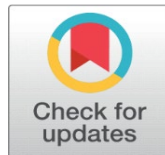


MEDIA DEPENDENCY BEHAVIOUR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented global health crisis, accompanied by widespread social, economic, and educational disruptions. In India, and particularly in Karnataka, the pandemic reshaped people's everyday lives, compelling them to rely heavily on media for information, guidance, and connection. With strict lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and heightened uncertainty, the media became a primary source of news updates, government guidelines, health advisories, and even emotional support. In Karnataka, the media played a major role during the pandemic. Television news channels, regional newspapers, government portals, and digital press disseminated verified information. In contrast, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter became both sources of instant updates and avenues for misinformation. In this background, the present study investigated the media dependency behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic in Karnataka with the objectives to identify the most preferred media for information-seeking, to determine the extent of media dependency for information during COVID-19 in Karnataka, and to study the impact of media dependency on the audience. The study used a structured questionnaire to find the answer to the above objectives. This study has explored the intricate relationship between individuals and media platforms during a time of uncertainty, revealing how people turned to various forms of media to seek clarity, security, and understanding. The findings are valuable not only for understanding the past pandemic but also for preparing communication strategies in the face of future crises.

Keywords: Pandemic, Media Dependency, Impact, Information Seeking

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 created an unprecedented global health crisis, accompanied by widespread social, economic, and educational disruptions. In India, and particularly in Karnataka, the pandemic reshaped people's everyday lives, compelling them to rely heavily on media for information, guidance, and connection. With strict lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and heightened uncertainty, the media became a primary source of news updates, government guidelines, health advisories, and even emotional support.

In Karnataka, the dependence on various media platforms reflected diverse socio-economic and cultural dynamics. Television news channels, regional newspapers, government portals, and digital media played a crucial role in disseminating verified information. In contrast, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter became both sources of instant updates and avenues for misinformation. At the same time, digital media helped sustain education, remote work, and social interactions, highlighting a shift in media consumption patterns.

Studying media dependency behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic in Karnataka is therefore significant, as it sheds light on how people navigated uncertainty, managed information overload, and adapted their media usage. Such research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the media's role in crisis communication, the challenges of misinformation, and the long-term transformations in media consumption habits within the state.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it not only enriches academic debates on media dependency but also offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, media practitioners, educators, and society at large. Its findings are valuable not only for understanding the past pandemic but also for preparing communication strategies in the face of future crises.

2.1. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study is grounded in the Media Dependency Theory proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976, which provides a useful framework for examining the relationship between individuals, media, and society during times of uncertainty. The theory argues that people's dependency on media is shaped by their needs, the capacity of media to fulfill those needs, and the broader social context in which they live. Under normal circumstances, individuals have access to multiple sources of information and social interaction; however, in times of crisis, when interpersonal communication and institutional support are disrupted, the media becomes a primary and often indispensable source of information and connection.

The COVID-19 pandemic created such a situation of disruption and uncertainty. In Karnataka, as in other parts of the world, strict lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and heightened anxiety forced individuals to turn to media to fulfill three major needs: informational, social, and affective. Media outlets such as television, newspapers, and digital media offered constant updates on the pandemic, government announcements, and health advisories, thereby addressing informational needs. At the same time, social media platforms and messaging services allowed people to remain connected with friends, families, and communities, thus fulfilling their social needs. Entertainment programs, online streaming, and interactive platforms further provided emotional support and relief, helping individuals cope with stress and isolation, thereby meeting affective needs.

The theory also emphasizes that media dependency tends to increase in times of social instability or crisis, which was evident during the pandemic. While the media provided essential guidance and reassurance, it also became a channel for misinformation and rumors, creating confusion and fear among the public. This dual role of media highlights both the strengths and vulnerabilities of dependency patterns in times of crisis. By applying MDT, the present study seeks to analyze how

individuals in Karnataka negotiated these opportunities and challenges through their media consumption practices.

The study draws on insights from crisis communication research. Thus, the theoretical foundation of this research situates media dependency as a dynamic process shaped by uncertainty, need, and access, making it particularly relevant to the study of media behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic in Karnataka.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous scholars have examined media dependency during crises, traditionally focusing on conventional outlets such as radio, television, and newspapers. However, some studies have expanded this framework to include digital platforms, recognizing their increasing role in information dissemination during emergencies. For instance, [Tai and Sun \(2007\)](#) investigated media dependency among Chinese individuals during the 2003 SARS epidemic. They found that, in an environment where information was highly controlled, individuals actively sought information through alternative resources like short message services (SMS) and the internet. These platforms not only facilitated information access but also allowed individuals to become information producers and disseminators, challenging official narratives.

Similarly, [Lowrey \(2004\)](#) explored the uses and dependency model in the context of mass communication. While the study primarily focused on traditional media, it acknowledged the evolving media landscape and the potential impact of digital platforms on media dependency during crises.

These studies highlight the dynamic nature of media dependency during crises, emphasizing the importance of both traditional and digital media in shaping public response and behaviour.

[Kioussis \(2011\)](#) emphasizes that trust in the media is essential for effective communication, especially in times of crisis. He argues that when the public trusts the media, they are more likely to accept and act upon the information disseminated, which is vital for coordinated responses during emergencies. Similarly, [Jacob \(2010\)](#) discusses how trust in media affects public perception and behavior, noting that during crises, media credibility becomes a key factor in shaping public responses. [Tsfati \(2003\)](#) further explores this relationship, indicating that trust in the media influences how individuals perceive and respond to information, particularly in politically charged contexts.

[Greenberg et al. \(2002\)](#) suggest that increased online communication during crises may be driven by its significant impact on individuals' well-being. The study highlights that during emergencies, individuals often turn to the internet to seek information, connect with others, and alleviate feelings of uncertainty and distress. This heightened engagement underscores the role of digital platforms in providing emotional support and facilitating coping mechanisms during times of crisis.

In his 2005 work, Longstaff emphasizes that during crises, the media becomes a cornerstone of societal functioning. He observes that the public often places greater trust in the media than in state institutions to understand and navigate their environment. This trust is pivotal for social resilience, as it ensures the dissemination of accurate and timely information, enabling individuals and communities to respond effectively to emergencies.

Throughout global crises, the media plays a pivotal role in maintaining societal stability by providing the public with relevant and credible information. This reliability stems from the public's trust in the media, which becomes especially

pronounced during emergencies when individuals seek guidance and clarity. [Mitomo et al. \(2012\)](#) underscore that during such times, the media's ability to deliver timely and accurate information is crucial for helping the public make informed decisions amidst uncertainty.

3.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to explore the relationship between media dependency and its impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific objectives are: -

- To identify the most preferred media for information-seeking
- To determine the extent of media dependency for information during COVID-19 in Karnataka
- To investigate the impact of media dependency on the audience

4. RESEARCH METHOD

The study is quantitative, and a survey was adopted to collect the data. The data is collected with a structured questionnaire, and questions are designed based on a 5-point Likert Scale.

The nature of questions in the questionnaire was closed-ended. The questions were related to media dependency behaviour during COVID-19. The questionnaire is given to respondents who are willing to fill out the questionnaire and respond to the questions.

For the survey, the researcher has selected 465 samples. According to Datagov, as of September 2024, there are 57.88 million internet users in Karnataka. Based on this number, using the formula given by [Kiouisis \(2011\)](#), the researcher obtained a sample size of 385 for the survey. The confidence level is 90% with a sampling error margin rate of +5%, and the population proportion is 50%. The obtained sample is the minimum sample for the research. The researcher has selected 465 samples to give equal representation for all the districts in Karnataka, and the present study considers the entire state as the sampling area.

the researcher adopted a convenience and snowball sampling method to select the samples that were heavily dependent on media during COVID-19.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Among the 465 respondents, 232 (49.9%) were female, and 233 (50.1%) were male. The researcher aimed to ensure equal representation of both genders, with each district contributing 15 samples, resulting in a total of 465. Consequently, the difference in the representation of genders is minimal.

Among the respondents, 50.1% are from rural areas and 49.9% are from urban areas. The study's equal representation of rural and urban respondents aligns with Karnataka's demographic distribution. According to the 2011 Census, 61.33% of Karnataka's population resides in rural areas, while 38.67% live in urban areas. This distribution is reflected in the study's sampling strategy, which aimed to ensure equal representation from both rural and urban districts.

The respondents are from various age groups. There are 160 respondents (34.4%) aged 21 to 30, 149 respondents (32.1%) aged 31 to 40, 120 (25.8%) aged 41 to 50, and only 36 respondents (7.7%) aged 51 years and older. The 11 to 30 age group represents the majority (34.4%) of the respondents.

Among the respondents, 323 (69.5%) are married, 140 (30.1%) are unmarried, and only 0.4% preferred not to disclose their marital status.

Respondents come from different educational backgrounds. Among them, 202 (43.5%) have pursued a post-graduate degree or higher, 86 respondents (18.4%) have completed professional courses, 97 respondents (20.9%) hold a bachelor's degree, 50 respondents (10.8%) have completed pre-university courses, and 30 respondents (6.4%) have education up to the 10th grade. The majority of the respondents (43.5%) hold a post-graduate degree or a higher level of education.

Like diverse educational backgrounds, respondents are involved in various professions. Among them, 33 (7.1%) are involved in agriculture, 224 (71.9%) are working in private sectors, 33 (7.1%) are working in government sectors, 12 (2.5%) are homemakers, 5 (1.1%) are senior citizens, and 48 (10.3%) respondents are students. The majority (71.9%) of the respondents are working in the private sector/jobs.

About 80 (17.2%) respondents are from below Rs. 10000 income group, 248 (53.3%) are getting Rs. 10001 to 30000 as their monthly income, 90 are (19.3%) are in the Rs. 30,001 to 60,000 group, 19 (4.1) are getting Rs. 60,001 to 90,000 income per month and 28 (6.1%) are getting Rs. 90001 and above per month as their income. The majority (53.3%) of the respondents are from the Rs. 10001 to 30000 income group.

Respondents preferred many media outlets to get the information during COVID-19. 20 of them preferred newspaper, 4 of them favoured newspaper and mobile, same number of the respondent chose newspaper and radio, radio, TV, newspaper and radio, 153 selected social media, 14 of them said social media and newspaper, 129 selected social media and TV, 21 favoured social media, TV, newspaper and radio, 6 chose social media, TV and radio, 50 watched only TV and 3 watched TV along with newspaper. The majority (80.9%) of the respondents preferred social media along with newspaper, TV, and radio.

Table 1

Table 1 Respondents' Most Preferred Media During COVID-19

	Frequency	Percentage
Newspaper	20	4.3%
Newspaper & Mobile	4	0.9%
Newspaper & Radio	4	0.9%
Radio	4	0.9%
Social media	153	32.9%
Social media & Newspaper	14	3.0%
Social media & TV	129	27.8%
Social media, TV & Newspaper	53	11.3%
Social media, TV, Newspaper & Radio	21	4.5%
Social media, TV & Radio	6	1.2%
Television	50	10.7%
TV & Newspaper	3	0.7%
TV, Newspaper & Radio	4	0.9%
Total	465	100.0%

The most striking insight is that 80.9% of the respondents preferred social media either alone or in combination with traditional media. This highlights a clear media dependency shift toward digital platforms during the pandemic, emphasizing the growing importance and influence of social media in crisis communication and public information-seeking behaviour. Traditional media, while still relevant, played more of a complementary role rather than being the primary source.

During COVID-19, respondents watched different news channels along with their favourite one. 30 (8.3%) of the respondents watched almost all news channels. 10 (2.1%) watched DD Chandana, 18 (4.0%) viewed English news channels, 16 (3.5%) said both English and Hindi news channels, 365 (78.5%) answered they watched various Kannada news channels such as Newsfirst, Public TV, Suvarna News, TV9 along with English news channels and 17 (3.6%) replied they preferred other news channels. The majority (78.5%) of the respondents preferred Kannada news channels along with others.

This suggests that while audiences did diversify their news sources, regional language media, particularly Kannada news channels, served as the primary and trusted source of information for the majority. This emphasizes the critical role of linguistically and culturally relevant media during public health emergencies, where clarity and relatability are essential for effective communication.

Table 2

Table 2 Social Media Platforms Mostly Depended on to Obtain Information about the Pandemic by the Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	46	10.00%
Facebook & Instagram	27	5.80%
Facebook & WhatsApp	49	10.50%
Instagram	34	7.30%
Twitter	29	6.20%
WhatsApp	61	13.10%
WhatsApp & Instagram	32	6.90%
All	187	40.20%
Total	465	100.00%

Most of the respondents depended on different social media platforms to obtain information on the pandemic conditions in the state. 46 (10.0%) of them depended on Facebook, 27 (5.8%) said both Facebook and Instagram, 49 (10.5%) answered both Facebook and WhatsApp, 34 (7.3%) replied Instagram, 29 (6.3%) said Twitter, 61 (13.1%) depended on WhatsApp, 32 (6.9%) hang on both WhatsApp and Instagram and 187 (40.2%) depended on all of these social media platforms. The majority (40.2%) of the respondents relied on all kinds of social media to obtain coronavirus information.

These findings suggest that during health crises, people tend to use multiple social media channels simultaneously to access timely and varied information, reinforcing the dominant role of digital media in public communication.

During the COVID-19 period, 83 (17.9%) of the respondents spent less than 1 hour on media, 155 (33.3%) of them spent 1 to 2 hours, 121 (26.0%) spent 3 to 4 hours, and 106 (22.8%) engaged with media for more than 5 hours in a day. The

majority (48.8%) of the respondents spend up to 3 to 4 hours and more than 5 hours a day, as they were free and stayed at home due to the pandemic situation.

This underscores how media became a central part of daily life during the pandemic, especially in the context of restricted outdoor and social activities.

Table 3

Table 3 Extent of Media Dependency During COVID-19 by the Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage
A very little extent	13	2.80%
A little extent	54	11.60%
Undecided or can't say	67	14.50%
A great extent	154	33.10%
A very great extent	177	38.00%
Total	465	100.00%

Respondents were asked about the extent of media dependency during the period. 13 (2.8%) said a very little extent, 54 (11.6%) replied a little extent, 67 (14.5%) answered undecided or can't say, 154 (33.1%) felt a great extent, 177 (38.0%) said a very great extent. Hence, it is found that the majority (71.1%) of the respondents depended on the media to a great extent during COVID-19.

Table 4

Table 4 Reasons given by Respondents for more Media Dependency		
	Frequency	Percentage
For Entertainment	35	9.20%
Just to pass the time	13	3.50%
Strong need for moral support	64	17.00%
Strong need for COVID-19 information	214	56.80%
To know about the situation	24	6.40%
To take care of my family	27	7.10%
Total	377	100.00%

The respondents were asked about the reasons for more media dependency, 35 (9.2%) of them said for entertainment, 13 (3.5%) answered just to pass the free time, 64 (17.0%) felt strong need for moral support, 214 (56.8%) thought they strongly needed COVID 19 information, 24 (6.4%) said to know about the situation in the state, 27 (7.1%) replied to take care of their family they depended on media more. The majority (56.8%) of the respondents opined that they strongly needed COVID-19 information as it was a new virus and spread across the world.

These findings highlight that during public health emergencies, the media becomes a vital resource not only for factual updates but also for emotional reassurance and a sense of control. The dominant motivation to seek COVID-19 information underscores the public's reliance on media as a critical channel for life-saving knowledge and guidance during crises.

To know the regularity of the media dependency, the question was asked, and 179 (39.0%) of them answered always, 153 (32.9%) said frequently, and 42 (9.0%) replied undecided or can't say. 75 (16.1%) said sometimes, and 16 (3.4%) felt rarely. The majority (71.9%) of the respondents connected to the media always during the COVID-19 period.

These findings suggest that for most people, the media became a routine and reliable source of information and support, particularly during a time of widespread uncertainty. The high level of consistent media use highlights its central role in daily life during the pandemic, driven by the need for updates, guidance, and a sense of connection to the outside world.

When the question asked to know the opinion of the respondents on the role of media during COVID-19, only 7.6% said unsatisfactory, 107 (23.0%) replied Don't know and the majority, 323 (69.4%) of the respondents said satisfactory. Therefore, it can be concluded that people are happy with the role played by the media during COVID-19.

Overall, the findings suggest that people were generally happy with the media's performance, recognising its importance in delivering timely and essential information during a global health emergency. This positive assessment reinforces the trust and reliance placed on the media during critical times.

To check the satisfaction level of the respondents, the question was asked. For that, 71 (15.4%) said their satisfaction level is up to a little extent, 77 (16.6%) answered they can't decide their satisfaction level, and 316 (68%) of the respondents replied they were greatly satisfied with the information sought by the media.

Table 5

Table 5 Impact on Respondents After Getting Information		
	Frequency	Percentage
Confused after getting more information	20	4.30%
Felt life is secured	8	1.70%
Got more knowledge about COVID-19	272	58.40%
Scared to depend on the media for information	18	3.90%
Understood the intensity of the situation	44	9.50%

These findings demonstrate a generally positive public perception of the media's performance in disseminating pandemic-related information. The high satisfaction level reflects the trust and reliance people placed on media outlets for staying informed and making decisions during an unprecedented global crisis.

The question also asked about the impact of the information on respondents. 9 (1.9%) of the felt they understood negative issues related to COVID-19, 20 (4.3%) said confused after getting more information, 18 (3.9%) stated that conveyed the sought message to others, 8 (1.7%) expressed that they felt their life is secured, 59 (12.7%) voiced that they followed COVID-19 guidelines, 272 (58.4%) communicated that they got more knowledge about COVID-19, 7 (1.5%) learnt to maintain cleanliness and distance, 18 (3.9%) feared to depend in media for information, 10 (2.2%) opined that they stressed with the information, 44 (9.5%) of them express that they understood the intensity of the situation. The majority (58.4%) of the respondents said that through the media, they got more information on COVID-19.

Overall, while a few respondents experienced confusion or stress, the data strongly suggest that the media had a predominantly positive impact, particularly in informing, educating, and influencing responsible behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study strongly support and extend the Media Dependency Theory developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), particularly in the context of a large-scale health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the theory, individuals become more reliant on media when their usual sources of information or stability are disrupted, especially during times of social uncertainty or upheaval. This study provides empirical evidence of that premise, as respondents demonstrated a heightened dependence on media for various needs, including information, emotional support, and entertainment during the pandemic.

The pandemic created a climate of fear, confusion, and instability, making people highly dependent on media platforms for accurate updates about the virus, public health guidelines, and the overall situation in their localities and beyond. This aligns with the theory's assertion that the greater the instability in society, the greater the audience's dependency on media, which in turn increases the media's potential impact. In this case, the media not only informed the public but also influenced how people emotionally and behaviourally responded to the crisis.

Moreover, the study confirms that the public turned to media not only for information but also for reassurance and connection, reinforcing the theory's proposition that media satisfy multiple psychological and social needs. Many respondents indicated they consumed media for entertainment and relaxation, highlighting the media's role in managing emotional stress during lockdowns and uncertainty.

A notable finding was that 46% of respondents subscribed to digital or other media platforms for the first time during the pandemic, while the remaining 54% continued existing subscriptions. This uptake supports the idea that during crises, people actively seek out media as a primary and trusted resource, deepening their dependency. Additionally, a large number of respondents said they shared media content with others, demonstrating how media not only satisfies personal needs but also influence social behaviours.

The study also reflects the dual nature of media effects—both positive and negative—as suggested by the theory. On the one hand, respondents reported gaining useful knowledge about COVID-19 and adopting safety guidelines. On the other hand, some experienced stress, confusion, or fear due to information overload and the spread of potentially misleading content. This duality reflects the media's power not just to inform but also to shape emotions and behaviours.

Finally, the study reinforces the relevance of Media Dependency Theory in the digital age, especially during crises. It shows how the media becomes an indispensable institution in managing public perception, behaviour, and psychological well-being. In conclusion, the theory provides a robust framework for interpreting the media's role in crisis communication and emphasizes the responsibility of media outlets to deliver accurate, accessible, and reassuring information, especially in times of collective uncertainty.

7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic was not only a global health crisis but also a critical test of how societies interact with information. This study has explored the intricate relationship between individuals and media platforms during a time of uncertainty, revealing how people turned to various forms of media to seek clarity, security, and understanding. Guided by Media Dependency Theory, the research highlights the crucial role media played in shaping perceptions, behaviours, and emotional responses among the public during the pandemic.

From the overwhelming need for accurate information to the emotional consequences of media overexposure, the findings underscore both the power and responsibility of media in times of crisis. While many respondents benefited from timely and relevant information, challenges such as misinformation, language barriers, and psychological stress were also evident.

As the world transitions into a post-pandemic era, the insights gained from this study remain highly relevant. They serve as a reminder of the critical need for responsible media communication, stronger digital literacy, and continued research on the media's evolving role in society. This study ultimately affirms that media is not just a channel of communication, but a lifeline during crises, one that must be thoughtfully developed, critically consumed, and ethically managed.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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