory include its ability to provide a contextual understanding of behavior, highlighting how social interactions and environmental factors shape information-sharing practices. It also emphasizes the role of community and collaborative learning, which can be particularly helpful in understanding how information spreads within social networks on platforms like Facebook. The complexity of emphasizing context and interaction can make the analysis more intricate and less straightforward compared to more user-centric theories like UGT. While it furnished a detailed understanding of contextual influences, Situative Perspective Theory may only partially capture the individual psychological motivations behind media use and information sharing.

Inferences for the Current Study

The literature reviewed offers a robust foundation for identifying the problem of people sharing unreliable information on social media. Studies by Pennycook et al. (2020) and Berger and Milkman (2012) highlight how emotional and engaging content can spread rapidly, often regardless of accuracy. The phenomenon of misinformation, exacerbated by the algorithms prioritizing engagement over accuracy, accentuates the necessity of this study. It demonstrates the importance of understanding the motivations behind sharing behavior and the factors contributing to sources' perceived credibility. This supports the identification of the problem by showing the prevalence and impact of unreliable information sharing, particularly in the context of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The significance of the study is further supported by the literature, which shows a gap in understanding the specific factors that drive information sharing on social media and how these

can be addressed to promote more reliable information dissemination. The research by Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) and Gonzalez et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of communication strategies and digital literacy, particularly in educational contexts. The research highlights that enhancing public understanding and critical evaluation of information sources can mitigate the spread of misinformation. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the motivations behind sharing behavior and the perceived credibility of sources, thereby addressing an area of need identified in the literature.

The literature also informs the methodology of this study. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the motivations behind information sharing. Studies like Oh and Syn (2015) and Susarla et al. (2016) support using surveys and content analysis to explore these motivations and their impact on sharing behavior. This approach aligns with the identified need to understand the psychological and social drivers of information sharing. The focus on digital literacy and critical evaluation of sources leads to a methodological emphasis on assessing participants' motivations and the factors they consider when sharing content.

In analyzing the data and interpreting the data, the literature directs the study to focus on areas such as emotional appeal, perceived usefulness, and source credibility. This lens ensures that the analysis will consider the complex interplay between these factors and how they influence sharing behavior. Instead of focusing on less important aspects like the attractiveness of the source in non-factual contexts, the study can provide more targeted perspectives. These discoveries will be helpful for developing strategies to promote reliable information sharing on social media, ultimately contributing to better crisis communication and digital literacy practices.

Background to the Dissertation Study: A Pilot Study

In Fall 2023, I conducted a pilot study that inspired this dissertation study in many ways. The pilot study provided an opportunity to explore key themes related to information sharing during crises, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It helped identify key variables, such as digital literacy, the role of social media platforms, and the factors influencing the virality of posts. The evidence from the pilot study helped shape this dissertation by improving the research questions and guiding the choice of the right methods to use. It also offered insights into participant behavior, engagement metrics, and data collection challenges, all of which shaped the scope and focus of the current study. By revealing patterns in how users interacted with and shared information, the pilot study served as a foundational step in understanding the broader implications for crisis communication, information accuracy, and the role of educational institutions during pandemics and other emergencies. Using Facebook data to understand virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic offers opportunities and limitations. This section will elaborate on these aspects in the context of the data collected, the period covered, the inferences drawn, and the relevance of Facebook post data as the effects of the pandemic diminish.

From the pilot study, I investigated the usage of Facebook posts containing the terms "COVID lockdown" and "school closures" from March 2020 to August 2020. The objective was to analyze the page categories (designated by Facebook) of these post topics most frequently shared and to explore the underlying reasons behind their shareability.

Facebook data can provide an understanding of various aspects of virtual learning (Shaw, 2017). The collection involved a sample (over 2,300 posts) of Facebook posts that contained the keywords "COVID lockdown" and "school closures" during the specified timeframe. The data was analyzed using R to identify recurring themes and categories within the posts. The data

collection period was aligned with the time frame of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implementation of virtual learning. The posts were limited to March 2020-August 2020. This period was chosen to capture the immediate responses, challenges, and adaptations related to virtual education. Analyzing data solely from this period might not capture the full extent of the impact of school closures and lockdowns. Still, it was selected to focus on the peak period of posts due to the emerging situation.

Analysis of Engagement Metrics and Post Virality on Facebook

Engagement metrics, particularly shares, were central to this analysis using CrowdTangle data from Facebook. Shares indicate a higher level of engagement as users actively choose to disseminate the information to their network, implying that the content resonated with them or handheld perceived value. In the literature review, we learned that several factors contribute to the virality of posts, including the relevance of the content, emotional impact, and the source's credibility. The analysis showed that posts from TV channels and individual users were among the most shared, indicating that trusted sources of information and personal narratives impacted users during this period. Among the top 75 most frequently shared sources, posts from TV channels and individuals were dominant, whereas posts from educational institutions ranked lower. This could imply that users were more inclined to share content that either provided new information or resonated emotionally with their experiences rather than content from formal educational sources.

Visualizations and Charts Representing Key Findings

Visualizing the data helps to illustrate the results. Below is a chart (**Figure 1**) representing the engagement metrics and the distribution of shares among different page categories. These visualizations represent the engagement patterns and highlight the prominence

of specific page categories over others. The prevalence of TV channels and individual posts in the top categories calls attention to the role of trusted information sources and personal narratives during the crisis. **Figure 1** shows the page categories as well as the total shares shown in the legend to the right of the chart. This was only able to show this was created to only show the top seventy-five page categories.

Chapter 2 delivered an in-depth literature review and background for the dissertation, focusing on the role of social media in crisis communication and the dynamics of information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter was organized into key sections discussing how social media platforms, particularly Facebook, became vital communication tools during crises. It reviewed the spread of both reliable and misleading information, the importance of source credibility, and the role of digital literacy in navigating these challenges. The chapter also introduces the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) as a theoretical framework to explore the motivations behind social media usage, specifically in the context of information sharing. In addition, the chapter described the pilot study conducted in Fall 2023, which informed the current research design by providing realizations of key variables influencing social media engagement and content virality during the pandemic. The literature review called attention to existing research gaps and established the foundation for the dissertation's focus on improving crisis communication strategies and enhancing digital literacy.

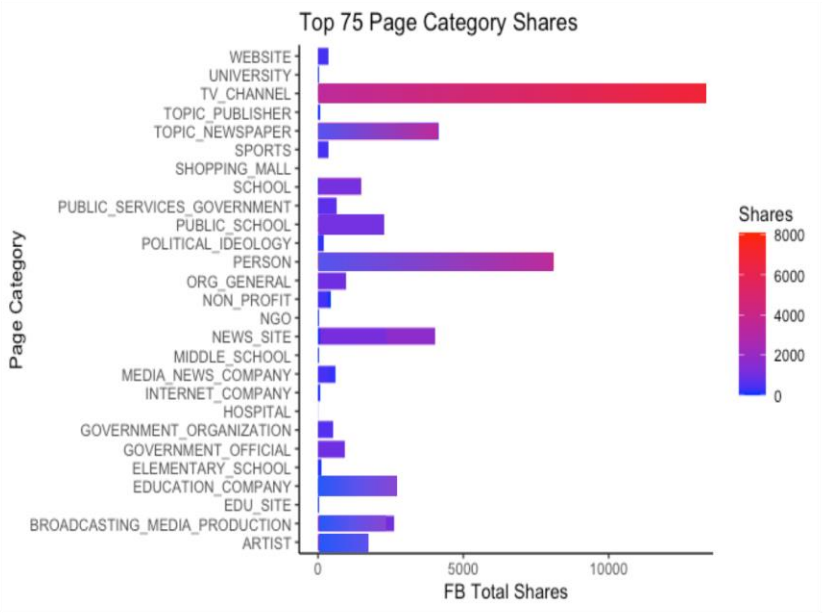


Figure 1: Distribution of Shares by Page Category (March 2020 - August 2020)
Summary

Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous chapter, I examined the significant role of impactful communication within organizations, particularly during unprecedented events like the COVID-19 pandemic. I highlighted the shift from traditional communication methods to digital platforms. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 lockdown, organizations must understand how their communication strategies are perceived and how members use social media to disseminate and receive information. The literature review covered several key areas essential to understanding the current study. First, it examined information sharing, highlighting the importance of communication strategies during crises. The review also focused on source credibility, emphasizing how the trustworthiness of a source influences information dissemination and reception. The challenges posed by misinformation in the digital age were discussed, mainly how misinformation can spread rapidly during crises, complicating efforts to provide accurate information. This review of existing literature revealed research gaps, particularly in the context of social media and educational disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps justify the need for the current study to provide a deeper understanding of how information is shared on social media, the role of source credibility, and the impact of misinformation during school closures.

This dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to explore the dynamics of information sharing and source credibility on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, specifically regarding school closures. The mixed-methods design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Quantitative research systematically investigates observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques (Babbie, 2010). It allows for collecting numerical data and applying statistical analysis to identify patterns, relationships, and trends. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It involves collecting non-numerical data, such as interviews and observations, to gain an understanding of people's experiences, motivations, and social contexts. By integrating these two approaches, this study leverages the robustness of quantitative methods to provide generalizable findings and the depth of qualitative methods to offer a detailed understanding of the context and lived experiences related to information sharing and source credibility on social media.

As described previously, the study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which provides a framework for understanding the motivations behind sharing Facebook posts related to COVID-19 and school closures. UGT suggests that individuals seek out and use media to fulfill specific needs or gratifications, categorized into cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs (Hossain, 2019; Gadekar & Krishnatray, 2017).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the factors influencing Facebook users' sharing behavior regarding posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This includes examining the characteristics of these posts, the motivations driving their creation and dissemination, and the sources from which they derive. The study aims to provide a perspective into the underlying psychological and social needs that drive sharing behavior, contributing to developing more crisis communication strategies and information dissemination practices in education. As I stated in Chapter 1, here are the research questions for this study:

1) What were the characteristics of a typical Facebook post shared by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown relating to school closures?
2) What sources of information/posts about school closures were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, and what were the sharers' perceptions of their reliability?
3) What factors from the sharers' perspectives influenced the motivations behind the posts shared regarding school closures on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown?

A chart in Appendix E supplies a detailed discussion of the research question, participants and recruitment, data sources, data collection methods, analysis, anticipated outcomes, and applicable literature.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from two primary sources: Facebook posts retrieved through CrowdTangle and responses gathered through a Qualtrics survey. In the pilot study, CrowdTangle, a social media monitoring tool, was utilized to investigate the virality of Facebook posts. CrowdTangle allows for collecting and analyzing public Facebook posts containing specific keywords, such as "COVID-19" and "school closure." The Qualtrics survey captured user perspectives and responses, offering insights into how individuals perceive and react to posts they share. By combining these data sources, this study can comprehensively analyze both the quantitative aspects of post-virality and the qualitative aspects of user engagement and sentiment, providing a holistic understanding of information sharing and source credibility on social media during the pandemic.

Quantitative data was collected through a content analysis of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures as well as a survey. This analysis identified these posts' content themes, formats, and engagement metrics to understand the nature of the

information shared within the educational community during the crisis. A dataset of Facebook posts can be obtained by querying the platform's database. This data included post content, timestamps, engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), and user interactions. The CrowdTangle data will indicate which posts gained prominence and virality on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dataset will be analyzed using R code, enabling quantitative examination of factors contributing to post virality, including emotional content, source credibility, and engagement metrics (Borchers et al., 2023). Borchers et al. (2023) published a paper titled "Facebook post data: a primer for educational research" in *Educational Technology Research and Development*, offering an awareness of using Facebook data for educational research, which is highly applicable to analyzing COVID-19-related posts. They discuss methods for collecting Facebook post data, including using tools like CrowdTangle, aligning with my approach. The authors emphasize the importance of ethical considerations, including privacy concerns and responsible data handling. They outline various quantitative and qualitative methods for analyzing Facebook post data, such as content analysis, sentiment analysis, network analysis, and engagement metrics analysis. While their focus is on educational research, many methods apply to analyzing school closure communication during the pandemic. They provide examples of how Facebook post data can be used to understand information dissemination and user engagement, which is relevant to my study of COVID-19 communication.

In addition to analyzing Facebook posts, this study will gather user perspectives and responses through a Qualtrics survey. The survey will be distributed through Facebook, allowing a diverse range of participants to share their views on the posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. The Qualtrics survey will include questions about participants' interactions with Facebook posts, emotional responses, and perceptions of source credibility. Open-ended

questions will allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, offering qualitative perspectives into the motivations and emotions underlying their interactions with these posts.

Combining data from CrowdTangle and Qualtrics, this study will comprehensively analyze Facebook posts' virality during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of emotional content and source credibility on user engagement. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data sources will deepen the understanding of social media behavior and information during crises, contributing to academic knowledge and practical implications for crisis communication and preparedness for educational institutions.

Survey Instrument

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through the survey questions with Facebook users who shared posts about school closures during the pandemic. The survey was distributed to active Facebook users during the COVID-19 lockdown period from March to August 2020. The participants were at least 18 years old and were located across various states in the United States during the specified period. 112 responses were recorded, with 108 valid responses used for the analysis, resulting in a response rate of approximately 96%.

The survey questions were designed to capture a comprehensive and detailed understanding of users' behavior and motivations. The survey included closed-ended and open-ended questions guided by Creswell's recommendations for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These survey questions are designed to capture Facebook users' behavior and motivations regarding sharing content about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. By understanding these elements, the survey can contribute to broader discussions on the role of social media in public communication and crisis management.

When the survey was initially developed, the aim was to capture a broad spectrum of data and knowledge concerning the general behavior and attitudes of Facebook users during the COVID-19 pandemic. It became evident that a more focused approach was necessary to investigate specific areas of interest and address the core research questions. The scope of the survey was narrowed to concentrate specifically on sharing content about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This shift allowed for a more detailed and targeted analysis, ensuring the data was relevant and provided meaningful discovery into the specific behaviors and motivations driving user engagement on Facebook during this period. Also, the Qualtrics survey utilized skip logic to ensure a streamlined experience for respondents. If a respondent indicated that they had shared Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures during the specified time frame (March to August 2020), the survey continued with additional questions exploring their information-sharing behaviors. If a respondent indicated that they did not share any posts, the survey concluded for them, preventing irrelevant questions and improving the efficiency of data collection.

Focus Survey Questions

The survey designed for this study aimed to capture various aspects of Facebook users' behavior and motivations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus survey questions provide an understanding of the decision-making processes behind post-sharing and the factors influencing these decisions. The following paragraphs detail specific survey questions and their alignment with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. While not all survey questions were utilized in the final analysis, they offer context and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the broader research design.

Survey Question #5 asked, "Have you shared Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in the year 2020, specifically during the time period of March-August 2020?" This question was based on research indicating that individuals use social media during crises to seek and share information. Studies like those by Thompson and Volkmer (2021) demonstrated that sharing behavior increases during times of public uncertainty or crisis due to a need for information dissemination and emotional support.

Survey Question #7 asked, "What motivated you to share these posts?" according to Vraga et al. (2017), motivations for sharing on social media can vary widely, from seeking to inform to expressing personal emotions or engaging in advocacy. This aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, where users are motivated to use media sources based on the desire for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment. These questions address any decision-making behind post-sharing for survey participants.

Survey Question #8 inquired, "How frequently did you engage with Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in 2020, specifically during the time period of March 2020-August 2020?" Literature on social media engagement during crises emphasizes that engagement rates can provide insights into public sentiment and the spread of information (Thomas & Volkmer, 2021).

Survey Question #9 asked, "When deciding to share a post on this topic during this time period, which of the following factors were most important to you?". Content accuracy and source credibility are well documented in the misinformation literature (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). Emotional impact and relevance are also important, as found in studies on emotional content on social media (Kramer et al., 2014).

Survey Question #11 asked, "Did you fact-check the information in the posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures before sharing them?". Pennycook & Rand (2019) examine social media users' behavior concerning misinformation, focusing on their ability and willingness to discern the credibility of information before sharing. Their analysis mentions that more analytical users are better at identifying false news, implying that encouraging fact-checking before sharing can reduce the spread of misinformation.

Survey Question #12 asked, "In your opinion, how do you think the sharing of information about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on social media platforms like Facebook impacted public awareness and behavior during the pandemic?". This question connects to studies exploring the role of social media in shaping public perceptions and behaviors during health crises (Terry et al., 2023).

Survey Question #13 invited respondents to describe a specific Facebook post related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures that they shared or considered sharing and to explain what motivated their decision. This open-ended question is aligned with Creswell's (2018) advocacy for research exploring and describing individuals' experiences. By asking respondents to describe a particular instance and what motivated them, this question placed the participant's voice at the forefront, allowing them to express their viewpoints and reasons in their own words.

Survey Question #14 asked respondents to share their opinions on how the dissemination of information about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on social media platforms like Facebook influenced public awareness and behavior during the pandemic. This open-ended question aligns with the qualitative research approaches that Creswell (2018) recommended, as it encourages participants to reflect on the broader social implications of information sharing. By inviting respondents to provide their perspectives on the role of social media in shaping public

consciousness and actions, this question allows for a deeper exploration of the perceived societal impact of online communication. This format emphasizes the respondents' interpretations, enabling them to articulate how they believe social media affected the pandemic response in their communities and beyond.

The survey designed for this study initially included a broad range of questions intended to capture various aspects of Facebook users' behavior and motivations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not all survey questions were utilized in the final analysis. The non-utilized survey questions provide a comprehension of communication sharing during times of crises, which are beyond the scope of this dissertation study.

Demographic Survey Questions

The demographic questions (Survey Questions #1, #2, and #3) about gender, age, and location are straightforward and provide necessary contextual data for analyzing trends. These questions help situate the respondents within specific demographic categories, allowing for more fine-tuned interpretations of the data.

Survey Question #10 asked, "Did you consider the potential impact of the shared content on your friends and followers before sharing?" and Survey Question 11, "Did you fact-check the information in the posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures before sharing them?" The impact of shared content and verification of information are factors in the study of digital literacy and responsible sharing practices. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spreads more rapidly than trustworthy news, underscoring the importance of fact-checking before sharing.

Survey Question #12 explored whether sharing behavior changed during significant events related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, such as major policy

announcements or local developments. Vosoughi et al. (2018) highlight how heightened events impact the spread of information, with false news spreading more rapidly than trustworthy news, particularly around sensitive or controversial topics.

While these survey questions were not utilized in the final analysis, they were essential in shaping the overall survey design and ensuring that the data collected would provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions also highlight the importance of considering various aspects of social media behavior, including demographic factors, engagement frequencies, the impact of shared content, and the motivations behind sharing decisions.

Data Analysis

This study collected data from two primary sources: Facebook posts retrieved through CrowdTangle and responses gathered through a Qualtrics survey. The analysis methods for each data source are detailed below.

I employed both quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyze the data. I used descriptive statistics for the closed-ended survey questions to summarize the results, such as calculating the frequency of different motivations for sharing posts. This provided a quantitative overview of respondents' behaviors. I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis for the open-ended survey responses to identify recurring themes, allowing for a deeper understanding of the reasons behind respondents' information-sharing behaviors. This combination of methods helped capture the numerical trends and the underlying motivations expressed by participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in this study to ensure the protection and respect of all participants involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they

participated in the survey or interviews. Participants were provided detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. This process ensured that participants were fully aware of their involvement and that their participation was voluntary.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Personal identifiers were removed or anonymized in all collected data to protect participants' identities. Data will be securely stored, with access limited to the principal investigator and authorized personnel only. Digital data will be encrypted and stored on secure servers. The results were reported in a manner that did not allow the identification of individual participants. Ethical approval was sought from the institutional review board (IRB) with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, to ensure the study complied with established ethical standards and guidelines. This approval process involved a thorough review of the study design, data collection methods, and consent procedures to safeguard the rights and well-being of all participants.

Revisiting the Pilot Research: Foundations for the Study

An early analysis of Facebook data related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, conducted as part of a pilot study in 2023, provided initial insights into the dynamics of information sharing during the pandemic. This pilot study identified prominent categories of posts, including those from TV channels and individual users, which garnered the most engagement. The outcomes helped inform the current dissertation's focus on online communication during crises.

As stated in Chapter 2, using Facebook data for analysis has some limitations. Facebook's algorithm prioritizes highly engaging content, which may skew the visibility of less shared yet carefully constructed posts, such as those from educational institutions. Facebook’s predefined

Page Categories may lack the nuance to classify all content related to school closures and lockdowns accurately. Another limitation is that Facebook data captures only one platform's activity, potentially overlooking how information was shared on other social media networks or through traditional communication channels. Despite these limitations, the knowledge gained from the pilot study reinforces the importance of understanding social media's role in crisis communication. It lays the foundation for further exploration of this topic.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and foundational theories guiding the study on the dynamics of information sharing and source credibility on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, specifically regarding school closures. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). The primary objective is to investigate the factors influencing Facebook users' sharing behavior, examining the characteristics of posts, the motivations behind them, and their sources. Data was collected from Facebook posts via CrowdTangle, and responses were collected from a Qualtrics survey. The quantitative data in this study will focus on the survey responses.

The qualitative data from the survey will gather user perspectives and motivations, guided by Creswell's qualitative research recommendations. A pilot study in 2023 revealed key categories of posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, highlighting the need for deeper exploration. The study aims to identify key factors influencing sharing behavior, such as emotional appeal, source credibility, content relevance, and demographic variables. By understanding these dynamics, the research can contribute to better crisis communication strategies and information dissemination practices in education, offering a perspective into social

media behavior during important public events. The study investigates the characteristics and motivations behind Facebook posts related to school closures during the COVID-19 lockdown, collecting data through a survey shared on Facebook, targeting individuals aged 18 and older. The research questions focus on the typical characteristics of Facebook posts during the lockdown, the sources and perceived reliability of shared information, and the factors influencing motivations behind sharing posts. The methodology uses CrowdTangle to analyze Facebook posts and Qualtrics for surveys. For the Facebook data, content analysis and engagement metrics will be applied. For the survey responses, I will use descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to understand the patterns and connections in the data. The study draws on the Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand sharing motivations and considers ethical issues and challenges in using social media data. It emphasizes the importance of content accuracy, source credibility, emotional impact, and public perception during crises. All this aims to reveal common themes, motivations, and behaviors in sharing information about school closures during the pandemic, supported by existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 4: Results

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore the information-sharing behaviors of Facebook users during the COVID-19 lockdown, explicitly focusing on posts related to school closures. The research aims to understand the motivations behind sharing such posts, the characteristics of the shared content, and the perceptions of the reliability of the sources. By examining these factors, the study will contribute to an understanding of how social media was used during the pandemic to disseminate information, express emotions, support communities, and serve other purposes.

The following questions guide the research:

1. **RQ1**: What were the characteristics of a typical Facebook post shared by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown relating to school closures?
2. **RQ2**: What sources of information/posts about school closures were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, and what were the sharers' perceptions of their reliability?
3. **RQ3**: What factors from the sharers' perspectives influenced the motivations behind the posts shared regarding school closures on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown?

These questions form the foundation of the analysis, which aims to provide discoveries into how and why individuals engage with social media during a global crisis. Under the overarching purpose are three objectives for the study:

Objective 1: To characterize Facebook posts and analyze post content. This involves examining the characteristics of Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, including content themes, formats, and engagement metrics, to understand the information shared within the educational community during the crisis.

Objective 2: To evaluate source reliability. This focuses on assessing the reliability and perceived credibility of information sources cited or referenced in Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It explores factors influencing users' perceptions of source credibility and their decision-making when engaging with educational content online.

Objective 3: To identify motivations and influences. This aims to uncover the underlying motivations driving Facebook users to share posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It investigates information needs, social influences, and digital literacy skills that shape individuals' behaviors and attitudes toward educational information-sharing during crises.

Overview of Chapter Structure

This chapter presents the study's results based on quantitative and qualitative data. The chapter is divided into several sections. First, I share the results of the quantitative data analysis, including the survey results, which focus on the frequency of engagement with Facebook posts, the themes and characteristics of the shared content, and the importance of source credibility. Second, I describe the results from the qualitative data analysis. This section delves into the open-ended responses from the survey, offering a thematic analysis of the participants' motivations in sharing, the types of content participants shared, and their perceptions of the information sources. The qualitative data complements the quantitative data by providing deeper insights into the reasons behind the observed behaviors. Third, I will integrate quantitative and qualitative results and organize them by research questions. This section incorporates quantitative and qualitative insights to comprehensively respond to the research questions. The section also discusses how these findings align with the theoretical framework and existing literature. Fourth, I will summarize the key findings. This final section of the chapter recaps the the results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses and gives a transition to Chapter 5,

where the study's broader implications will be explored in depth. By following this structure, this chapter systematically addresses the research questions and sets the stage for the discussion and conclusion in the subsequent chapter.

Quantitative Data

As you recall from Chapter Three, the survey was distributed to a group of active Facebook users during the COVID-19 lockdown period from March to August 2020. The participants were at least 18 years old and were located across various states in the United States during the specified period. 112 responses were recorded, with 108 valid responses used for the analysis, resulting in a response rate of approximately 96%.

The survey, administered via Qualtrics, consisted of a combination of closed-ended, ranking, and open-ended questions designed to capture quantitative and qualitative data on respondents' information-sharing behaviors. The quantitative data focused on respondents' engagement frequency, the characteristics of shared content, the credibility of the sources cited, and the motivations behind sharing these posts. These specific questions were directly aligned with the primary research questions, ensuring that the data collected provided meaningful evidence that fit the study's objectives. In addition to the core questions, the survey included several exploratory questions to gather preliminary data for possible future analyses. These exploratory questions explore broader information sharing and user behavior aspects that extend beyond the current research focus. While these questions offer a perception, they were not directly analyzed in this study. Instead, they serve as a foundation for future research investigating additional dimensions of information dissemination and digital interactions. By incorporating both targeted and exploratory questions, the survey was structured to thoroughly

address the primary research objectives while also allowing for the collection of supplementary data that could inform future studies.

Quantitative Findings Overview

My first question focuses on posting participation; the results are shown below in **Figure 2**. Q5 asked respondents whether they had shared Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures during 2020, specifically between March and August 2020. Out of 108 respondents, the data revealed that:

- **52% (n=56)** of respondents did not share any posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures during this period.
- **48% (n=52)** of respondents reported sharing posts related to these topics.

This nearly even split indicates that while a substantial portion of respondents actively engaged with and shared information about the lockdowns and school closures on Facebook, a slightly larger group opted not to share such posts. This finding shows that the audience was divided regarding their availability to engage publicly on social media about the COVID-19 crisis. For those who did share, the motivations behind this will become apparent through the data. Conversely, the group that did not share might have opted for private engagement, consumed content without sharing, or avoided discussing the pandemic on social media altogether.

Q5 focused on posting participation, while Q8 focused on engagement with posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns. The results are shown below in **Figure 3**. The data indicated a range of engagement levels among respondents regarding sharing Facebook posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. Among the 108 respondents:

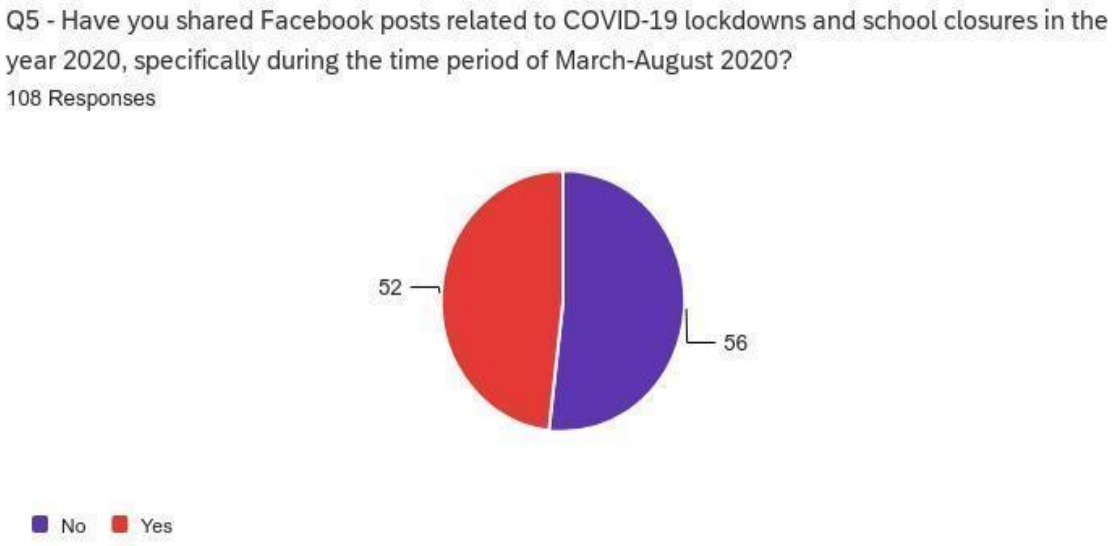


Figure 2: Question 5 from Qualtrics Survey

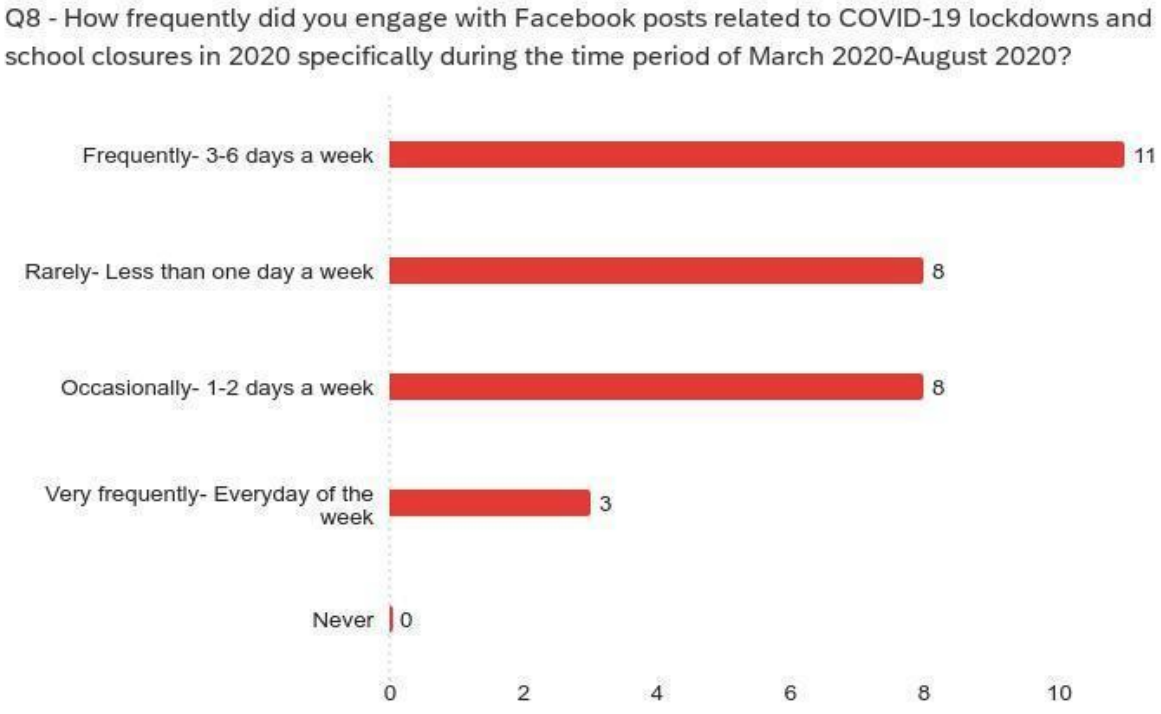


Figure 3: Question 8 from Qualtrics Survey

- **48% (n=52)** reported sharing posts, while **52% (n=56)** did not share any related posts during the specified period.
- Of those who shared posts:
    - **10% (n=3)** shared posts very frequently (every day of the week),
    - **37% (n=11)** shared frequently (3-6 days a week),
    - **27% (n=8)** shared occasionally (1-2 days a week), and
    - **27% (n=8)** shared rarely (less than once a week).

These results suggest varied levels of engagement, with 74% of respondents actively sharing content related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, although at different frequencies.

Q7 focused on the reasons behind posting; the results are summarized below in **Figure 4 and 5.** The results of Q7 revealed several prominent themes among those who shared content on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown:

- **60% (n=18)** of respondents indicated they were motivated to share posts to inform others, making it the most common reason for sharing.
- **50% (n=15)** shared posts to express their opinions.
- **37% (n=11)** used Facebook to express their emotions, utilizing the platform as an outlet for their feelings during the pandemic.
- **17% (n=5)** were motivated by a desire to support a cause, such as raising awareness about mental health issues or advocating for educational policies.
- **10% (n=3)** mentioned other motivations, including spreading joy and relaying factual information without emotion or opinion.

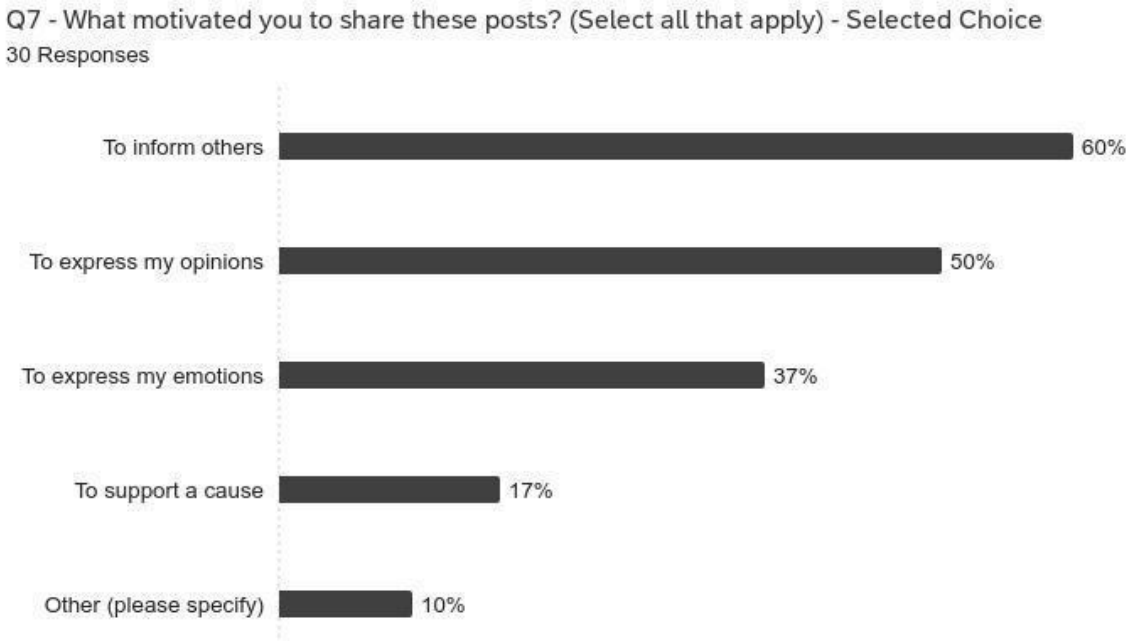


Figure 4: Question 7 from Qualtrics Survey

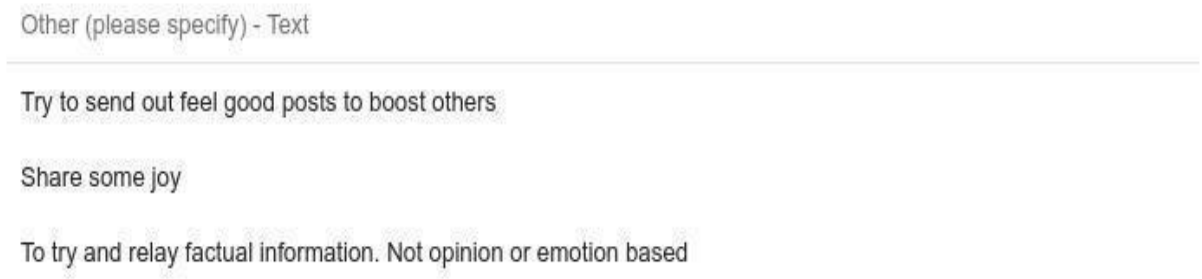


Figure 5: Open Response from Question 7 of Qualtrics Survey

These content themes illustrate Facebook's dual role as an information source and a platform for emotional expression and advocacy during the pandemic. The variety of motivations highlights social media engagement's complex and multifaceted nature during crises when users seek to inform and express themselves and connect with and support their communities meaningfully.

Q9 of the survey focused on ranking which factors were most important to the poster when sharing on Facebook during that time. The survey results are summarized below in **Figure 6.** Respondents emphasized the importance of content accuracy and source credibility when sharing posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. The survey data revealed that:

- **Content Accuracy** was rated as the most important factor, with an average ranking of **1.33 out of 5** among 18 respondents.
- **Source Credibility** was the second most important factor, with an average ranking of **2.55 out of 5** among 13 respondents.

While content accuracy and source credibility were prioritized, a smaller subset of respondents also considered other factors, such as emotional impact and relevance to personal life.

Question 11 of the survey focused on whether the participant fact-checked before sharing posts. The results are summarized below in **Figure 7.**

Fact-checking practices were also prevalent among the respondents:

- **60% (n=18)** reported that they regularly fact-checked the information before sharing it.
- **20% (n=6)** did so occasionally, while the remaining **20% (n=6)** did not engage in fact-checking.

This section delivered a comprehensive overview of the quantitative results from the survey, offering insights into engagement behaviors, content themes, source credibility, and

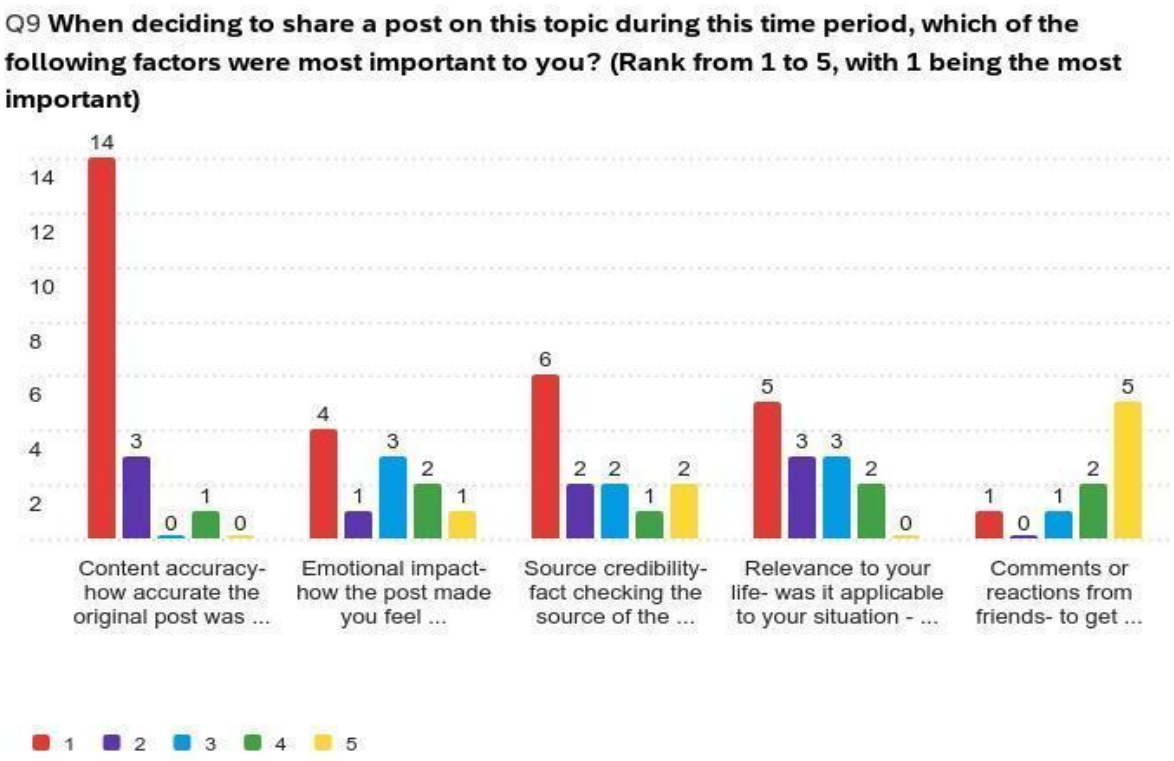


Figure 6: Question 9 from Qualtrics Survey

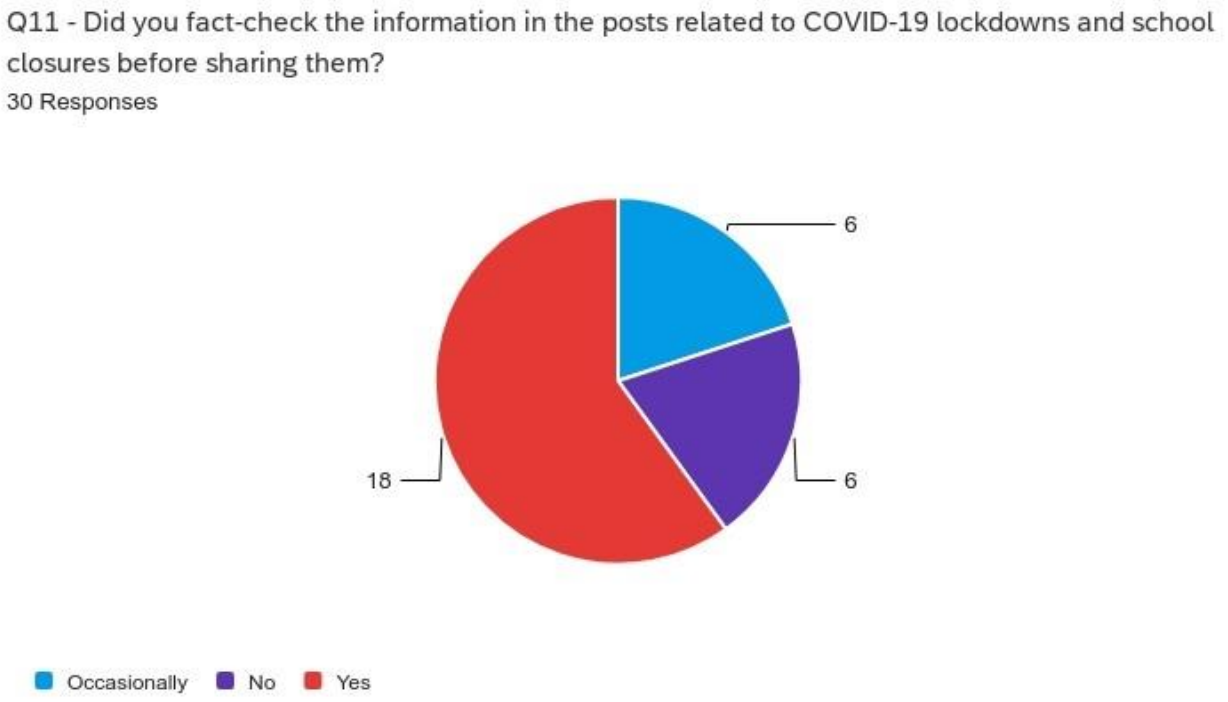


Figure 7: Question 11 from Qualtrics Survey

motivations behind sharing Facebook posts during the COVID-19 lockdown. The qualitative analysis section will elaborate on these responses and delve deeper into the reasons behind these behaviors and the implications for social media engagement during crises.

Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The qualitative data collected from open-ended survey responses from questions 13 and 14 offers perspectives into the motivations and behaviors of individuals who shared Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This section presents a thematic analysis of the responses divided into two parts: part one is related to question thirteen, and part two is related to question fourteen.

Survey Q13: Please describe a specific Facebook post related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures that you shared or considered sharing. What about that post motivated your decision? (open-ended answer)

Theme One: Teacher Advocacy and Information Sharing

The theme of teachers' roles emerged strongly among respondents, particularly among educators. One respondent who needed to correct public misconceptions about their workload during the COVID-19 lockdown commented:

> *"I recall a post about teachers 'being lucky,' and I recall sharing it with the comment that some teachers were working even harder and not being paid to do nothing."(R1)*

Another respondent reflected on their role as communicators, sharing information with friends, parents, and colleagues. The following comment is illustrative.

> *"Being a school teacher, I would share posts about the closure being extended to get the message out to my friends who were also teachers and/or parents." (R2)*

One comment shared reflected teachers' roles in voicing their feelings regarding decisions related to schools. This comment is as follows:

"As a teacher, I shared posts relevant to our local area, and specifically our school. One specifically that I recall had to do with my feeling about the decision to close the school." (R3)

These quotes illustrate a sentiment among educators to use social media to highlight the realities of their shifting roles. The need to counter public perceptions, share relevant information, and voice their feelings regarding decisions reflects a broader narrative of teacher advocacy and the role of educators during crises, as discussed in the existing literature on social media and educational advocacy. The quotes share a common theme of teacher advocacy and information sharing but vary in purpose, tone, and audience. R1 emphasizes advocacy against misconceptions, R2 highlights the practical role of teachers as information pipelines, and R3 reflects the emotional expression of a teacher dealing with local decisions. They provide a distinct view of how teachers used social media during the pandemic to support their profession and engage with their communities.

Theme Two: Nonbiased and Informative Sharing

Another key theme identified was the preference for nonbiased and strictly informative content. Respondents emphasized the importance of sharing accurate, non-partisan information during widespread misinformation. One comment expresses this below:

"I tend to stay away from reposting because I can't always check the source." (R1)

Another respondent noted this point in addition to sharing their emotions about missing students or funny updates. The comment is as follows:

"I only shared nonbiased, strictly informative posts OR went the funny route with family updates and 'I miss my students.'" (R2)

Yet another respondent noted the importance of a local source, a hospital. This respondent commented:

"I mostly shared posts from UT Medical Center. I felt they were likely the most educated source in my area." (R3)

The focus on nonbiased, factual sharing highlights respondents' deliberate efforts to contribute meaningfully to public conversations without spreading misinformation. This pattern matches what is commonly seen in social media behavior during crises, where users prioritize credibility and accuracy to maintain the integrity of the information they share. All the quotes reflect a commitment to credibility and avoiding misinformation, though the respondents take different approaches. R1 is very cautious, avoiding any unverified content, while R2 mixes informative posts with personal, emotional updates. R3, on the other hand, depends heavily on trusted expert sources for reliable information. These different approaches show how people navigate sharing responsibly during crises, each aiming to contribute positively while steering clear of false information.

Theme Three: Spreading Joy and Providing Resources:

A recurring theme among respondents was using Facebook to spread positivity and share valuable resources, particularly for parents navigating homeschooling during the COVID-19 lockdown. Many respondents emphasized the importance of uplifting their social networks by providing emotional and practical support. One respondent reflected on their efforts to keep spirits high, stating:

"Most of my posts were to spread joy, so celebrations, funny videos, encouraging words. I also posted any resources I could share with my friends who were homeschooling their children." (R1)

Another respondent shared a post aimed at acknowledging the emotional struggles many parents faced during this period:

"I shared a post regarding the stress many parents were feeling about having their children at home from school during the COVID-19 lockdown." (R2)

Similarly, another participant mentioned their focus on offering positive messages and resources for parents who were adapting to the challenges of the pandemic:

"During the lockdown, I made it a point to share positive messages and resources for parents who were struggling with the new normal." (R3)

These quotes affirm the role of social media as a platform for providing emotional uplift and practical guidance, particularly for communities affected by school closures. This theme illustrates the importance of social networks in offering morale-boosting content and essential resources during a crisis, demonstrating the dual role of social media in supporting emotional well-being and sharing helpful information. All these quotes share the theme of helping others through the lockdown; they are different in the balance between emotional support and practical resources. R1 blends both elements, R2 leans more towards emotional acknowledgment, and R3 focuses on positivity with a pragmatic approach. This variety illustrates how respondents adapted their support based on what they felt their social networks needed most during the crisis.

Theme Four: Sharing Relevant Information for Parents and Teachers:

A key theme among educators was using Facebook to share updates related to school closures, focusing on keeping their networks informed without engaging in political or

controversial content. One respondent described their role in disseminating information to both teachers and parents:

> *"Being a school teacher, I would share posts about the closure being extended to get the message out to my friends who were also teachers and/or parents."* (R1)

Another respondent emphasized the need to keep their community up to date with new policies:

> *"I made sure to share any updates on school closures or new policies as soon as they were announced."* (R2)

Similarly, a third respondent focused on local school board meetings to ensure parents had access to relevant decisions:

> *"I posted about the local school board meetings and decisions to help keep parents informed."* (R3)

These quotes show how important Facebook became as a communication tool for teachers during the pandemic. By sharing clear, factual updates about school closures and policies, teachers helped keep parents and fellow educators in the loop. Their choice to avoid political or conspiracy-related content shows a focus on delivering reliable, neutral information, which aligns with broader trends of maintaining credibility during a crisis. The three quotes highlight the use of Facebook to share relevant, non-partisan information, they vary in the content type shared. R1 sticks to general updates on closures, R2 includes broader policy announcements, and R3 focuses specifically on local school board decisions. These differences show varying levels of engagement, from simple updates to more in-depth local governance details. Despite these variations, the shared goal of providing clear, neutral information to their networks remains consistent across all quotes.

Theme Five: Concern for Mental Health:

A motivation for sharing content on Facebook was related to mental health concerns, particularly the challenges faced by parents, educators, and families during the COVID-19 lockdown. Respondents used social media as a platform to raise awareness and provide support for mental well-being. One respondent highlighted the emotional toll on parents:

> *"I shared a post regarding the stress many parents were feeling about having their children at home from school during the COVID-19 lockdown."* (R1)

Another respondent focused on providing coping strategies and resources for friends and family, emphasizing the importance of mental health support:

> *"I was particularly worried about the mental health of my friends and family, so I shared a lot of posts about coping strategies and support resources."* (R2)

Similarly, another respondent emphasized sharing resources to help others manage anxiety during the pandemic:

> *"My focus was on mental health and well-being, so I shared articles and posts that provided tips on managing anxiety during the pandemic."* (R3)

These quotes show how social media was used to recognize and address the emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic. Respondents aimed to share valuable information, provide emotional support, and raise awareness about mental health challenges during a time of increased stress and uncertainty. All three quotes reflect a shared concern for mental health and a desire to use social media as a platform for offering support and resources during the pandemic. Each quote, though, approaches the issue from a slightly different angle. R1 emphasizes the stress that parents were facing as they coped with having their children at home. At the same time, R2 expands the focus to include general coping strategies and helpful resources for both

friends and family. R3 takes a more focused approach by sharing specific tips for managing anxiety and promoting well-being during the crisis. Although these perspectives vary, they all work toward the same goal of providing comfort, support, and relief to those struggling with mental health challenges in a time of great uncertainty. The different approaches complement each other, showing a collective effort to address mental health needs from multiple perspectives during the pandemic.

This concludes the analysis of Question 13; now onto examining the outcomes from Question 14.

Survey Q14: In your opinion, how do you think the sharing of information about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on social media platforms like Facebook impacted public awareness and behavior during the pandemic? (open-ended answer)

Theme One: Impact on Public Awareness

A key theme that emerged from the responses is the role of social media in raising public awareness about the realities faced by schools, teachers, and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media served as a tool for disseminating information and educating the public about the challenges within the education sector. One respondent noted how social media helped bridge the understanding gap between schools and the broader public:

> *"I think it helped those adults who were not employed in schools to better understand the realities that schools, teachers, and students were facing."* (R1)

Another respondent reflected on the initial positive impact of social media as a tool for sharing information and offering different perspectives:

> *"At first it seemed to be a good impact, solid information was being shared and the world was getting the opportunity to see the situation from other people's perspective."* (R2)

These quotes imply that, initially, Facebook played a prominent role in raising public awareness about the challenges encountered by the education sector during the pandemic. By highlighting the perspectives of teachers and students, social media contributed to a broader understanding of the impact of school closures. This aligns with broader discussions on the role of social media in crisis communication, where platforms like Facebook act as channels for disseminating important information to the public. Both quotes highlight the positive role of social media in raising public awareness about the challenges faced by the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they each have a different focus. R1 is more specific, focusing on how social media helped adults outside of schools better understand the challenges educators and students faced. R2 offers a broader reflection, stating that social media had a global impact, providing new perspectives. These differences in scope and tone reflect varied reflections on the reach and influence of social media during the pandemic.

Theme Two: Misinformation and Fear Mongering

Another prevalent theme in the responses is the concern over misinformation and fear mongering on social media, particularly on platforms like Facebook. This theme reflects the negative influence social media had during the pandemic. One respondent shared the emotional toll misinformation had on the users in their network:

> *"There was so much misinformation and fearmongering happening on Facebook that it negatively impacted the mental health of many users I knew."* (R1)

Another respondent commented on the emotional, evidence-lacking nature of many posts, which led to confusion and doubt about what was true:

> *"There were many posts based solely on emotion with no evidence to back it up that made people question what the truth really was."* (R2)

These responses bring attention to a major issue with social media during the pandemic—the widespread spread of misinformation and its emotional toll on users. The abundance of fearmongering and unverified content likely added to the growing anxiety and confusion, highlighting the need for stronger fact-checking tools on social media platforms. This theme aligns with existing studies on the dangers of misinformation in digital spaces, especially during times of crisis when public health is on the line. Both quotes express a shared concern about the harmful effects of misinformation on social media during the pandemic, particularly how it affected users' emotional and mental health. The quotes are different in their focus: R1 centers on the mental health impact of fearmongering, while R2 takes a closer look at the lack of evidence behind emotionally charged posts, focusing more on how misinformation caused confusion and led people to question what was true. Both though illustrate the widespread effects of misinformation, showing how it not only strained users emotionally but also made it harder for them to understand and navigate the crisis.

Theme Three: Political Bias

Several respondents noted the political bias that permeated much of the content shared on Facebook during the pandemic. This theme explores how turning information into a political issue affects how people think and behave. One respondent expressed concern about the one-sided nature of posts:

> *"I feel most cases, the comments and posts were one sided to fit a belief on one side of the country."* (R1)

Another respondent pointed out the mix of political and unverified content, which often overshadowed helpful information:

"I think they informed a lot of people, but the problem is not everyone fact-checked and a lot of posts were political vs helpful." (R2)

These quotes highlight the concern that information shared on Facebook during the pandemic often became polarized, with content driven by specific political agendas. This political bias likely contributed to divisions in public opinion, making it harder for people to access balanced and accurate information. The responses suggest a need for a stronger focus on promoting non-partisan, fact-checked content on social media platforms during crises. Both quotes express frustration with the political slant of much of the content shared on Facebook during the pandemic. R1 emphasizes the one-sided nature of posts, drawing attention to how different perspectives were often missing. R2 points out how political content overshadowed helpful, fact-checked information, making it more difficult for users to find reliable details. Both of these quotes reflect the worry that political agendas on social media can weaken the accuracy and usefulness of shared information during critical times.

Theme Four: Mental Health Impact

Another key theme emerging from the responses is the impact of social media on mental health during the pandemic. This theme is beneficial to understanding the broader implications of social media use during crises. One respondent highlighted the emotional toll of misinformation and fear mongering:

"There was so much misinformation and fearmongering happening on Facebook that it negatively impacted the mental health of many users I knew." (R1)

Another respondent pointed out the anxiety caused by the spread of unverified, fear-based content:

"The spread of unverified content and fear-based posts contributed to a growing sense of anxiety among users, making it harder to distinguish fact from fiction." (R2)

These quotes highlight the negative impact that social media had on mental health during the pandemic. The constant exposure to fearmongering and misinformation likely exacerbated feelings of anxiety and uncertainty among users. This theme highlights the importance of addressing the mental health consequences of social media use, particularly in times of crisis when the spread of accurate, reassuring information is critical. Both quotes highlight the detrimental effect of social media on mental health during the pandemic, emphasizing the role of misinformation and fear mongering. R1 is more personal and empathetic, focusing on the direct impact on people the respondent knew, while R2 shows a broader, more analytical view of how unverified content contributed to widespread anxiety. These quotes illustrate the emotional toll social media can have during times of crisis when fear-based and unverified content proliferates.

This qualitative analysis detailed the themes that emerged from the open-ended survey responses. This data complements the quantitative data, offering a comprehensive view of the factors influencing information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown. The thematic analysis reinforces the importance of accurate information, credible sources, and the diverse motivations driving user engagement on social media during crises.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integrating quantitative and qualitative results provides a holistic understanding of the factors influencing information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures. By synthesizing the data from various survey questions, we can see how the quantitative trends align with the deeper insights gained from qualitative responses, offering a more comprehensive answer to the research questions.

RQ1: Characteristics of Facebook Posts

Aligned Survey Questions: Q5, Q7, Q8, Q13

The quantitative data revealed that many respondents (48%) shared posts about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, varying frequencies (Q5, Q8). The qualitative themes further clarified this behavior, highlighting that many posts centered on factual updates, personal experiences, and expressions of humor and joy (Q13). The outcome illustrates that while many users were motivated to inform others (Q7), they also used social media as a platform for emotional expression and connection during the pandemic. One respondent noted, "I only shared nonbiased, strictly informative posts OR went the funny route with family updates and 'I miss my students.'" Another shared, "Most of my posts were to spread joy, so celebrations, funny videos, encouraging words.

RQ2: Sources of Information and Perceptions of Reliability

Aligned Survey Questions: Q9, Q11, Q13, Q14

Quantitatively, content accuracy and source credibility were the most significant factors influencing the decision to share posts, with 60% of respondents emphasizing these aspects (Q9, Q11). The qualitative data enhanced this by revealing a strong preference for trusted sources, such as educational institutions and medical centers, and a general skepticism toward less credible or unverifiable information (Q13). One respondent shared, "I was a school administrator at the time. I was sharing all of the information from my school's Facebook page." Another noted, "I tend to stay away from reposting because I can't always check the source." Also, respondents expressed concerns about the broader impact of information sharing on social media, with one respondent stating, "There was so much misinformation and fearmongering happening on Facebook that it negatively impacted the mental health of many users I knew"

(Q14). These results support the importance of reliability and accuracy in social media engagement during crises.

RQ3: Motivations Behind Sharing Posts

Aligned Survey Questions: Q7, Q9, Q13, Q14

The primary motivations identified in the quantitative data were to inform others (60%), express opinions (50%), and share emotions (37%) (Q7, Q9). The qualitative evidence revealed more detailed reasons for sharing, such as community support, advocacy for causes like teacher appreciation, and the desire to spread positivity (Q13, Q14). For instance, one respondent shared, "I posted any resources I could share with my friends who were homeschooling their children," highlighting the role of social media in supporting and informing the community. Another respondent emphasized advocacy, stating, "I commented on how many times a day we had to direct students to socially distance themselves. In hindsight, I just wanted teachers to be appreciated for being on the front lines." These outcomes indicate that social media served as both an information-sharing tool and a means for individuals to fulfill emotional and social needs during the lockdown.

Cross-Referencing with Literature

The results from this study align closely with and contribute meaningfully to the existing literature on social media engagement during crises, particularly within the Uses and Gratifications Theory framework. This theory posits that individuals engage with media to fulfill specific needs, such as information-seeking, emotional expression, and social interaction. The data collected in this study, both quantitative and qualitative, strongly support this framework, revealing that users were driven by both informational and emotional motivations when sharing content on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown.

This study's emphasis on content accuracy and source credibility aligns with previous research on information-seeking behaviors in social media use during crises. For instance, studies by Pennycook and Rand (2020) affirm the importance of reliable information sources during emergencies, highlighting that individuals are motivated to share content they believe will benefit their social networks by providing accurate and helpful information. The respondents in this study demonstrated a clear preference for sharing content from trusted sources, such as educational institutions and medical centers, reflecting a conscious effort to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the information they disseminated. This behavior stresses the essential role of information-seeking in shaping social media engagement during the pandemic.

Also, the study's insights resonate with the concept of emotional contagion on social media, as discussed by Kramer et al. (2014). The role of emotional sharing, revealed through both the quantitative and qualitative data, suggests that users were not only driven by a desire to inform others but also sought to manage their own and others' emotional states. Social media served as a vital tool for emotional support during profound uncertainty, with respondents using the platform to express concern, offer encouragement, and share uplifting content. This emotional expression helped foster a sense of solidarity and connection, reinforcing the idea that social media can be a powerful medium for emotional communication, particularly during crises.

The study's results also align with existing literature on social interaction and collective action facilitated by social media. Research by Vraga and Bode (2017) emphasizes the role of social media as a platform for fostering community and enabling collective responses to public concerns. In this study, respondents frequently cited community support and advocacy motivations, particularly about education and public health during the lockdown. These outcomes indicate that users were motivated to share content that addressed collective concerns

and fostered a sense of community, highlighting the dual role of social media as both an information-sharing tool and a space for collective action during the pandemic.

This study also challenges some aspects of the existing literature, particularly concerning the spread of misinformation on social media. While much of the literature, including the work of Vosoughi et al. (2018), emphasizes the rapid dissemination of false information on social media platforms, the data of this study hint towards a more subtle reality. Many respondents were cautious about sharing unverified content, indicating a higher level of digital literacy and responsibility than is often acknowledged. This careful approach to sharing information reflects an awareness of the potential dangers of misinformation and a deliberate effort to contribute positively to the public discourse. This outcome challenges the dominant narrative of rampant misinformation on social media, showing that, at least within this sample, users exhibited a high degree of discernment and responsibility in their information-sharing practices.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study offer several avenues for future research. First, the emphasis on content accuracy and source credibility implies that further exploration of digital literacy and fact-checking behaviors on social media is warranted. Understanding how users assess the credibility of information and what factors influence their decision to share could provide a comprehension to combating misinformation during crises. Second, the study points out the role of emotional expression in social media engagement. Future research could investigate the impact of emotional content on user engagement and information dissemination, particularly how emotional responses to crises shape social media behavior and influence public perception.

Finally, the research indicates that social media platforms are important in community support and advocacy during crises. Research exploring the long-term effects of social media

engagement on community resilience and cohesion could provide the knowledge for developing strategies to leverage social media in future public health emergencies or other crises.

The data presented in this chapter provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown. Chapter 5 will delve deeper into the implications of these findings, discussing their relevance in the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. This discussion will also explore the broader impact of social media on public communication during crises and consider the potential for leveraging these platforms to enhance information dissemination and emotional support in future emergencies. Through this analysis, I will explore how social media plays a role in managing modern crises and offer recommendations for all stakeholders in regard to social media usage during a crisis.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter comprehensively discusses the research results and their implications, followed by the study's conclusions. It begins with a brief overview of the chapter structure and a recap of the research objectives and key findings from Chapter 4, including how the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) fits into the analysis. The chapter is structured as follows: Part Two delves into a detailed discussion of the results, integrating the quantitative and qualitative data to provide a refined understanding of information sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Part Three analyzes the theoretical and practical implications of the study, emphasizing the relevance of the outcomes for educational technology, crisis communication, and social media engagement. Part Four addresses the study's limitations and proposed future research directions. Lastly, Part Five concludes the chapter with a summary of the study's contributions and recommendations for practice and policy.

Chapter 4 analyzed Facebook posts containing "COVID lockdown" and "school closures" from March 2020 to August 2020. Over half of the respondents shared related posts, with a majority fact-checking the information. Content accuracy was the most important factor in sharing decisions. The qualitative analysis added context, revealing motivations like spreading joy and sharing factual content while emphasizing source credibility. This evidence aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which explains that individuals seek media to fulfill specific needs such as information, personal identity reinforcement, and social interaction.

This chapter builds on these findings to discuss their broader implications and provide a comprehensive conclusion to the study. It investigates how social media can be leveraged for productive communication and support during crises, particularly in virtual learning

environments. It also offers recommendations for practice and policy based on the study's perspectives and the UGT framework.

Discussion of Key Findings

The results from this study provide a refined understanding of how individuals used Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown to share information, express emotions, and advocate for specific causes, particularly related to education and public health. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data shows several insights about the behaviors, motivations, and strategies underlying social media engagement during a public health crisis. The study's data demonstrated that a high portion of respondents (60%) were motivated by the desire to inform others about updates regarding school closures and COVID-19 policies. This finding aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, particularly the information-seeking need, where users engage with media to gather and disseminate valuable content. Respondents prioritized content accuracy and source credibility, often referencing trusted institutions like educational organizations and medical centers.

This finding is significant because it strengthens the role of social media platforms, such as Facebook, as a tool for public information dissemination during crises. While social media has been criticized for contributing to the spread of misinformation, the data in this study reveals a more cautious and deliberate approach to information sharing. Respondents' fact-checked content and favored posts from reputable sources, challenging the dominant narrative of social media as primarily a source of misinformation. This reflects a higher level of digital literacy than previously assumed, suggesting that users are increasingly aware of the consequences of sharing unverified content.

Another key finding was the prominent role of emotional expression in social media use during the pandemic. Approximately 37% of respondents indicated that they shared posts to express their emotions, ranging from frustration and anxiety to positivity and humor. The qualitative data further illustrate this, with respondents sharing personal stories, homeschool struggles, and humorous content to lift spirits.

This behavior stresses the dual role of Facebook as both an informational and emotional outlet. During a time of heightened uncertainty and isolation, individuals used social media to maintain social bonds and seek emotional support. This aligns with theories of emotional contagion (Kramer et al., 2014), which indicates that emotions can spread through social networks, influencing the collective mood of communities. Sharing posts that conveyed joy, humor, or empathy likely contributed to a sense of collective resilience, providing relief and solidarity in the face of challenging circumstances. The data also revealed that respondents were motivated to engage in community support and advocacy, particularly around education and mental health issues. Many users shared resources and updates to support teachers, parents, and students during the lockdown. This accentuates the role of social media as a platform for digital activism, where users advocate for social causes and provide practical resources to their networks.

One notable theme was teacher advocacy and information sharing. Several respondents used Facebook to correct public misconceptions about teachers' workloads, sharing posts highlighting the increased demands on educators during the pandemic. This finding shows that users were concerned with information-sharing and advocating for recognition of the challenges faced by specific groups, reflecting the potential for social media to be a tool for collective action during crises. Despite common worries about misinformation spreading quickly on social media,

this study found that many respondents were careful to avoid sharing content that hadn’t been verified. The importance placed on source credibility and the fact that respondents frequently mentioned fact-checking behavior shows that users were aware of the risks of misinformation and took steps to avoid contributing to its spread.

This finding challenges the narrative of studies such as those by Vosoughi et al. (2018), highlighting the rapid spread of false information on social media platforms. Instead, the data here points to the fact that users were more discerning and practiced responsible sharing, particularly during the pandemic when misinformation could have serious public health consequences. This might highlight that digital literacy has become an important factor in how individuals engage with social media during crises, as users are increasingly aware of the need to verify information before sharing it with their networks.

The evidence from this study contributes to a deeper understanding of social media engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the complex interplay between information-sharing, emotional expression, and community support. While Facebook was used as a platform for disseminating critical information, it also served as a space for emotional connection and collective advocacy. Users were careful in their sharing practices, prioritizing credible sources and avoiding misinformation, suggesting that digital literacy played a key role in shaping social media behaviors during the pandemic.

This study's key findings align with existing literature on social media use during crises and challenge some assumptions, particularly regarding misinformation. Users' responsible and thoughtful engagement during the COVID-19 lockdown shows that when used cautiously, social media can serve as a tool for community-building and public education in times of crisis. Future

research should further explore how social media platforms can encourage and support these behaviors, especially in the context of improving digital literacy and combating misinformation.

Answering the Research Questions

This section connects the study's results to the initial research questions, allowing for an evaluation of how effectively the research addresses these key inquiries and helps understand information sharing on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RQ1: What were the characteristics of a typical Facebook post shared by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown relating to school closures?

The study identified several defining features of Facebook posts related to school closures during the COVID-19 lockdown. Quantitative data indicated that these posts commonly included factual updates, personal reflections, and emotional expressions. Themes such as announcements on school closures, commentary on the effects of the lockdown, and educational resources were prominent. Many posts included links to credible news outlets and official sources. The qualitative findings reinforced this by showing that users frequently employed text and multimedia elements, such as images and videos, to engage their audience and convey their messages more effectively. Posts featuring personal stories and reflections tended to receive higher levels of interaction, pointing out that sharing personal experiences was a way to communicate and seek emotional support during the transition to remote learning. The typical characteristics of Facebook posts shared during the lockdown included informative content, personal experiences, and emotional engagement. These posts often utilized multimedia formats to maximize interaction. These posts were heavily focused on providing updates and resources, specifically addressing the educational challenges posed by the pandemic.

RQ 2: What sources of information/posts about school closures were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown, and what were the sharers' perceptions of their reliability?

The study found that various sources were shared in posts about school closures during the COVID-19 lockdown. Quantitative data revealed that credible sources, such as news organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies, were the most frequently shared. This was corroborated by the qualitative data, highlighting that users prioritized content from trusted and reliable sources, underscoring the importance of accuracy and credibility in their decision to share. Respondents reported high levels of trust in posts from official institutions and educational experts while exhibiting skepticism toward content from less established or seemingly biased sources. The reliability of the information shared was closely linked to users' perceptions of the content's credibility and accuracy. Posts from reputable news outlets, educational institutions, and official agencies were widely trusted and shared, reflecting a higher demand for reliable information during the crisis. This finding emphasizes the crucial role that perceived source credibility plays in shaping information-sharing behavior on social media.

RQ3: What factors from the sharers' perspectives influenced the motivations behind the posts shared regarding school closures on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown?

The study identified several key factors influencing the motivations behind sharing posts related to school closures on Facebook. Quantitative data indicated that the primary motivations were to inform others (60%), express opinions (50%), and share emotions (37%). The qualitative data provided a deeper understanding of these motivations, revealing that personal experiences, social influences, and the desire to support the community were drivers. Many respondents cited the need to share accurate information, provide emotional support, and distribute resources that

would help others manage the challenges of remote learning. Also, digital literacy emerged as a fundamental factor; users with higher levels of digital literacy were more likely to fact-check information before sharing and to prioritize content from credible sources. This can imply that users' knowledge and skills in navigating digital platforms shaped their engagement with and dissemination of educational content during the pandemic. Factors influencing the motivations behind sharing posts included the need to inform and support others, express personal opinions, and share emotional experiences. Social influences and digital literacy also shaped users' decisions to share educational content on Facebook during the pandemic.

The study successfully addresses the three research questions by identifying the common characteristics of Facebook posts about school closures, evaluating the reliability and credibility of information sources, and uncovering the factors that influenced users' motivations for sharing content. These outcomes provide insights into how social media was used for information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to the broader understanding of social media engagement in times of crisis. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data within the Uses and Gratifications Theory framework, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of how social media platforms like Facebook were used for educational communication, emotional support, and community engagement, offering implications for educational technology, crisis communication, and social media dynamics in future crises.

Relation to Uses and Gratifications Theory

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in this study can be best understood through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). UGT is a framework that examines how individuals actively seek out media to meet specific needs and desires. According to this theory, media users are goal-driven and intentionally select media that fulfills their personal

needs. UGT outlines several motivations for media use, including information seeking, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment, all of which are reflected in the outcomes of this study.

The study revealed that 60% of respondents were motivated to share posts primarily to inform others, strongly emphasizing factual information, non-biased content, and fact-checking before sharing. Quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that users used Facebook to disseminate accurate and timely updates about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. This behavior aligns with information-seeking gratification, where users engage with media to stay informed and help educate their social networks. By sharing credible information, users fulfilled their need for reliable and accurate content, positioning themselves as trusted sources within their online communities.

The data also showed that 50% of respondents shared posts to express their opinions, with qualitative results indicating that many did so to convey their personal views on the pandemic or to highlight their professional roles (e.g., teachers) and personal reflections. Sharing these opinions and experiences helped users affirm their identities and values, positioning Facebook as a platform for self-expression. Sharing content tied to one's professional role or personal experiences demonstrates the desire to reinforce and project one's identity through media, a key element of UGT. Respondents used Facebook to assert their opinions and strengthen their individual identities by aligning their media use with their beliefs.

The motivations of emotional expression (37%) and supporting a cause (17%) were also prominent in the findings. Many respondents shared content to build social connections and provide emotional support to their peers and communities, such as posts to spread joy, support mental health, or foster solidarity. These behaviors reflect the UGT's motivation for social

interaction and community integration. By sharing uplifting or cause-related content, users sought emotional connection and engaged in digital advocacy, using social media to create solidarity and offer support during a time of collective stress. This shows that Facebook was used not only for self-expression but also to enhance social connectivity and community bonding.

Beyond information and social interaction, entertainment was another key motivation revealed through qualitative data. Users frequently shared humorous and positive content—such as funny videos, celebrations, and encouraging words—to provide relief during the stressful lockdown period. Sharing such content aligns with entertainment gratification, as users sought not only to inform or express opinions but also to lighten the mood for themselves and others. By engaging in this type of content, respondents found ways to cope with stress and bring moments of enjoyment and emotional release to their online communities.

Through this evidence, it becomes clear that users actively selected and shared content on Facebook that met various needs, whether to inform, express, connect, or entertain. This active engagement reflects a core principle of UGT: users are proactive in their media consumption and seek out content that fulfills multiple needs simultaneously. For instance, a single post might meet informational and emotional needs, showcasing the multifaceted nature of media use during crises. The emphasis on accuracy and source reliability reflects a deeper need for credible information linked to information-seeking and personal identity. Trustworthy content reinforces users' values and helps them project their identities confidently within their social networks. Similarly, the focus on emotional sharing and community support illustrates the importance of media in maintaining emotional well-being and social cohesion during times of crisis.

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative results through the Uses and Gratifications Theory framework offers a comprehensive understanding of how and why users engaged with

Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Users sought to fulfill various needs, including staying informed, expressing their identities, connecting socially, and finding entertainment. This diverse engagement points out the active role of users in selecting and sharing media content that best satisfies their personal and social gratifications. Understanding these dynamics can inform future strategies for leveraging social media platforms to better meet users' needs during crises and enhance their overall experience.

Practical Implications

This section delves into the theoretical and practical implications of the study, focusing on its significance for educational technology, crisis communication, and social media engagement. The findings contribute insights into applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to understand social media behavior in crisis contexts. As previously discussed, UGT suggests that individuals actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs, including information seeking, personal identity reinforcement, social interaction, and entertainment. This study's data supports UGT and extends its relevance by showing how these motivations are triggered and prioritized during crises. The emphasis on information accuracy and credibility reflects UGT's assertion that users are goal-oriented in their media use. These outcomes highlight the essential role of source credibility and emotional content, demonstrating how these factors can drastically influence media engagement in emergencies. These insights deepen our theoretical understanding of how social media platforms function as pivotal tools for disseminating information, providing emotional support, and fostering community during crises.

Implications for Educational Technology

This study supports the potential for social media to support educational initiatives, particularly during disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis proposes that

educational institutions can leverage social media to share accurate information, offer emotional support, and build community among students, parents, and educators. Educators and stakeholders can craft more influential communication strategies that resonate with their audiences by understanding the motivations behind information sharing. For instance, sharing verified educational resources and timely updates through trusted channels can enhance the credibility and impact of the information shared. Encouraging positive and supportive interactions on social media can help reduce stress and anxiety, thus fostering a more conducive learning environment during challenging times. The study highlights that educational technology can extend beyond the classroom, using platforms like Facebook to maintain a sense of connection and support within educational communities.

Implications for Crisis Communication

This study's evidence illuminates social media's role in crisis communication. During the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, platforms like Facebook were instrumental in delivering timely and accurate information. The study shows that users strongly emphasized fact-checking and the accuracy of the information they shared, signaling a high demand for credible sources during times of crisis. Public health officials, government agencies, and other stakeholders can use these insights to strengthen their crisis communication strategies. Ensuring that information shared via social media is timely, accurate, and comes from reliable authorities can foster trust and reduce the risk of misinformation. Addressing the emotional needs of audiences and incorporating empathetic messaging, crisis communicators can enhance community resilience and solidarity, helping individuals cope better during difficult periods.

Implications for Social Media Engagement

The study displays the complex nature of social media engagement during the pandemic, demonstrating the need for platforms to balance users' informational, emotional, and social needs. Social media companies can use these insights to refine their content algorithms and community guidelines, ensuring users can access reliable information while benefiting from emotional and social support. Features that promote fact-checking, highlight credible sources, and foster positive interactions can improve the overall user experience and combat misinformation. Also, social media platforms can collaborate with educational institutions and public health organizations to facilitate the widespread dissemination of information and resources, increasing their reach and impact during crises. These efforts would enhance the reliability of the information users receive and the supportive community environment social media can provide.

This section illustrated the study's theoretical and practical implications for educational technology, crisis communication, and social media engagement. Applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of users' motivations and behaviors, providing actionable knowledge into how social media platforms can be more beneficially leveraged during crises. This research can inform strategies to improve information dissemination, emotional support, and community building, ultimately contributing to developing more resilient and informed societies.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This section addresses the study's limitations and outlines potential directions for future research. It reflects on the research process, identifying areas where improvements could

enhance the analysis and propose avenues for further investigation to build on the insights gained.

One of the primary limitations of this study is the potential lack of a representative Facebook user base. The data collected via CrowdTangle may not fully capture the diversity of individuals affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. Demographic factors such as disparities in internet access, social media usage patterns, and varying levels of engagement could introduce biases that limit the generalizability of the results. The outcomes may reflect only a segment of the population and not the full scope of perspectives.

Also, the study focused on Facebook posts containing the terms "COVID lockdown" and "school closures" from March 2020 to August 2020. While this period was chosen to capture discussions during the peak of the pandemic, it does not account for the evolving nature of the crisis or the long-term effects that continued beyond this timeframe. Expanding the research to include a broader timeline would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how information-sharing behaviors evolved throughout the pandemic, capturing ongoing developments and shifts in public discourse.

Another limitation is the exclusive focus on Facebook data. Different social media platforms—such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok—cater to distinct user demographics and have unique engagement features that may influence how information is shared and perceived. By limiting the analysis to Facebook, the study may overlook differences in behaviors and motivations across other platforms. Future research should consider conducting a comparative analysis across multiple social media channels to provide a more holistic view of social media engagement during crises.

While insightful, this study's qualitative analysis was based on a limited number of open-ended responses. This approach may not have captured the full complexity of user behavior and motivations. A more in-depth content analysis, using advanced text mining techniques or a larger sample of qualitative data, could offer deeper comprehension and reveal subtle patterns in information-sharing dynamics. Such an approach could deepen our understanding of how users engage with content and the factors that drive their sharing decisions.

Using a Qualtrics survey for data collection introduces limitations, including the potential for self-selection bias. Survey participants may have been mainly motivated by or interested in COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, which could skew the results. This could lead to overrepresenting certain opinions while underrepresenting others, affecting the diversity and balance of perspectives captured in the study. Another limitation involves the reliance on self-reported data, which is subject to response biases. Participants may not accurately recall their motivations or fact-checking behaviors, or they may offer responses they perceive as socially desirable rather than reflective of their actual actions or beliefs. This discrepancy can result in a gap between reported and actual behaviors, complicating the interpretation of the results.

The survey distribution method also presents challenges. Sharing the survey on personal social media pages and relying on friends and acquaintances for further dissemination may have created a sample skewed toward the demographics of the researcher's social network. This could introduce demographic biases related to factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, further limiting the generalizability of the data. Also, the survey’s design and question formulation may have restricted the depth of the responses. While open-ended questions provided qualitative insights, they may not have captured the respondents' full range of experiences and motivations. A more comprehensive survey design combining open-ended and

structured questions could help mitigate this issue by allowing a more detailed exploration of the factors influencing social media engagement during the pandemic.

Future research could address these limitations by employing more diverse and representative sampling methods, such as random sampling from larger populations or targeted sampling across different demographic groups. Integrating behavioral data from social media analytics with self-reported survey data could provide a more accurate and robust understanding of user behaviors and motivations. This combination of data sources would offer a more comprehensive perspective, bridging the gap between what users say they do and their actual online activities. Expanding the scope of analysis across platforms and extending the data collection timeframe would also contribute to a deeper and more intricate understanding of social media engagement during global crises.

Future Research Directions

Future research could consider conducting longitudinal studies to track how information-sharing behaviors and motivations change over time. Understanding these shifts can offer a perspective for developing adaptive and responsive communication strategies as pandemics evolve and new crises emerge. Broadening the scope to include multiple social media platforms will allow researchers to identify platform-specific dynamics and uncover broader information-sharing trends. A comparative analysis across platforms could reveal how different user demographics and platform features influence engagement patterns and the dissemination of information.

Future studies should employ more comprehensive qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, to better understand the personal and emotional contexts behind information sharing. These methods could offer a richer perspective on users' underlying

motivations and experiences, complementing the quantitative data. Advanced text analysis tools could possibly help uncover complex patterns and themes within social media content, leading to more intricate insights into how and why users share information during crises.

The role of misinformation in social media information-sharing during crises is another area that needs further research. Investigating how misinformation spreads, how it influences user perceptions and behaviors, and what strategies are most productive in combating it can help develop more robust crisis communication frameworks. Researchers could also explore ways to integrate self-reported data with behavioral data from social media analytics to provide a more accurate picture of user behavior. Metrics such as click-through rates, engagement levels, and interaction patterns can offer a more comprehensive analysis of actual behaviors, reducing reliance on self-reported responses that may be subject to biases. Research could examine the efficiency of different crisis communication strategies organizations and institutions employ. By evaluating which approaches successfully engage users and disseminate accurate information, researchers can help identify best practices for future crises, guiding public health officials, educational institutions, and government agencies in their digital engagement efforts.

While this study provides a perspective into information-sharing on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic, acknowledging its limitations is essential to interpreting the evidence accurately. By addressing these limitations and pursuing the proposed future research directions, scholars can build a more comprehensive understanding of social media dynamics in crisis communication, ultimately enhancing the efficiency of digital engagement strategies in future crises.

Summary

This study offers insights into how people shared information on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding school closures. By combining data and personal stories, my research delves into why people posted what they did, their emotional responses, and the role of trustworthy sources. Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, I have gained a deeper understanding of the factors that drive social media engagement in times of crisis.

For me, this study's significance lies in its ability to illuminate the often complex behaviors and motivations behind social media usage during unprecedented times. Grasping these dynamics is essential for successfully harnessing social media platforms to spread information and foster community support during crises. My focus on credible sources and accurate information highlights the need to develop robust strategies to combat misinformation and enhance digital literacy.

From an academic perspective, my study adds to our collective knowledge of social media engagement and crisis communication. It expands the Uses and Gratifications Theory by showing how users' needs for information, emotional expression, and social connectivity intensify during a crisis. The research provides guidance for educators, policymakers, and social media managers. Educational institutions can leverage this knowledge to improve their communication strategies, ensuring accurate and supportive content reaches their audiences. Policymakers can craft better guidelines to enhance information reliability and crisis communication. Social media platforms can refine their algorithms to prioritize credible sources and encourage positive user interactions.

Sharing reliable information is necessary during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vital role of social media as a tool for disseminating information, offering

emotional support, and building communities. Ensuring that shared content is accurate and credible can profoundly impact public perception and behavior, leading to a more informed and resilient society. This study emphasizes the need to boost digital literacy, promote trustworthy sources, and meet social media users' diverse informational and emotional needs. By understanding and addressing these factors, we can navigate future crises more effectively and create a more reliable and supportive digital environment.

My research deepens our understanding of social media engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and gives practical perspectives for improving information sharing and crisis communication. The importance of reliable information cannot be overstated, and this study lays the groundwork for future research and practices to foster trust and resilience in the digital age. This work has been deeply meaningful to me, as it supports the power of accurate information and the invaluable role of community support during challenging times.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Study title: Analyzing Facebook Data: Exploring Page Categories of COVID Lockdown and School Closures Posts and their Shareability

Researcher: Amanda Zeller, STEM Education University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN and Principal Investigator Dr. Lynn Hodge, TPTE Department Chair University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN

We are inviting you to take a survey for research. This survey is completely voluntary. There are no negative consequences if you don't want to take it. If you start the survey, you can always change your mind and stop at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the factors influencing the sharing behavior of Facebook users with regard to posts related to the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and school closures.

What will I do?

This survey will ask you questions about what you shared on Facebook during the COVID Lockdown and from whom you received that content from.

Risks:

- Online data being hacked or intercepted: Anytime you share information online there are risks. We are using a secure system to collect this data, but we can't completely eliminate this risk.
- Breach of confidentiality: There is a chance your data could be seen by someone who shouldn't have access to it. We are minimizing this risk in the following ways:

- All identifying information is removed.
- We will remove all identifiers prior to beginning the analysis.
- We will store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer.
- We will keep your identifying information separate from your research data.

Possible benefits: By completing this survey, the shareability of Facebook posts during the COVID-19 lockdown relating to school closures. There are no direct benefits to participants.

Estimated number of participants: 500 participants

How long will it take? Survey**:** 5-10 minutes

Costs: None

Compensation: None

Future research: De-identified data (all identifying information removed) may be shared with other researchers. You won't be told specific details about these future research studies.

Confidentiality and Data Security:

We will collect the following identifying information for the research: Gender, age, location. This information is necessary to look for trends or patterns in relation to regions.

Please be assured that this research has received ethical approval from our university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We are committed to upholding the highest ethical standards in all aspects of this study. Your participation in this study will provide valuable insights into the information-sharing behavior of social media users during unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures.

Where will data be stored? On the servers for the online survey software (Qualtrics). It will be stored in a University of Tennessee, Duo Authentication multi factor secure Google drive.

How long will it be kept? The deidentified data will be kept indefinitely for future use.

Who can see my data?

- We, the researchers, will have access to your survey answers. This is so we can analyze the data and conduct the study.
- Agencies that enforce legal and ethical guidelines, such as
    - The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UTK
    - The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP)
- We may share the findings in publications or presentations. If we do, the results will be aggregate data and de-identified data. Since no identifying information is included in this survey, none will be shared.

Questions about the research, complaints, or problems: Contact Amanda Zeller at azeller1@vols.utk.edu

Questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, or problems: Contact the UTK IRB Board utkirb@utk.edu

Please print or save this screen if you want to be able to access the information later.

Agreement to Participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

Appendix B

Analyzing Facebook Data: Exploring Page Categories of COVID Lockdown and School Closures Posts and their Shareability

The primary goal of this research is to gain insights into the factors that influence the sharing behavior of Facebook users when it comes to posts concerning the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. By participating in this study, you will help us understand why certain posts on this topic are more likely to be shared widely on social media platforms.

By completing the survey and submitting you are agreeing to participate in the survey part of the study.

Demographic Information:

1. Gender:
   Male
   Female
   Prefer not to say
   Other (please specify

2. Age:
   18-24
   25-34
   35-44
   45-54
   55-64
   65 or older

3.Location: (Select the state you resided in during the COVID Lockdown March2020-August 2020)
   Drop down options of each state in the United States will be listed

Survey Questions:

4. Have you shared Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in the year 2020, specifically during the time period of March-August 2020?
   Yes/No

5. What motivated you to share these posts? (Select all that apply)
   To inform others
   To express my opinions

To express my emotions
To support a cause
Other (please specify)

6. How frequently did you engage with Facebook posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in 2020 specifically during the time period of March 2020-August 2020?

Very frequently- Everyday of the week
Frequently- 3-6 days a week
Occasionally- 1-2 days a week
Rarely- Less than one day a week
Never

7. When deciding to share a post on this topic during this time period, which of the following factors were most important to you? (Rank from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important)

Content accuracy- how accurate the original post was relating to COVID-19 and school closures
Emotional impact- how the post made you feel (supported, encouraged, angry, etc.)
Source credibility- fact checking the source of the original post
Relevance to your life- was it applicable to your situation
Comments or reactions from friends- to get more comments/reactions from your social circle

8. Did you consider the potential impact of the shared content on your friends and followers before sharing?

Yes
No
Not sure

9. Did you fact-check the information in the posts related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures before sharing them?

Yes
No
Occasionally

10. Did your sharing behavior change during significant events related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, such as major policy announcements or local developments?

Yes, I shared more during significant events
No, my sharing behavior remained consistent
No, I shared less during significant events
I'm not sure

11. Please describe a specific Facebook post related to COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures that you shared or considered sharing. What about that post motivated your decision? (open ended answer)

12. In your opinion, how do you think the sharing of information about COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on social media platforms like Facebook impacted public awareness and behavior during the pandemic? (open ended answer)

Appendix C

Email Template

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on COVID-19 Lockdown Facebook Posts

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Amanda Zeller, and I am a PhD student at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, who is conducting research on the topic of Facebook posts related to the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 and school closures, along with our principal investigator Dr. Lynn Hodge, TPTE Department Chair at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. You are invited to participate in this study. The primary goal of this research is to gain insights into the factors that influence the sharing behavior of Facebook users when it comes to posts concerning the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. By participating in this study, you will help me understand why certain posts on this topic are more likely to be shared widely on social media platforms. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the freedom to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymized, and your personal information. The study involves completing a brief online survey that should take approximately 5-10 minutes of your time. Your input will be invaluable in contributing to a deeper understanding of social media dynamics during critical events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey Link Thank you for considering this invitation. Your contribution is highly appreciated and will make a meaningful impact on our research. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at azeller1@vols.utk.edu or Dr. Lynn Hodge at lhodge4@vols.utk.edu. Once again, participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to decline or withdraw at any time. Your time and insights are greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Amanda Zeller

PhD Candidate, University of Tennessee Knoxville

Dr. Lynn Hodge

Principal Investigator, TPTE Department Chair, University of Knoxville

Appendix D

Facebook Template Post:

📢 Join My Research Study! 📊

Hello everyone! Principal Investigator Dr. Lynn Hodge, TPTE Department Chair at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and Amanda Zeller, a PhD Candidate at the University of Tennessee Knoxville as a team we are conducting a research study on Facebook posts related to the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 and school closures. We want to understand why some posts on this topic get shared widely while others don't. Your participation in this brief survey will help us gain insights into social media dynamics during critical events. It's completely voluntary, and you can opt out anytime. Your privacy is protected, and your input is crucial. The estimated duration of the survey is 5-10 minutes. Click the link to participate: Survey Link.

Thank you for your valuable contribution! 🔍

Vita

Amanda was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia from California State University at Northridge in 2003, followed by a Master of Education in Teacher Leadership from Lamar University in 2021. She will receive her Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in December 2024. Her research centers on understanding the motivations behind why people share content on social media, focusing specifically on Facebook posts related to COVID-19 and school closures. Her work contributes to the broader understanding of social media behaviors and their implications in education and society. Amanda has over a decade of teaching experience, including eight years in public schools where she taught a variety of Career and Technology courses at the middle and high school levels. She also spent three years in a private school setting, where she led middle school teachers in the authentic integration of technology into their classrooms. Her journey has been shaped by her time living in Los Angeles, Houston, and abroad in Vicenza, Italy. She is passionate about the role of technology in education and has a particular interest in social media as a tool for connection and learning. Amanda credits her husband of 21 years and her two sons as her greatest inspirations throughout this journey, offering unwavering support and encouragement as she pursued her academic and professional goals.