Original Article   **Open Access**

'WHAT DOES IT SAY?' EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF KEYWORDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS DURING COVID-19

Dr. Nada Algharabali

The English Department, College of Basic Education, PAAET, Ardhiya, Kuwait

ABSTRACT: It is now clear that the coronavirus crisis will change the world, let alone the social fabric of individual societies. One of the most tangible outcomes of this pandemic will surely be how people perceive the role of social media during times of fear, uncertainty and confusion. The present study mainly attempts to reveal how the language content of social media posts affects online users' reactions and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was gathered from an online survey distributed to users from both Arab and non-Arab countries. Also, more personalized online interviews were conducted on a number of users to yield qualitative insights on the embedded meaning of the language of social media posts. The social media platform being focused on in the present research is WhatsApp, although Twitter is also utilized as another reference given its popularity. The results of this study demonstrate not only the irreplaceable function of social media during a crisis such as COVID-19, but also the need to encourage worldwide digital literacy on the language content of public social media posts.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Media Posts, Language Content, Sociolinguistic Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has not been a time when social media proved to be the people's lifeline against fear and uncertainty more than during the COVID-19 crisis. Besides the obvious function of social media – which is staying in touch with family and friends – under the circumstances that have forced people to stay home and strictly respect social distancing, its various platforms are being used to recreate a life with some semblance of normalcy. A global coronavirus culture seems to be emerging with the help of social media platforms as virtual safe spaces for people to gather and express themselves, creating united human connectedness against a common threat. An interesting trend arising from this culture is utilizing various social media platforms to engage in online group activities. For instance, in China, the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, the illusion of a nightclub through the virtual streaming of a cloud club is created with DJ sets and music, and viewers can experience being at a nightclub and sending messages to connect with one another (Wright, 2020). And in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania shuttered gyms are recreating virtual fitness training online. Live streaming workout instructions and fitness classes are offered to public on demand (Pedersen, 2020).

In addition to that, there are other important uses of social media. People can get together and create groups in popular closed network platforms, such as WhatsApp. For example, scientists from all around the world are using this app as a tool to collaborate in brainstorming possible solutions, cures and explanations for the coronavirus. Furthermore, people get together and form chat groups and discussion forums for moral support during these difficult times (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Sokolov, 2020). The world as we know it has been transported into the net and virtual communities have emerged using online social networks to either construe solidarity or distance themselves from certain areas of concern (Herring, 2004).

It has been noted during this time that many users seem to bond around collective rallying topics by engaging and sharing trending posts that recognize the various events taking place since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak. Sharing online posts has therefore become like a bonding strategy (Zappavigna, 2012). Aside from sharing a sense of immediate collective experiences, posts displaying trending topics or themes related to the overall coronavirus crises seem to appear like an 'indirect' online conversation between users from all around the globe (Zappavigna, 2012). These posts are typified by keywords linked to trending issues at the time (Zappavigna, 2012), such as the issue of grocery shop aisles that were emptied by binge shoppers towards the beginning of the crisis, for example. The linguistic resources that convey meaning used in these posts project a certain stance by the public in relation to events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, sharing these online posts or refusing to spread them also reflects the

way users position themselves towards the coronavirus goings on. This point will be one of the focal areas in the present study.

In the present paper, I aim to investigate and present people's insights with regards to the language resources used in social media posts during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the following research enquiries: 1) To what extent is the presence of social media during the COVID-19 crisis important in our lives? 2) Based on the linguistic resources and the key words used in online posts, what type of posts on social media do users prefer to view, share or avoid sharing during this crisis? And 3) What do online users hope to obtain from engaging in social media during this period?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To the people who have chosen to self-isolate and to all the others who were forced out of public spaces during the COVID-19 crisis, many found comfort in safe spaces offered by the worldwide web. Had we been in the 90s, this experience would have probably been terrifying with limited online input and no social media as a source of information or a means of communication with the outside world. Naturally, due to social distancing protocols, online applications such as WhatsApp (Perez, 2020), Facebook (Collins, 2020), and Instagram (Loren, 2020), all saw a massive increase in screen-time to the point where being glued to one's phone became a common phenomenon (Holland, 2020). Developing dependency on new technologies is quite understandable, especially during this period. Social media, for example, can play a critical role in promoting moral support, national solidarity and health safety during a deadly pandemic (Chen *et al.*, 2020). However, social media can also be misused as a tool that causes fearful shock waves and societal unrest through the spread of misinformation (Harris and Kurasawa, 2020).

In a couple of years' time, Internet users would be able to look back and realize how the COVID-19 crisis inevitably changed the way technology is utilized. And how this difficult experience helped shape more discerning users when viewing online information (Doerr *et al.*, 2012; Zubiaga *et al.*, 2016; Zubiaga *et al.*, 2018). Also, over time, social media talk – the language patterns and word choice displayed in blogs and online posts on social media platforms – will have an increasing tendency to focus on negotiating public stances among users in virtual communities (Herring, 2004; Zappavigna, 2012). In other words, the way in which users actively choose to position themselves towards global issues on public platforms.

Typically, towards the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, Internet user's automatically looked online for answers to critical questions, such as: the nature of this virus, how contagious it is, medications to cure it, chances of recovery, and so on see (Thelwall and Thelwall, 2020); but also see (Doerr *et al.*, 2012; Zubiaga *et al.*, 2016; Zubiaga *et al.*, 2018). Anticipating such a reaction by the public, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) promptly introduced several important websites, among which are the coronavirus worldwide dashboard displaying statistics of the virus spread and casualties caused by it, as well as a myth-busting website that is regularly updated (Robson, 2020).

The public could therefore find answers online provided by reliable sources (e.g. WHO) in the hope of preventing the spread of misinformation and rumors. Abd-Alrazaq *et al.* (2020) have conducted a classificatory study on a number of trending topics, which often include recurrent keywords, on social media all centered on the COIVD-19 pandemic. They conclude by strongly suggesting the instillation of a surveillance system to filter out tweets on social media that appear to impede the efforts of public health authorities in promoting people's cooperation and avoiding panic during health crises (Abd-Alrazaq *et al.*, 2020). In fact, during this COVID-19 pandemic, many governments have taken the spread of false news very seriously by employing law enforcement agencies to monitor posts on social media platforms, either through keywords or topic choice (Jain and Singh, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). For example, in Kuwait, the government issued laws that prosecute individuals who broadcast false news and fear-mongering online posts by imposing a large fine or imprisonment. Unfortunately, misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic seems to outweigh official information, according to Kouzy *et al.* (2020). They cross-examined topic-related categories of unofficial information (including non-serious ones containing humor) against COVID-19 related information provided by WHO and found that misinformation spread at a much faster and larger scale on Twitter than information that contained official, truthful facts.

The question is, can rumors on social media be controlled? A study by Zubiaga *et al.* (2016) examined a corpus of 330 rumor threads on 9 newsworthy events to try to verify the lifecycle of a rumor. Not unlike Kouzy *et al.* (2020), they found that the lifecycle of rumors that originate from reliable facts do not last as long as false rumors (Cinelli *et al.*, 2020; Del-Vicario *et al.*, 2016; Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). They concluded that online users tend to support false rumors much more, making it difficult for

governments to control and/or censor misinformation on social media (Doerr *et al.*, 2012; Zappavigna, 2012). Another study by Al-Surimi *et al.* (2016) looked at the advantages and disadvantages of social media and Internet-based data in real-time and their effect on the circulation of crucial information to the public during epidemics, such as SARS and MERS, among other infectious diseases, (Glowacki *et al.*, 2016). They argue that social media has the advantage of being very rapid with up-to-date Internet-based data and user-friendly tools. It can therefore enlighten the public about the characteristics of the disease, do and don't behaviors that influence its spread, and the timely global progression of the disease through an accurate surveillance system, among other advantages; and all within seconds. However, they also point out that a large part of the information on social media is not moderated by professionals and may often be questionable (Graza, 2020).

On a similar note, a more recent study by Thelwall and Thelwall (2020), examined the most popular posts tweeted during COVID-19 crisis and after classifying what was posted into different subject-related tweets – such as, funny, political and social distancing related tweets – they found that Twitter played many positive roles during the coronavirus crisis, mainly through unofficial tweets (Chen *et al.*, 2020). However, a recent study conveys the adverse effect of social media and its impact on public behavior online. Ahmad and Murad (2020) carried out a study on the impact of social media discourse during COVID-19 in Kurdistan and found that the spread of public panic through the choice of certain expressions was determined by the age of the user. They conclude that younger users are not only attracted to social media (where misinformation is readily available) more than official health websites but are also responsible for the spread of social media input. Similarly, in an article online, The Human Rights Watch official website highlighted the dangers of social media discourse and warned of its global impact during COVID-19. It aptly pinpoints how coronavirus discourse and derogatory language has shaped global reactions and the spread of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia evidenced in expressions such as, 'the Chinese virus' (Abd-Alrazaq *et al.*, 2020; Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020).

On the whole however, it is worth emphasizing that social media has made our life much easier during the COVID-19 experience. For example, the judicious choice of language expressions and keywords in trending posts and tweets on social media can easily provide a relief factor to people during the coronavirus crisis. Especially, for instance, when celebrities and important influencers reached out to the public sharing aspects of their daily lives through posts or tweets during the coronavirus lockdown (Sokolov, 2020). The idea of a famous Hollywood actor/actress or a known politician being seen respecting social distancing by staying home, or working from home, or washing their hands, or even simply sharing stay-safe tips with the public, could set a good example for people to follow (Hess, 2020; Jha, 2020). Depending on the linguistic content of posts or tweets, social media can therefore be far more beneficial than simply the sources of rumors about the COVID-19 crisis. If anything, social media posts can place at the users' disposition various genres of input offering entertainment and humor (Goldberg, 2020; Watt, 2020) at a time when the public is in dire need for emotional and mental uplifting stimulation (Kushner, 2020; Newton, 2020).

The key question to consider is: What are online users really looking for in the embedded language messages of online posts and tweets available on social media during the COVID-19 crisis? A question I aim to investigate in the present study. Given the newness of the coronavirus pandemic, the present study will present necessary research insights on the effect that language choices in social media posts have on online users during the COVID-19.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study was inspired by the interesting patterns of online engagements on social media platforms that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. The monotony and boredom resulting from staying at home in compliance with global lockdowns has led many people worldwide to spend more time on social media either in search for information related to the coronavirus or simply to look for distraction and entertainment. The aim of the present study is to investigate how utilizing linguistic resources largely affects the content of online posts on social media and how that impacts people's reactions towards COVID-19 pandemic as well as the dynamics of their online engagements during this period.

Through close observation of posts mainly on WhatsApp and Twitter during the first 3 weeks of the pandemic's onset, the researcher noted a tendency by many online users in Kuwait to favor certain posts on social media as evidenced from the high circulation of popular types of posts. Based on this observation a pilot questionnaire was set up to elicit as many perceptions on the nature of social media posts during the pandemic. The initial questionnaire was piloted on 10 participants for a reliability test,

which resulted in a Cronbach result of 0.82, and the consequent feedback then led to setting up an online survey consisting of 14 questions via use of the Crowdsignal application.

3.1. The Sample

Given that the coronavirus outbreak is a global crisis, it made more sense to aim for a more comprehensive perspective and thus widen the range of the study and include other countries (besides Kuwait) with no geographical restrictions. This was made possible given that the survey was distributed online. Beside 'nationality', four other sociolinguistic parameters were included in order to glean comparative insights, namely: gender, age, marital social status, and educational background. The survey was distributed locally and internationally to a common network of friends, family and acquaintances, while ensuring to participants that any information provided is used solely for research purposes and is protected by anonymity.

Therefore, the demographic information that is focused on in the present study is: gender, age, nationality, education and educational status. The total number of participants was 312, divided between 144 male and 168 female online users. The total age range under examination was (21 – 60+), with age groups classified within a nine-year range. The distribution of age groups is as follows: 26.9% of the users were between 21 – 29 years, 19.2% were between 30 – 39, 18.9% were between 40 – 49, 25.3% were between 50 – 59, and 9.6% were 60+. The nationality of participants shows a clear concentration on Kuwaiti users, reaching up to 229 users (73.4%), and therefore a mere 83 (26.6 %) non-Kuwaiti users. The non-Kuwaiti users were from different parts of the world, such as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Greece, England, Italy, Malta, U.S.A., and other countries, and were categorized as such as non-Kuwaiti to facilitate data analysis. Marital status was also examined as a variable to find out if there would be a link between married users with families (who are a majority of 61.2%) and the type of posts they preferred to view and share in comparison to users who were single (at 38.8%). Finally, educational background was examined to reveal the possible connection between the users' educational background and their preference of, and judgments on various posts in social media (see Table 1).

Table 1. The educational level of online users in the study

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High school	33	10.6	10.6	10.6
	Diploma	41	13.1	13.1	23.7
	Bachelor	146	46.8	46.8	70.5
	Master	45	14.4	14.4	84.9
	PhD	47	15.1	15.1	100.0
	Total	312	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

3.2. The Online Survey

The survey is designed to investigate several linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of various posts on social media during the COVID-19 crisis. Fourteen questions were designed to elicit not only views on the linguistic content of posts on social media platforms, but also the types of posts that have disappeared during this period and how users position themselves in relation to certain types of posts based on the various keywords that appear in them. Thirteen of the 14 questions invite participants to add comments that aim to elicit further information and by doing so, the questionnaire incorporates a qualitative dimension to the data – provided, of course, feedback is given by participants.

The first question focuses on the importance of social media in our lives, especially during the COVID-19 crises. The question was stimulatingly framed to ensure a clear position towards social media, namely: 'Can you imagine not having social media during the COVID-19 crises?' The next three questions focus on finding out the most popular platforms being used during COIVD-19 and the duration of screen-time spent, baring in mind the recent increase in screen-time due to the outbreak and people being quarantined at home. Somewhat linked to those questions is question 5, which investigates the platforms that most users tend to frequent in search for information or news related to COVID-19.

The rest of the questions focus more on the type of online posts that users prefer to view or avoid on social media as well as the type of online input they would (or would not) share with others. Questions 8 and 9 examine the position that users have taken towards social media input during the coronavirus outbreak. The former question emphasizes users' beliefs over governments' involvement in monitoring public input on social media during this period. The latter, on the other hand, looks at the effect of

humorous posts in diverting people's attention away from the harmful psychological impact of COVID-19. The idea of focusing on humor came into perspective upon noticing that funny posts tended to be the most popular online input during the three-week observational period towards the beginning of the crisis. Questions 10 and 11 are targeted to elicit users' preferences not only of the posts they would like to receive, but also on the ones they like to share with others. Questions 12 and 13 aim to understand the users' observations on the types of posts that frequently reoccur online and ones that have disappeared from social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last but by not least, the final question examines the impact of language content in online posts and the effect of theme-related keywords on the users' reactions to these posts. Keywords of ten potential theme-related topics were chosen based on conclusions made during the three-week observational period. Furthermore, 6 user reactions were selected to represent how users may react to a given post, or to an expression presented in a post. The 6 possible user reactions are: disbelieve, laugh, ignore, read, share and panic. The final reaction ('panic') was not included in the analysis due to its insignificant results.

3.3. The Interview

Inspired by the results from the survey in the present study, an interview was setup with a few select participants. Eight participants who answered the survey also volunteered to take part in an interview consisting of 5 questions that are a direct extension of some of the questions in the survey (see Section 3.2). Three of the participants were male and from non-Kuwaiti countries, while 5 were from Kuwait, 3 male and 2 female. The participants' ages were between 29 – 56 years old. The interviews were conducted online due to two reasons: 1) social distancing for local participants, and 2) geographical distance of participants from other countries. The aim of the interview is to look more closely at certain focal points and to elicit qualitative insights from users about the nature of social media content during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as examine perceptions on the types of posts viewed on social media.

The first question aims to find out whether users prefer to access information related to the coronavirus from official websites or via links on social media. The second question attempts to reveal whether there are specific words, phrases or Hashtags perceived by users as indicators that a certain post is a rumor or misinformation. Question number 3 asks users if the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has increased their viewing time on social media and probes the online platforms most preferred by users during this period. And finally, questions 4 and 5 focus on the language content of two particular types of posts, namely: funny and patriotic posts. Choosing to focus on these specific posts is, again, a direct influence from the results of the survey and is hoped will reveal people's preferences of online input choices during the coronavirus pandemic.

4. RESULTS
4.1. Survey Results

The findings of the present study indicate that the language content of social media posts has an important impact on user's online engagements during the coronavirus crisis. The data was analyzed via SPSS for frequency, mean, and significance of the independent variables. Significance was also elicited through one-way and two-way ANOVA tests. Moreover, the comments from interviews were analyzed structurally through social themed coding. According to the results of the first question in the study's survey, 76% of Internet users cannot imagine being without social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. While, 44.2% prefer to visit official websites (e.g. WHO) for information on COVID-19 and 17.3% prefer to focus on news websites (e.g. BBC and CNN, see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1. Popular Internet platforms visited during the COVID-19 crisis
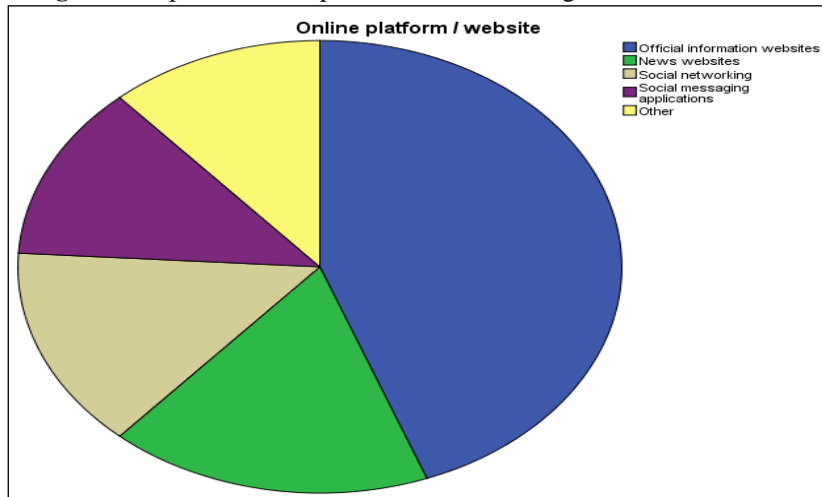
Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

Moreover, users tended to prefer viewing certain types of input and not others on social media. Therefore, in answer to question number 6 in the survey: 'During the COVID-19 crisis, what type of online posts do you prefer viewing?', users gravitated towards posts with comforting, optimistic language content as well as entertaining posts (at 31.1% and 17%, respectively, see Table 2, below). However, 20.2% of social media users preferred to view posts with patriotic slogans see Table 2, below). Interestingly, according to the results of question number 7.31.4% of the participants in the survey seem to dislike viewing posts catastrophic content or prophesizing posts linking the coronavirus to doomsday (the latter being at 32.1%, see Table 3, below). Posts with prophecy-related content were noted frequently on WhatsApp and Twitter during the three-week observational period of coronavirus outbreak (see Section 3.0, also see Abd-Alrazaq *et al.* (2020).

Table 2. The type of online posts users prefer 'viewing' during the COVID-19 crisis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Comforting optimistic posts	97	31.1	31.1	31.1
	Entertaining posts	53	17.0	17.0	48.1
	Distracting posts	57	18.3	18.3	66.3
	Patriotic slogans posts	63	20.2	20.2	86.5
	Other	42	13.5	13.5	100.0
	Total	312	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

Table 3. The type of online posts users prefer 'avoiding' during the COVID-19 crisis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Catastrophic News	98	31.4	31.4	31.4
	News about international or local causalities	37	11.9	11.9	43.3
	Information about lack of food and medications	45	14.4	14.4	57.7
	Doomsday prophecies	100	32.1	32.1	89.7
	Other	32	10.3	10.3	100.0
	Total	312	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

The idea of question number 8 in the survey is a direct projection from question 7 about the type of posts users dislike to view online (see Table 3). It elicits insights as to whether participants feel it necessary for government officials to interfere in filtering out posts that convey misinformation and rumors. According to 46.8% of the participants, government intervention in controlling COVID-19 related information on social media is necessary, 33.7% feel some intervention is needed, and a mere 19.6% perceive government intervention as unnecessary.

Additionally, also related to previous questions on the language content of online posts users liked or disliked to view is question number 9: 'If you had a choice, what type of online post would you like to view/receive frequently?' The choices that were given to participants in the survey were: 1) funny posts, 2) helpful posts, 3) general posts, 4) patriotic posts, and 5) informative posts (in this chronological order). Interestingly, 47.4% of online users prefer to see posts with more general content that are unrelated to COVID-19, only 'sometimes', which correlates closely with 55.8% who 'always' prefer helpful posts related to COVID-19 on social media. On the other hand, as many as 44.6% users 'sometimes' prefer to find posts with more funny language content online, and 36.2% users 'always' prefer to find humorous posts. In relation to posts with patriotic language content, as many as 39.7% of the users 'always' prefer them and 32.7% 'sometimes' prefer them.

Moreover, given that question number 9 is a Likert scale survey type question, where participants were given the option to choose answers from a 5-point scale ('1' being the best and '5' being the worst), a one-way ANOVA analysis by age, nationality, martial status shows significance in these variables. Therefore, at closer inspection, significance was found at $f \leq 0.01$ for patriotic posts favored by Kuwaiti users (at a mean of 4.12 from an average mean of 3.60), married users also favor patriotic posts (at a mean of 4.05 from an average mean of 3.85), and over-60-years users prefer patriotic posts (at a mean of 4.27 from an average mean of 3.21). However, more significant results were found at $f \leq 0.01$ for funny posts preferred by non-Kuwaiti users (at a mean of 4.42 from an average mean of 4), and non-married and non-Kuwaiti users (at a mean of 4.29 from an average mean of 4.11).

Question number 10 addresses posts with humorous language content online. This genre of input was chosen for closer examination because it was one of the recurring types of posts during the observational period of the present study. Significant results demonstrate a close divide between 36.5% of users preferring to view posts that display witty humor content and 35.6% opting for dark humor content based on the post's theme and the keywords. These results seem to resonate with the choice of 'humor' (at 34%, see Table 4) for the type of posts that online users prefer to share with others ('humor' being one of the options given in question 11: 'Do you post anything on social media platforms, if so what type of posts do you usually share?')

Table 4. Online posts usually shared with others

|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Funny posts	106	34.0	34.0	34.0
	Informative posts related to COVID-19	44	14.1	14.1	48.1
	Informative posts **un**related to COVID-19	78	25.0	25.0	73.1
	Patriotic posts	34	10.9	10.9	84.0
	Other	50	16.0	16.0	100.0
	Total	312	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

Furthermore, questions 12 and 13 in the survey of the present study, address opposing ideas with reference to the types of posts that users tend to think reoccur frequently on social media (question 12) and ones that are missing from social media since the start of the coronavirus outbreak (question 13). Significant results show that 57.4% of the users participating in the study believe that posts related to COVID-19 are recurrent online, while a mere 5.4% of these posts are patriotic in nature. On the hand, 38.8% online users seem to think that posts of sports content are missing from social media during the COVID-19 crisis, and 19.2% feel that post content linked to influencers and famous people have also visibly declined online.

Finally, the results for question 14 demonstrate the compelling effect of certain types of theme-related keywords on users' engagements in social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the data in Figure 2 (below), posts containing keywords such as 'Trump', 'UFOs are next', and 'Teleportation coronavirus' seem to cause users to laugh at, and disbelieve them, with 30.7% users choosing to read the 'UFOs are next' post, nonetheless (see Figure 2). Additionally, users appear interested to read posts containing keywords, such as 'Leisure time', 'The young are not safe', and 'treatment' all related to the coronavirus crisis, while only sharing posts on 'leisure time' with other users. Posts containing keywords related to 'staying at home' during the COVID-19 crisis seem to induce two significant opposing reactions 'ignore' at 34.1% and 'share with others' at 30.4% (see Figure 2). By far

the most significant result however, is linked to the humorous theme on 'Less grooming' during this period reaching up to 46.8%. Another theme that appeared to be considered humorous was 'Binge buying' at 33.1%, however, 32.8% of the users also tend to ignore it. Results showing users who 'disbelieve' and 'ignore' posts with keywords, such as 'Masks kill' – at 26.9% and 37.4%, respectively – are a clear indication that a 'protection mask' is a topic that is taken seriously by the public during the COVID-19 pandemic see (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The effect of theme-related keywords on users' reaction towards posts
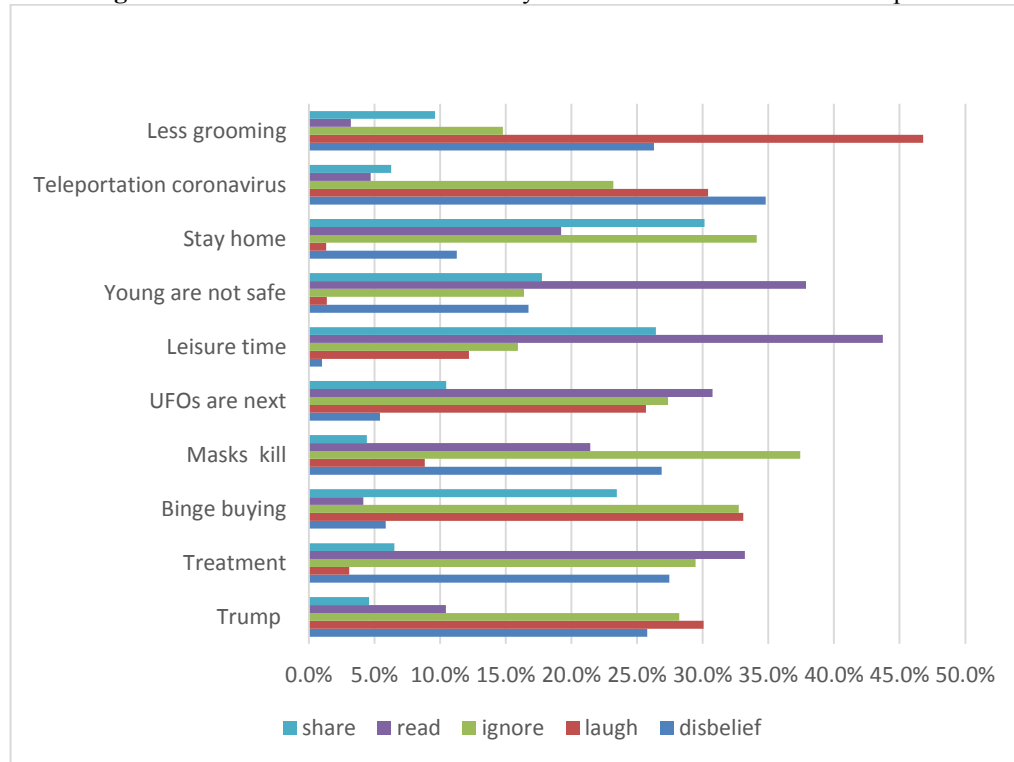
Source: Data collected from online survey application (Crowdsignal) and analyzed via SPSS.

4.2. Interview Results

The results from the interviews correspond directly to the quantitative results from the online survey of the present study (see Section 4.1). All the users who have increased their screen-time online during the COVID-19 pandemic unanimously point out that they access official health websites and trusted online news sites directly much more than being taken to them via links on social media. Additionally, according to participants, they tend not to accept or believe posts related to information on COVID-19 on social media. Half of the participants questioned most post language contents that 'claim the discovery of a treatment for the coronavirus or a miracle vaccine' while pointing out that 'many of these posts are usually linked to public announcements by President Trump' (according to interviewees), thus making them difficult to believe. The same perspective was also noted by similar comments given in the online survey (see Section 4.1).

Interviewee comments on the two types of posts that are often found on social media varied drastically. Not unlike feedback given in the online survey, three of the Kuwaiti participants tend to disfavor posts with funny content related to COVID-19 and did not accept that humor on social media could be considered an entertaining factor, much less as necessary online input. According to them, people do not wish to be entertained during a serious international health catastrophe. On the other hand, two male Kuwaiti interviewees strongly favor online posts with funny content during this period. One of them stating: 'I especially love trump-related humor'. Non-Kuwaiti and interviewees, also, seem to think that although the pandemic is a serious global health threat, 'humorous and funny posts on social media are very necessary to alleviate people's anxiety, fear and uncertainty caused by the coronavirus outbreak'. This last point of view also closely relates to the feedback from the online survey about posts with funny content on social media. Examples of posts on theme-related humor was given (by the interviewees) since the beginning of the pandemic, namely: quarantine-related, Trump-related, boredom-related, toilet paper-related, and so on.

Most Kuwaiti interviewees focused more prominently on posts with patriotic content, which according to them increased drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to two interviewees, Kuwait – a country usually divided into a majority of non-Kuwaiti expatriates in comparison with the smaller percentage of Kuwaitis – found itself reinforcing national unity through patriotic online posts that 'disapprove of the many non-nationals who have tried to take advantage of the country's recourses during the pandemic' (according to participants' feedback, also see Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2020) and Abd-Alrazaq *et al.* (2020). One Kuwaiti interviewee pointed out that the pandemic created a wave of international or regional competition among countries in relation to 'prevention lockdown protocols and preserving people's livelihoods based on a solid economy and sufficient national resources', resulting in Hashtags, such as: 'Kuwait is great' and 'we (Kuwaitis) are grateful to our country's resources'. Another interviewee explained that patriotic posts should never have religious themes claiming that the coronavirus is a punishment from God, or that the more people prayed the more likely the virus will be eliminated, instead these posts should be about bringing people together for the sake of the country. That said, however, only one of the Kuwaiti interviewees (the youngest) stated that patriotic posts are: 'so boring'.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present paper examined the role of social media during the coronavirus pandemic. More importantly, it investigated the effect that language content of online posts has on the way users deal with these posts and the way they position themselves towards certain issues and events in relation to the COVID-19 crisis. Echoing previous research on the significant rise of social media use (Collins, 2020; Loren, 2020; Perez, 2020), this study also demonstrates an increased online engagement, especially on social media platforms such as WhatsApp. According to quantitative and qualitative results here, online users have increased their screen-time due to reasons such as keeping in touch with friends and family, considering social media as a source of entertainment and an uplifting stimulant (Sherman, 2020; Tannen, 2020). Many users have also noted that they increased their presence on social media platforms to remain informed on COVID-19-related issues (Goldberg, 2020; Holland, 2020; Watt, 2020). Moreover, the qualitative results show that online users in numerous countries seem to have developed more interactive group engagements that center around an emerging coronavirus online culture (as previously mentioned) in which exchanging trending social media posts, is just one example (Abd-Alrazaq *et al.*, 2020).

The increase in online engagement during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have promoted more discerning online users when it comes to viewing posts linked to the coronavirus. The results of the present study indicate that users actively chose to rely on the pandemic-related information from official health websites and Internet news broadcast sites making sure to avoid being exposed to misinformation and rumors as well as to avoid sharing them (Glowacki *et al.*, 2016; Robson, 2020) although see Ahmad and Murad (2020). That said, however, many of the users who participated in both the survey and interviews of this study also admitted to accessing information on COVID-19 indirectly via (social media and social messaging) rather than going to official websites, such as WHO. This point was quite poignant from comments made by the majority of participants who took part in the interviews for this study.

In addition, according to online users (64%) who tended to shy away from catastrophic news and posts with expressions of prophecies, for example, linking the coronavirus to doomsday and the like, also believe there are many posts online that convey very believable information based on the language content in the posts. Comments from the survey as well as those made during interviews unanimously agreed that news and language content including certain keywords, such as 'Trump,' 'new vaccines or treatments' are likely to be misinformation and thus not believable. In fact, it was clear early on during the first period of the coronavirus outbreak that a pattern of online social media engagements was emerging (Kouzy *et al.*, 2020; Sokolov, 2020; Thelwall and Thelwall, 2020). According to the observational period mentioned earlier, various reactions by users to particular posts on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter were noted and were later evidenced in results from both the survey and online interviews. For instance, feedback from participants shows that users consider the language content of patriotic and funny posts to be the most preferred input on social media. According to participants, these types of posts tend to have a positive and uplifting influence on people during the pandemic. Apparently, through keyword choice, these posts also tend to be theme-related based on the given coronavirus phase taking place at the time (see Figure 2). This is yet another factor that allowed users from all corners of the world to exchange shared issues during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Think for

example, the humorous toilet paper theme-related posts that went viral online at one point during the pandemic (see Section 4.2).

Also, worth mentioning here, are the posts with patriotic language content believed to be very helpful based on participant feedback. For example, these online posts are important because they encourage people to help their community stay safe by adhering to preventative guidelines issued by the government officials. Posts with patriotic slogans are therefore seen as raising awareness, a sense of community and forming a united front against the coronavirus pandemic. The younger generation, however, does not understand their purpose and considers them to be 'so boring' (in the words of participants) and posts with keywords such as 'stay home' tend to be 'ignored' (see Figure 2).

As far as posts with funny language content are concerned, users were divided into two groups, a group that perceives humor during the COVID-19 pandemic (whether witty or dark, related or unrelated to the coronavirus) as 'extremely necessary during this dark global period of our lives' and 'beneficial in minimizing the anxiety and fear created by a deadly disease' (according to users' feedback, also see Figure 2). However, the other group of participants strictly disagrees, since many of the users believe that 'the pandemic is a very serious disease', which has caused nothing but 'human fatalities' and 'economic destruction' and should therefore 'not be joked about' and 'users should not exchange funny posts related to COVID-19' (as expressed by participants).

In agreement with similar research carried out in the Middle East region (Abd-Alrazaq *et al.*, 2020), it is also worth mentioning at this point, that whether it is inappropriate funny posts or rumors about the pandemic, a total of about 80% of the users participating in the present study feel that government officials should interfere (fully or to some extent) in filtering out the negative effect of coronavirus misinformation also see Jain and Singh (2020). Not to mention that users in this study generally tended to shy away from news that included catastrophic language content or keywords that indicate prophecies linked to the coronavirus pandemic (see Figure 2). Moreover, many have noticed the 'unfortunate' disappearance of posts with sports news content and famous celebrity tabloids from social media. According to many participants, having news that is unrelated to the coronavirus pandemic is a pleasant change and positive distraction from the dismal news that overloads the Internet daily (although see Sokolov 2020).

To conclude therefore this study has shown that social media has played an important role in keeping people informed about the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also helped in maintaining communication between people and bringing them together during a crisis that has enforced human physical distance. More importantly, it has shown that certain types of posts, that usually include particular keywords, enable social media users to decide how they wish to react and behave towards COVID-19-related public information online. It is, therefore, safe to say that social media has been the key to closing the physical distance created by the dangerous contagion of the coronavirus pandemic. Even the older generation succumbed to social media to keep in touch with loved ones. Of course, with instant global news being broadcast online regularly, there comes the risk of exposure to coronavirus misinformation and rumors; a setback of social media engagement. A disadvantage that is mostly eliminated, thanks to users who have become more critical of online language content in social media posts.

Although the present study has provided an overview on the role of social media during the coronavirus pandemic, yet this topic is of such depth and importance during such a global crisis that it merits further closer inspection. In hindsight, the initial goal of this study was to provide a comparative perspective of how language content in social media posts affects online users during the COVID-19 pandemic. The comparative dimension was build, initially, on five different variables (see Section 3.0). However, it was noted during the investigative process that covering such a vast research territory would have been far beyond the scope of the present paper. Therefore, the present study mostly benefited from building on two variables rather than five at a later stage. Having said that, however, this study will undoubtedly contribute as an overview of the role that the language content of social media posts plays during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it may be considered a useful point of reference for further investigations of other linguistic patterns that typify social media posts during a pandemic. An interesting future research sequel would be a longitudinal study using a similar methodological framework with a similar research objective in the period 'following' the coronavirus crisis when participants could offer a more neutral or objective outlook towards online engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

REFERENCES

Abd-Alrazaq, A., Alhuwail, D., Househ, M., Hamdi, M. and Shah, Z. (2020). Top concerns of tweeters during the COVID-19 pandemic: infoveillance study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22(4)*:

Ahmad, A. R. and Murad, H. R. (2020). The impact of social media on panic during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraqi Kurdistan: online questionnaire study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22(5)*:

Al-Surimi, K., Khalifa, M., Bahkali, S., Ashraf, E. M. and Househ, M. (2016). The potential of social media and internet-based data in preventing and fighting infectious diseases: from internet to twitter. In Emerging and Re-emerging Viral Infections (pp. 131-139). Springer, Cham.

Chen, E., Lerman, K. and Ferrara, E. (2020). Tracking social media discourse about the COVID-19 pandemic: Development of a public coronavirus twitter data set. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance, 6(2)*:

Cinelli, M., Quattrociocchi, W., Galeazzi, A., Valensise, C. M., Brugnoli, E., Schmidt, A. L. and Scala, A. (2020). The covid-19 social media infodemic. arXiv preprint arXiv:2003.05004.

Collins, K. (2020). Facebook Sees 70% Increase in Messenger Group Video Calls Following Coronavirus Outbreak. In Cent, Available at: https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-sees-surge-of-engagement-worldwide-following-coronavirus-outbreak/.

Del-Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G. and Quattrociocchi, W. (2016).*The spreading of misinformation online*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Doerr, B., Fouz, M. and Friedrich, T. (2012). Why rumors spread so quickly in social networks. *Communications of the ACM, 55(6): 70-75*.

Glowacki, E. M., Lazard, A. J., Wilcox, G. B., Mackert, M. and Bernhardt, J. M. (2016). Identifying the public's concerns and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's reactions during a health crisis: An analysis of a Zika live Twitter chat. *American Journal of Infection Control, 44(12): 1709-11*.

Goldberg, B. (2020). Humor is Healing': Laughter Soothes Nerves During COVID-19 Trauma, In Reuters,Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-humor/humor-is-healing-laughter-soothes-nerves-during-covid-19-trauma.

Graza, A. (2020). How Social Media is Shaping Our Fears of – and Response to – the Coronavirus. In Time, Available at: https://time.com/5802802/social-media-coronavirus/.

Harris, A. S. and Kurasawa, F. (2020). COVID-19: Social Media both a Blessing and a Curse During Coronavirus Pandemic, in The Conversation: Academic rigor, Journalistic Flair.

Herring, S. C. (2004). Online communication: Through the lens of discourse. *Internet Research Annual, 1: 65-76*.

Hess, A. (2020). Celebrity Culture Is Burning: The pandemic has disrupted relations among the masses, the elites and the celebrities who liaise between them. In The New York Times, Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/arts/virus-celebrities.html.

Holland, M. (2020). How to Take a Digital Detox During the COVID-19 Pandemic. In BBC, Worklife, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200513-how-to-take-a-digital-detox-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2020). COVID-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide: National action plan needed to counter intolerance, Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide.

Jain, K. and Singh, B. (2020). View: Disinformation in times of a pandemic, and the laws around it. In The Economic Times, Available at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com.

Jha, L. (2020). Coronavirus: WHO, others tap social media, celebs to raise awareness, in Livemint, Available at: www.livemint.com.

Kouzy, R., Abi-Jaoude, J., Kraitem, A., El-Alam, M. B., Karam, B., Adib, E. and Baddour, K. (2020). Coronavirus goes viral: quantifying the COVID-19 misinformation epidemic on Twitter. *Cureus, 12(3)*:

Kushner, J. (2020). The Role of Social Media During a Pandemic, In Khoros, Industry Trends, Available at: https://khoros.com/blog/social-medias-role-during-covid-19.

Loren, T. (2020). Social Media & Covid-19: How to communicate during a crisis. In Later, Available at: https://later.com/blog/social-media-covid-19/.

Newton, C. (2020). How Social Networks can Do Good While We're Trapped Indoors, In The Verge, Available at: https://www.theverge.com/interface.

Pedersen, B. (2020). Shuttered gyms are shifting to virtual training. In Lehigh Valley Business, Available at: https://www.lvb.com/shuttered-gyms-shifting-virtual-training/.

Perez, S. (2020). WhatsApp has Seen a 40% Increase in Usage Due to COVID-19 Pandemic. In Church Tech,Available at: https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/26/report-whatsapp-has-seen-a-40-increase-in-usage-due-to-covid-19-pandemic/.

Robson, D. (2020). Why Smart People Believe Coronavirus Myths. In BBC Future, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article.

Sherman, N. (2020). Zoom Sees Sales Boom Amid Pandemic, in BBC News, Bussiness reporter, New York, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/business

Sokolov, M. (2020). The Pandemic Infodemic: How social media helps (and hurts) during the coronavirus outbreak. In The Drum Network: Opinion, Available at: https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2020.

Tannen, D. (2020). In Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently here's how. In Politico, Available at: https://www.politico.com/news/magazine.

Thelwall, M. and Thelwall, S. (2020). Retweeting for COVID-19: Consensus building, information sharing, dissent, and lockdown life. arXiv preprint arXiv:2004.02793.

UNESCO (2020). During this Coronavirus Pandemic 'Fake News' is Putting Lives at Risk. In New Health, Avaiable at: https://news.un.org/en/story.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. Science. *359(6380): 1146-51*.

Watt, T. (2020). Amid COVID-19 uncertainty, humour has kept us going – but I'd hate to see brands involved, In The Drum Network: Opinion, Available at: https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2020.

WHO (2020). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Myth busters. In Myth busters, Available at: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters.

Wright, R. (2020). Finding Connection and Resilience During the Coronavirus Pandemic. In The New Yorker: Our columnist, Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/coping-camaraderie-and-human-evolution-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis.

Zappavigna, M. (2012). Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web (Vol. 6). A&C Black.

Zubiaga, A., Liakata, M., Procter, R., Hoi, G. W. S. and Tolmie, P. (2016). Analysing how people orient to and spread rumours in social media by looking at conversational threads. *PloS one, 11(3)*:

Zubiaga, A., Aker, A., Bontcheva, K., Liakata, M. and Procter, R. (2018). Detection and resolution of rumours in social media: A survey. *ACM Computing Surveys (CSUR), 51(2): 1-36*.