

Research Paper

Infodemic of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effect on Levels of Stress

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ABSTRACT

Invasion of the SARS CoV-2 virus has been accompanied by round-the-clock dissemination of information on media platforms. The purpose of the research was to study the “infodemic” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and measure its effect on levels of stress in individuals. It was hypothesized that there is a significant difference in the levels of perceived stress based on the type of media consumed by individuals and that more news consumption will lead to higher perceived stress levels. It was also hypothesized that there is a significant difference between the level of perceived stress in males and females on the basis of news consumption. Data was collected from a total of 307 participants (both male and female) aged 16-62. The NSE media consumption test was used to survey the participants’ media usage. The Perceived Stress Scale was used to determine the levels of stress. Mean and Standard Deviation was calculated for the group of participants and T-test and one way ANOVA was used to analyze the scores. The results indicated that the participants experienced moderate levels of perceived stress regardless of the type of media and amount of news consumed across all sexes between March 2021 and June 2021 of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Infodemic, News, Media Consumption, NSE Media Consumption Test, Stress, PSS, Media Credibility and Accountability, Mass Media, Desensitization.

Coronavirus (CoV) is a type of virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV2 virus) outbreak as a “serious global threat” in 2020. As the virus swept across the globe, media consumption rates increased more than ever. Media usage, also known as media consumption, is defined as the sum total of information and entertainment media consumed by an individual or a group. There are a variety of factors that determine media consumption; they include: consumers’ interests and preferences, affordability, accessibility, gender and other social norms.

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“Infodemic” as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) is, “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak.” According to the WHO, an infodemic causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors, which eventually has a harmful impact on health. With people being unsure about what they need to do in order to protect their health and the health of people around them, the intensity and/or the length of an outbreak increases. While information voids get filled quickly due to this, it can also amplify harmful messages. Prevalence of an infodemic (including false news, conspiracy theories, magical cures and biased news) is also associated with the potential to increase anxiety and stress in individuals and even lead to loss of life (Rathore & Farooq, 2020).

Mass media plays a huge role in not only circulating information but also in influencing public behavior. India went into a lockdown on March 25, 2020. And a survey conducted in the first week of the lockdown showed that the rate of social media consumption had gone up by almost 75% as compared to the week preceding the lockdown. Across different media platforms, on an average, five hours were spent on media usage in 2020 - digital or otherwise on a daily basis in India (Statista Research Department, 2021).

The case of the COVID-19 outbreak shows the critical impact of new information on the environment. Dissemination of information can strongly influence people’s behavior and change the effectiveness of the government’s countermeasures. Models that predict the spread of the virus begin to consider the population’s behavioral response to public health interventions and the transmission dynamics behind content consumption. During the pandemic, with 24/7 news availability, misinformation and information overload is a disturbing possibility. Conflicting news from unverified resources and other conspiracy theories from various public health experts and politicians was common (Anwar, Malik, Raees, & Anwar, 2020). Continuous coverage of information regarding the amount of new infections, fatalities, and overburdened medical facilities, as well as the virus’s economic effects, such as company closures and job losses increased. Continued news media intake during times such as the pandemic might have long-lasting effects on the individuals (Evans and Hargitai 2020).

Moreover, such widespread outbreaks are associated with profound effects on all aspects of society, and have adverse mental health consequences. Chao, Xue, Liu, Yang and Hall in 2020 suggested new media use (rather than traditional) and more media engagement was associated with negative psychological outcomes, while certain media content was associated with positive psychological impact.

According to the American Psychological Association, stress is the physiological and psychological response to internal and/or external stressors. Fear, worry, and stress are some of the normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times of uncertainty or the unknown (WHO, 2020). So, it is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such trying times calls for effective crisis communication practices through these channels of mass communication. While effective crisis communication and controlled usage of media is indispensable in dispelling fear and uncertainty, inadequate crisis communication and excessive consumption of media can bring dire personal and economic consequences.

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Objective

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of media consumption during COVID-19 pandemic on the level of stress in individuals.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference in the levels of perceived stress between news and non news consumers.
- Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant difference in stress based on the amount of news consumed.
- Hypothesis 3: There is a significant difference between the level of perceived stress in males and females on the basis of news consumption.

Sample

A sample of 307 individuals, working and studying in different organizations and institutions across India have participated in this study. All the participants were between the ages 16 and 56. Data was collected online through google forms. The total number of participants consisted of 175 females, 130 males and 2 others who preferred not to reveal their sex. The participants included students, homemakers, private sector employees, public sector employees, self-employed and others from both urban and rural backgrounds. Educational qualifications of the participants were UG/PG/grade XII. Random sampling was used to select the participants. The form was circulated on Google forms via social media between 1st March 2021 to 7th June 2021.

- **Inclusion criteria**
Individuals between the ages of 16 and 62 and currently living in India.
- **Exclusion criteria**
Individuals below 16 years of age and above 62 years of age.

Variables

Independent variables

Media consumption - It is the nature of media an individual consumes on media platforms (news or non-news).

Consumption Time - It is the amount of time an individual spends on different media platforms (based on number of hours spent)

Sex of the individual.

Dependent variable

Stress is the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress influences how people feel and behave.

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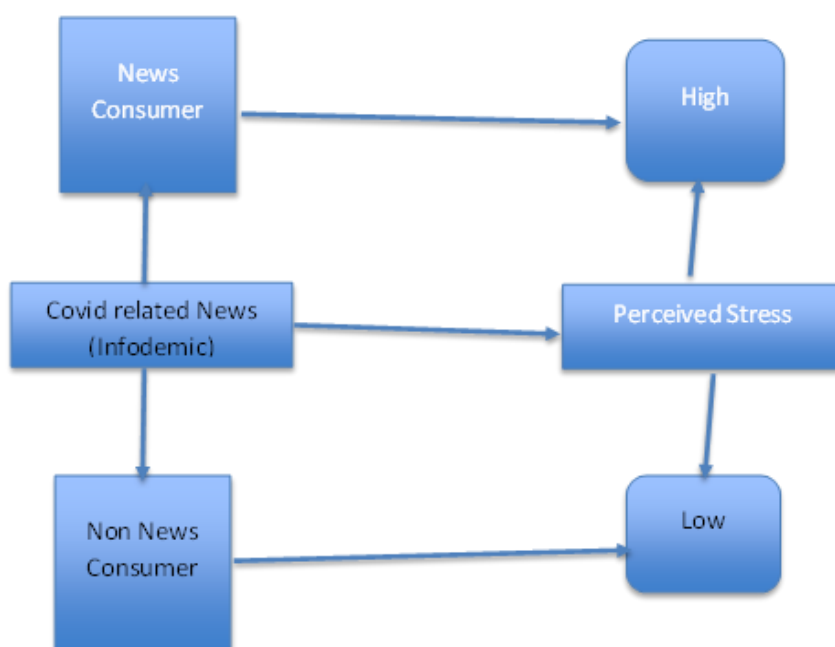


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study, Perceived Stress Scale by Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein (1983) - The PSS consists of 10 questions in total. The responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 5-point Likert's type scale. NSE Media Consumption Test was used to assess participant's pattern of media usage.

Statistics Used

In order to find out the correlation between the variables, statistical techniques adapted were Mean, one way ANOVA, and Standard Deviation. Computation of the data was completed by using SPSS 26 software.

Table 1 Mean and SD of the perceived stress between news and non news TV viewers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
News	146	22.66	5.740
Non news	161	22.55	5.615
Total	307	22.60	5.665

Table 2 Results of ANOVA on difference between news and non news TV viewer in levels of perceived stress

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.840	1	0.840	0.026	0.872
Within Groups	9820.678	305	32.199		

The first platform across which consumption was measured, was television. Out of the 307 participants, 146 watched news and 161 watched other non-news content on television. The mean perceived stress score for those who consumed news was 22.66 with a standard deviation of 5.74. The mean perceived stress score for non-news consumers was 22.55 with

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a standard deviation of 5.61. These mean scores suggested that the participants from both the groups experience moderate levels of perceived stress. Using one way ANOVA, the significance value was found to be 0.872 which was higher than the p value of 0.05, and hence, this indicated insignificance.

Table 3 Mean and SD of the perceived stress between news and non news internet users

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
News	160	22.31	6.191
Non news	147	22.93	5.033
Total	307	22.60	5.665

Table 4 Results of ANOVA on difference between news and non news internet users in levels of perceived stress

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	29.347	1	29.347	.914	.340
Within Groups	9792.171	305	32.105		

From the table, it can be inferred that 160 participants accessed news through an internet platform and 147 participants accessed other content through the internet. The mean perceived stress score for individuals who accessed news came out as 22.31 with the standard deviation as 6.191 and a mean score of 22.93 and standard deviation of 5.033 for those who consumed other content on the internet. This data suggested that participants from both the categories have moderate levels of perceived stress irrespective of the type of content consumed. This further suggested that the perceived stress levels did not depend on the type of content consumed on the internet. The significance value was $0.340 > p$, which indicated insignificance.

Table 5 Mean and SD of the perceived stress between news and non news newspaper readers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
News	258	22.38	5.395
Non news	49	23.78	6.863
Total	307	22.60	5.665

Table 6 - Results of ANOVA on difference between news and non news newspaper readers in levels of perceived stress

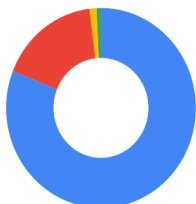
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	80.212	1	80.212	2.511	.114
Within Groups	9741.306	305	31.939		

From table 5, it can be seen that the total number of participants who read news and those who read other articles (entertainment, educational, editorials) were 258 and 49 respectively. The mean perceived stress score for news consumers was 22.38 with a standard deviation of 5.395. For non-news consumers the mean was 23.78 with standard deviation 6.863. Both the groups showed moderate levels of perceived stress with a difference of mean scores of 1.4. Using ANOVA, the significance level was found to be $0.114 > p$ value, which showed insignificance.

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More people used the internet and newspaper for news while more people used TV for non-news. Although the platform through which media was consumed differed, the perceived stress level was found to be moderate in all the three categories. The level of stress was not necessarily determined by the type of media and the platform they consumed it from. Therefore, the first hypothesis that states “There will be a significant difference in the levels of perceived stress between news and non news consumers” is rejected.

NEWSPAPER RESPONDENTS



TELEVISION RESPONDENTS



INTERNET RESPONDENTS



Number of Respondents According to Time Spent on The Three Media Platforms

Out of the 307 respondents, news was consumed by 146 respondents via television, 160 participants via internet and 258 participants via newspaper in the study.

According to the second hypothesis, the independent variable is the amount of time spent consuming news on three platforms – television, internet and newspaper. The time spent was measured in 5 categories which are: less than 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours and more than 4 hours.

Table 7 Mean and SD of stress on number of hours spent by the participants viewing news on television

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than 1 hour	89	22.66	5.400
1-2 hours	37	22.14	6.038
2-3 hours	12	23.08	6.501
3-4 Hours	7	23.71	7.889
More than 4 hours	1	29.00	.
Total	146	22.66	5.740

Table 8 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of stress depending on the number of hours spent viewing news on television

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	60.320	4	15.080	.451	.772
Within Groups	4716.557	141	33.451		

The number of respondents who viewed news on television for less than 1 hour was 89 and 1-2 hours was 37. Their mean and standard deviation scores were 22.66 and 5.4 for less than

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1 hour and 22.14 and 6.038 for 1-2 hours respectively. Their values indicate a moderate level of perceived stress. The significance value for the 5 categories was found to be $0.772 > p$, which was insignificant. Thus, the perceived stress level was found to be moderate, irrespective of the time spent consuming news on the TV.

Table 9 Mean and SD of perceived stress on number of hours spent by the participants consuming news on internet

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than 1 hour	9	21.78	5.357
1-2 hours	30	20.17	7.498
2-3 hours	48	22.92	5.291
3-4 hours	50	23.26	6.468
more than 4 hours	23	21.96	5.489
Total	160	22.31	6.191

Table 10 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of perceived stress depending on the number of hours spent consuming news on internet

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	206.028	4	51.507	1.356	.252
Within Groups	5887.965	155	37.987		

Table 2.2 shows the mean and standard deviation of perceived stress levels based on hours consuming news on the internet. Out of 160 respondents who accessed news on the internet, 9 spent less than 1 hour, 30 spent 1-2 hours, 48 spent 2-3 hours, 50 spent 3-4 hours and 23 spent more than 4 hours. Thus, respondents were fairly scattered across all the five categories of time spent on the Internet consuming news. The mean and standard deviation scores were 21.78 and 5.357 for less than 1 hour, 20.17 and 7.498 for 1-2 hours, 22.92 and 5.291 for 2-3 hours, 23.26 and 6.468 for 3-4 hours and 21.96 and 5.489 for more than 4 hours respectively. The significance value between the five groups was found to be 0.252. This value was found to be more than the p value of 0.05 and hence, insignificant. Thus, the perceived stress level was found to be moderate, irrespective of the time spent consuming news on the internet.

Table 11 Mean and SD of perceived stress on number of hours spent by the participants reading news on newspapers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than 1 hour	209	22.14	5.300
1-2 Hours	44	22.89	5.612
2-3 Hours	3	26.67	6.658
3-4 hours	2	30.00	.000
Total	258	22.38	5.395

Table 12 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of perceived stress depending on the number of hours spent reading news on the newspaper

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	194.701	3	64.900	2.262	.082
Within Groups	7286.075	254	28.685		

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Out of the total respondents in the five categories, 209 read newspapers for less than an hour and 44 individuals read newspapers for 1-2 hours. The mean perceived stress score and standard deviation for less than 1 hour was 22.14 and 5.30 and for 1-2 hours was 22.89 and 5.61 respectively. These mean values can be interpreted as moderate levels of perceived stress. The significance value was $0.252 > p$, which was insignificant. Thus, the perceived stress level was found to be moderate, irrespective of the time spent consuming news via newspaper. Hence the second hypothesis that states “More time spent for news consumption will lead to higher perceived stress levels” is rejected”

Out of the 307 respondents, 146 respondents consumed news via television platform, 160 participants via internet platform and 258 participants via newspaper in the study. The independent variable for this hypothesis is the sex of the participant and the dependent variable is the perceived stress. The participants identified themselves as belonging to one of the three categories which were: prefer not to say, male and female.

Table 13 Mean and SD of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through television

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	82	22.55	5.755
Male	63	22.68	5.736
Total	146	22.66	5.740

Table 14 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through television

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	54.921	2	27.461	.832	.437
Within Groups	4721.956	143	33.021		

From table 14 it can be inferred that 82 female participants and 63 male participants consumed news via television. The mean perceived stress score was 22.55 in females with a standard deviation of 5.755 while mean stress for males was 22.68 with standard deviation of 5.736. The perceived stress was moderate for males and females. Using ANOVA, the significance value was found to be $0.437 > p$, and hence, was insignificant. Thus, there was no significant difference in the levels of stress based on news consumption via TV in the two sexes.

Table 15 Mean and SD of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through internet

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	83	22.25	6.482
Male	76	22.26	5.875
Total	160	22.31	6.191

Table 16 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through internet

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	59.570	2	29.785	.775	.462
Within Groups	6034.424	157	38.436		

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The above tables show the perceived stress levels of the participants who accessed news content through the Internet. 83 females and 76 males used the internet platform to consume news. The mean perceived stress score and standard deviation for females was 22.25 and 6.482, while it was 22.26 and 5.875 for males. It can be seen that the perceived stress levels were moderate for males and females. The significance level was $0.462 > p$, which was found to be insignificant. Thus, there was no significant difference in the levels of stress based on news consumption via the internet in the two sexes.

Table 17 Mean and SD of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through newspaper

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	155	22.37	5.483
Male	101	22.26	5.253
Total	258	22.38	5.395

Table 18 Results of ANOVA on difference between levels of perceived stress between male and female who consumed news through newspaper

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	89.171	2	44.586	1.538	.217
Within Groups	7391.604	255	28.987		

The above data represents participants who read news from newspapers. 155 females, 101 males and 2 others who preferred not to disclose their sex consumed news via newspaper. The mean perceived stress level in female, male was found to be 22.37, 22.26 with standard deviation as 5.483 and 5.253, which can be interpreted as having moderate stress levels. The significance level was $0.217 > p$, which indicated insignificance. Thus, there was no significant difference in the levels of stress based on news consumption via newspaper in the two sexes.

Empirical studies have repeatedly shown a positive correlation between media usage and stress. The level of stress has varied minimally with the amount of media consumed but the values remain insignificant, which could be attributed to another argument that individuals also use and consume media to cope with stress and familiarize themselves with the ongoings of the world. An article published by Lara N. Wolfers and Sonja Utz revealed that when an individual is unable to control their immediate surroundings and the situational circumstances, distracting themselves seems a good strategy in order to calm stress-induced negative emotions.

Since news can be briefly divided into hard and soft news, the effects that each of these categories have on its consumers can also vary. The results of our study indicate that irrespective of the type of media accessed by the respondents, the levels of stress that they perceive is moderate. A possible explanation for this could be the negative and positive effect of hard and soft news, respectively, which can be explained by the differential topic focus, framing and style of hard news with respect to soft news.

The findings of this research could be attributed to numerous factors. First being the time and period of data collection from the participants. The data was collected in 2021 in India, and the public had become aware of what COVID-19 was and how it spread. Even though there was no direct relation between news consumed and perceived stress level, all the

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participants invariably had a moderate perceived stress level which could be due to the continuous health threat, economic downfall, uncertainty of the future, rising unemployment and the parallelly stressful state of affairs.

Another cause that supports our finding could be the repetitive exposure to COVID-19 related articles which leads to desensitization among the general public. This repetitive exposure to similar news stories does not evoke the initial excitation and hence leads to flattened emotional reactivity. The perceived stress remains the same or in fact, in some cases, reduces - once exposed to related stressors multiple times, as the existing threshold is already met. As the number of casualties increased along with round the clock news dissemination, news appeared to lose its capacity to create fear in readers.

An article published by Michelle A Strasser, Philip J Summer and Denny Meyer showed that increased consumption of COVID-19 related news was associated with a decline in mental health; however, there was no clear indication on the impact of news consumption particularly on levels of stress experienced by individuals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, many felt emotionally overwhelmed. Stress can cause physical reactions, including headaches, sleep problems and stomach problems, as well as lead to a worsening of chronic health problems and body pains. It can cause difficulty concentrating and making decisions and may cause an increased use of substances and aggravation of mental health problems.

On one hand, it is very important for media organizations to honor their roles as pillars of the fourth estate amid COVID-19 by pouring media resources into issues that matter to individuals' lives and livelihoods, rather than sensational reports. Media plays a huge role in deciding which information to feed in the minds of the public, and hence media credibility and accountability plays an important role in deciding the consequences of the outbreak of a pandemic.

However, it is equally important as consumers of information, to select the type and amount of information one gathers to fight a global crisis while prioritizing one's mental health. Regularly selecting the right source of news to consume is personal responsibility. On one hand, it is very important for media organizations to honor their roles as pillars of the fourth estate amid COVID-19 (by pouring media resources into issues that matter to individuals' lives and livelihoods rather than focusing on dramatic reports). On the other hand, it is equally important as consumers of information, to select the type and amount of information one gathers in order to fight such a global crisis along with prioritizing one's mental health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends taking care of one's body, making time to unwind, and connecting with others to help manage stress. It is important to manage one's own stress, as it can equip us to better take care of others. Stress management helps us forge ahead and reach the ultimate goal of living a balanced life, and hence important to inculcate in our daily lives.

There is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has had negative effects on the mental health of individuals all around the world. Data and research show that the disease has a significant psychological impact. The pandemic, a public health emergency that is of unparalleled magnitude and international concern, posed a challenge to not just physiological, but also psychological resilience. Among the wide variety of unprecedented

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challenges faced during and after the pandemic, mental health disorders, like stress, are being experienced.

The results of the study indicated that moderate levels of perceived stress, regardless of the type of media and amount of news consumed, were experienced by all sexes between March 2021 and May 2021 of the pandemic. The uncertainty in economy, health, job and other aspects of lives caused by the pandemic would have served as the extraneous variable to predict the stress instead of news from the media.

Limitations of the Study

- The study included the less sample and adopted convenience sampling.
- The data was collected during the most unprecedented time in the recent history of the world as pandemic affects all the aspects of human life, hence, chances are very high for the impact of extraneous variables.
- The study could have been inclusive of other dependent variables such as anxiety and depression, as the pandemic was highly linked with developing anxiety rather than stress.

Implications

Providing mental health support to the adult population is the most important during the pandemic as all the participants experienced moderate levels of stress, regardless of their differences.

Suggestions for further research

- Further research can replicate the study after the pandemic in order to control the extraneous variable caused by uncertainty.
- Future research can include other dependent variables such as anxiety and depression.

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Conflict of Interest

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