

The Role of Media and its Types in Shaping the Public Awareness of COVID-19 Preventive Measures

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the role and impact of old (Newspapers, T.V., and Radio) and new (social media) media outlets in shaping people's awareness of the preventive measures to stop COVID-19. This study used a quantitative method via implementing a survey that was distributed online through Qualtrics. A total of 164 participants submitted the survey which included multiple-choice questions on the participants' practices towards protecting themselves and others from getting infected with COVID-19 infection. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to present the findings in this study. Findings indicate the important role media, especially new, plays in shaping the viewers' and followers' awareness of COVID-19 preventive measures. While the COVI-19 pandemic is almost over, the contribution this study is making is important in predicting public awareness and how it is shaped in possible future pandemics and crises similar to COVID pandemic.

Keywords: Preventive Measures, Old Media, New Media, Public Awareness, COVID-19, Pandemic

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of media impact on people's awareness towards COVID-19 preventive measures is essential since the World Health Organization strongly encouraged people to follow these measures to help stop the spread of the virus. Studying the role of media in this regard is particularly important since people usually follow news either through old media (Newspapers, T.V., and Radio), new media (social media), or both. Studying such impact is essential, and studying the differential impact between these two major categories of media is also critical since one of them (old media) is controlled or censored and the other is uncensored. There is a lack of knowledge on the potential impact of exposure to social media and its relation to the pandemic (Scopelliti, Pacilli, & Aquino, 2021). As for old media, some research reports findings that indicate a significant correlation between the consumption of old media outlets (such as TV and newspaper) and the increased fear towards getting infected with COVID-19 virus, especially at the outbreak of the pandemic (Lin, Hu, Alias, & Wong, 2020). Other researchers (Lu & Lu, 2020) found that there was a direct impact between exposure to media and different levels of anxiety. Viewers of old media who watched reports of COVID and were exposed to images of hospitals and patients were more prone to getting higher levels of anxiety.

Scopelliti, Pacilli, and Aquino (2021) argued that the level of exposure to media and the level of severity of reports and images related to the COVID-19 pandemic were associated with the level of severity of anxiety and depression. Similar findings were reported by Bendau et al. (2020) who indicated that their study findings reported a significant correlation between the frequency and length of the viewed materials related to the pandemic and symptoms of anxiety and depression. On the other hand, regarding social media and its impact on people, the study

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conducted by Ahmad and Murad (2020) reported a strong correlation between following news related to COVID-19 on social media and the feelings of fear and the status of their well-being and mental health. Croucher et al. (2020) indicated that social media increased people's unfair treatment towards and biased views of Chinese people, whose country is thought to be the source of the pandemic. While These studies investigated the relationship between media and people's psychological feelings and well-being, this study explores the relationship between following media (new and old) and its impact on adhering to the suggested preventive measures to stop spreading COVID-19.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Media are an essential part of modern life. In a 2016 study, Artz (2016) reported that commercial media are a \$2.2 trillion industry, and it makes a difference in people's lives. There are different types of media, but they have to meet the laws of media. According to the laws of media, McLuhan (1988) argued that media should meet four criteria: enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal. For example, radio enhances news via sound, obsolesces the importance of print media, retrieves the importance of sounds, and reverses into entertainment (Kovarik, 2011; Smeltzer & Rae, 2014). The role of the media in shaping people's behaviors and awareness has been theorized. According to Cultivation Theory, for instance, people's behaviors get shaped when they expose themselves to specific narrative patterns, news, messages, and images for longer periods of time and on a repetitive basis (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Another theory is the Agenda-Setting Theory, which indicates that media does not only control what stories to stream but how much value, significance, and importance can be attached to the stories being streamed (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A third theory is the Niche Theory, which predicts that

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new media outlets (such as internet-based social media platforms) will eventually take the place of the old traditional media if new media meet the needs and satisfactions of the audience more effectively (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012). These theories indicate and theorize the power of media to shape public behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Zanna & Rempel, 2008).

The power of media in shaping people's awareness and behaviors is connected to the coverage a certain topic is given. Recently, media worldwide has probably covered nothing comprehensively compared to its coverage to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this may be related to the fact that the public needed information out of fear and to learn how to avoid being infected with the virus (Scopelliti et al., 2021). To control the pandemic, people's behaviors and awareness when it comes to adhering to the preventive measures make a great difference. It has been found that COVID-19 media campaigns were effective in shaping people's awareness and behaviors towards the preventive measures of COVID-19 (Alharthi et al., 2021; Greenwood et al., 2021; Khalesi et al., 2021). Such campaigns helped not only people but also businesses in providing hand sanitization in their facilities, strictly complying with wearing masks before entering business facilities, and keeping safe distances between customers.

Media are majorly divided into two major categories: old and new. The concept of old media refers to traditional media outlets such as TV, newspapers, and published reports, and the concept of new media refers to digital platforms such as all types of social media (Dowd et al., 2020). Each of these two categories has its own power but also possesses some drawbacks. The following section illustrates this claim.

2.1 New Media

New media have some advantages (power) and disadvantages (drawbacks).

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2.1.1 Power

- Social media is more effective in providing people with timely updates and with appropriate to-do pieces of advice (Omrani & Shalhoub, 2015).
- One of the pluses that new media provides is the possibility of publishing and sharing infographics that are not only easily accessible but also engaging and can affect people's behaviors (Chan, et al., 2020)
- Social media can be utilized to engage people, make possible communication between individuals, help generate awareness, and respond to people's concerns more rapidly and effectively (WHO, 2017).
- Social media can facilitate communications between different communities of practice, such as between the scientific and the medical specialists. It can deliver the message people on the frontline (doctors, nurses, etc.) want to give to the rest of the world more rapidly and as is (O'brien et al., 2020).
- Social media allows isolated or stigmatized people to get connected to a broader community of similar people or people with similar struggles (Panzera et al., 2013).
- Social media allows healthcare professionals to communicate with their patients in order to check on their health status, follow up on treatment processes, and continue giving health advice (Yaqub, 2014).
- Social media enables sharing pictures, videos, voice messages, and status updates on a large scale, which helps in creating a sense of unity, normalizing behaviors, and enhancing compliance (O'brien et al., 2020).

2.1.2 Drawbacks

- Since it is easy to spread news using social media, substantial amounts of false news on the Covid-19 Pandemic were

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circulated using social media platforms. (Rosenstiel et al., 2015; UN News, 2020)

- Receiving too much information from different sources of social media outlets can lead to a status of information inaccuracy and inconsistency or ambiguity (Garfin et al., 2020).
- Excessive exposure to social media can cause feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety that can harm one's well-being and mental health (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; O'brien et al., 2020).
- WHO (World Health Organization) recommends minimizing exposure to social media to only once or twice per day, and they warn against the negative effects of excessive exposure to circulated news on social media (WHO, 2020).
- Social media algorithms further exacerbate the situation as this algorithmic system will provide more links to Covid-19 news, which leads to "confirmation bias and a distortion of risk perception" (O'brien et al., 2020).
- Social media news can cause people to unfairly treat and have biased views towards Chinese people as they are thought to be the source of COVID-19 (Croucher et al., 2020).
- Finally, there are also some concerns regarding privacy in social media (Yaqub, 2014)

2.2 Old Media

Similar to new media, old media also has power and drawbacks.

2.2.1 Power

- Traditional media are often a more authentic source of information than social media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).
- Traditional media usually circulate less false news (Shu et al., 2017).
- Traditional media tend to be more trusted by the public (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

2.2.2 Drawbacks

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- Traditional media are slow compared to social media when it comes to circulating news (Shu et al., 2017).
- Traditional media are censored and not all kinds of news are allowed to be circulated.
- Traditional media are ideologized. Only news that serves certain ideologies is streamed, supported, and enhanced by certain traditional media outlets (Borah, 2011).
- Traditional media frame news in a way that solicits a certain reaction from the public (Borah, 2011).

2.3 Preventive Measures

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), the following preventive measures should be followed to stop the spread of COVID-19:

- Staying updated on COVID-19 news through WHO and local health authorities.
- Getting vaccinated.
- Keeping physical distance.
- Wearing a properly fitted mask.
- Washing hands frequently.
- Self-isolating when having symptoms such as fever, cough, and difficulty breathing.
- Seeking medical assistance when these symptoms develop.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the use of media channels raise public awareness of COVID-19 preventive measures?

RQ3: Which is more effective in raising public awareness regarding COVID-19 preventive measures: old media or new media?

4. METHODOLOGY

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This study implements a quantitative methodology design in collecting and analyzing the data. The researcher designed a survey to investigate if old media and new media were effective in helping people become more aware of COVID-19 protective measures. Then, the study measures which type of media (old or new) was more effective in this regard.

4.1 The Instrument

The instrument is a self-administered survey that takes the form of a questionnaire. The survey is divided into three major parts. Part one—demographics—asked about eight items: country of origin, gender, age, married status, first language, employment, education, and if the participant works in the medical field. The second part is divided into two subsections: The first subsection asks about old media. It includes questions such as: How often do you read newspapers? Which newspaper type do you read? How often do you watch TV? Which channel type do you watch? And how often do you listen to the radio? The second subsection asks about new media. It includes questions such as: Do you have a social media account/s? Which social media app do you use? How often do you use social media? How many hours do you approximately use social media a day? What is your major reason for using social media? How do you know COVID-19 news? And do you tend to believe the COVID-19 news you hear? The third part asks about adhering to preventive measures. It includes questions like: Which of the following protective measures do/did you follow? Did you get vaccinated against COVID-19? And do you consider yourself aware of COVID and its implications?

Regarding the level of measurement, the survey included nominal level questions such as nationality, gender, and marital status; ordinal level scale; as well as interval levels such as age and time spent on social media. In order to ensure the privacy of the participants, the researcher designed the survey so that no

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leading information would be requested from the participants in the demographic information section, and no identifying questions about the participants would be asked in the body of the survey. All the demographic questions were anonymous. Participation in this study was voluntary. The first question in the survey was a consent to be signed by the participants before they decided to proceed to the survey itself. In the consent, the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point by just closing their browser. The participants were also given the contact information for the researcher in case they had any questions or concerns.

4.2 Reliability and Validity

Expert jury validity was conducted to test and revise the instrument before it was used. Reinard (2006) defined expert jury validity as a process of forming a group of experts on the topic of the research to examine the measurement tool in order to judge its suitability, validity, and reliability. The researcher validated the survey by sending the questionnaire to two individuals with expertise in the medical field. The researcher then modified the instrument according to their recommendations and comments. Furthermore, the researcher sent the revised instrument to four other reviewers to judge the survey questions, and their comments were taken into consideration.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Demographic Analysis

This demographic part includes questions about the descriptive variables: gender, age, marital status, education level, job category, country of origin, country of residence, and if they work in the medical field. The researcher used these independent variables because they offered background on the participants.

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This demographic information helped the researcher understand the findings from the data analysis and make connections between the participants' demographic data and responses to other questions.

As for gender, most of the participants ($n= 105$) were males (77%), which outnumbered females ($n= 17$, 12%). 15 participants did not answer this question. Regarding the distribution of age among the participants, the survey included eight age groups that ranged from 18 (as the youngest) and spanned up to 60 or older. The distribution was as follows: 25 participants were between 18-25, 7 participants were between 26-30, 12 participants were between 31-35, 49 participants were between 36-40, 14 participants were between 41-45, 11 participants were between 46-50, 6 participants were between 51-60, and 8 participants were above 60 years old. The highest age group that participated in the study was 36-40, representing 35.7%, while the lowest age group was 51-60, representing 0.04%. Concerning the participants' marital status, the highest group that participated in this study were found to be the "married" group ($n= 103$), representing 75%, followed by single participants ($n= 25$), representing 18%.

For education level, participants were given 6 choices that ranged from less than a high school diploma to a doctoral degree. Out of the 137 participants, 76 (55.47%) participants reported that they possessed a 4-year educational degree. While this was the majority, the lowest group was found to be the "2-year associate degree," which was reported by 4 participants and representing 0.02%. The second-largest group was those who reported having a high school diploma ($n=24$, 19.5%). With respect to the participants' employment status, those that reported being employed were 93, representing 67.88%, and those that reported being unemployed were 37, representing 27%. Of those who reported having a job, 64 (46.7%)

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participants said they worked for the government, 18 (13.13%) worked for the private sector, 13 (9.5%) reported working in trade and business, 8 (5.8%) reported being retired, and 7 participants (5.10%) reported working in the medical field.

In regard to the participants' country of origin, the sweeping majority of participants came from Saudi Arabia ($n=94$), representing 68.61%. Although the majority of the participants were Saudis, some participants came from other countries including 25 participants from Egypt, 1 from Jordan, 2 from Yemen, 1 from the UK, 1 from Libya, and 1 from Paraguay. Those participants did not necessarily live in their countries of citizenship. 95 participants lived in Saudi Arabia, 16 participants lived in Egypt, 7 in the United States, 1 in Kuwait, 2 in the UK, and 1 in Turkey. Finally, regarding the first language of the participants, 129 reported speaking Arabic as a first language, and only 5 reported speaking English as a first language.

5.2 Media Types

In the survey, there were questions pertaining to the type of media the participants prefer to view. These media types range between old and new. Old media includes TV, newspapers, and radio, while new media includes social media platforms.

5.2.1 Old Media

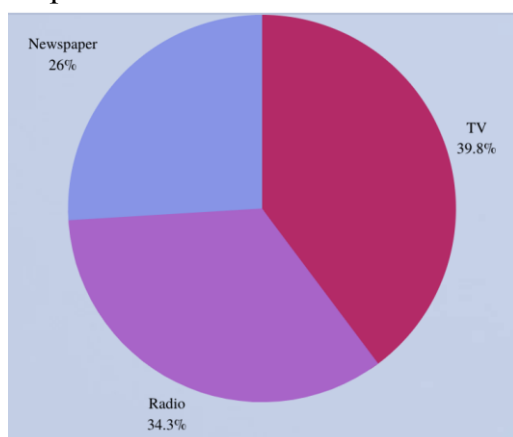
A total of five questions in the survey targeted old media followers. The first one asked about newspapers and how often the participants read them, and the second question asked about the type of newspapers the participants prefer to read. 47 (34.31%) participants reported reading newspapers on a daily basis, 41 (29.93%) participants said they never read newspapers, and the rest of the participants said they read newspapers every now and then. Regarding the type of newspapers the participants

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read, 43 (31.39%) participants said they read governmental newspapers, 6 (4.38%) said they read non-governmental newspapers, and 45 (32.85%) said they read both. The rest reaffirmed that they never read newspapers.

Regarding watching TV, 72 (52.55%) participants said they watch TV on a daily basis. 34 (24.82%) participants said they watch TV every now and then. 17 (12.41%) participants said they watch TV weekly, and the rest reported never watching TV. Concerning the question that asks about the TV channel type the participants watch, 33 (24.09%) participants said they watch governmental channels, 27 (19.71%) participants said they watch non-governmental channels, and 59 (43.07%) participants said they watch both types of channels, governmental and non-governmental. Finally, 18 (13.14%) participants reported never watching TV. As for the radio question, “How often do you listen to the radio?,” 62 (45.26%) participants said they listen to the radio on a daily basis, 35 (25.55%) participants reported listening to the radio every now and then, and 7 (5.11%) reported listening to the radio on a daily basis, and the rest never listen to the radio.

Fig.1. Participants who follow old media on a daily basis

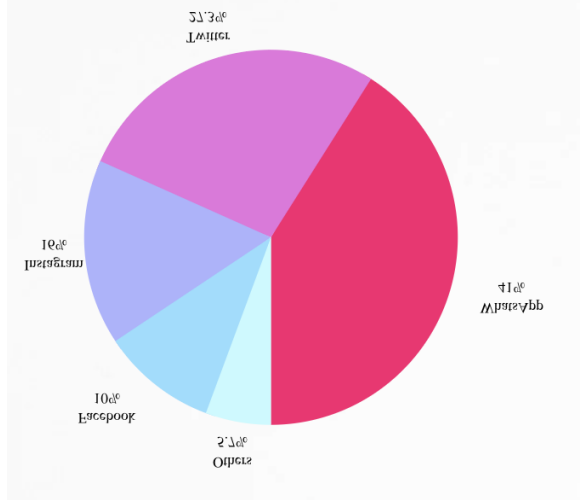


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5.2.1 New Media

A total of five questions pertaining to new media were asked to the participants. The first question asked participants if they own social media accounts. 129 (94.16%) participants reported using social media, and only 8 (5.84%) participants said they do not use social media. The second question asked about what social media platform the participants use. The survey provided choices of social media platforms for the participants to choose from. These include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others. The question enabled multiple responses. WhatsApp was selected 123 (40.73%) times, Twitter was selected 82 (27.15%) times, Instagram was selected 48 (15.89%) times, and Facebook was selected 30 (9.93%) times.

Fig.2. Social media platforms used by the participants



The third question asked the participants who use new media (social media) about the frequency of visiting their social media accounts. 128 (93.43%) participants said they use their social media accounts every day. The rest of the participants said they use them every now and then. As for how many hours the participants use their social media a day—fourth question—57 participants (41.30%) say they spend between one and three

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hours a day on their social media accounts, 37 participants (26.81%) said they spend between 3 and 5 hours on their social media accounts every day, and 35 participants (25.36%) use social media for more than five hours a day. The last question about social media the survey asked was about the reason why the participants use social media. The question allowed for multiple answers. “For fun” option was selected 103 (29.34%) times, the “to follow the news” option was selected 96 (27.35%) times, the “to pass time” option was used 83 (23.65%) times, and the “for work/business” option was used 65 (18.52%) times.

5.3 Awareness of COVID-19 Preventive Measures

The survey contained five questions about the participants’ awareness of COVID-19, its implications, and their awareness of the preventive measures to protect themselves from getting infected. The following is a list of the five questions that were used to yield COVID-19 awareness responses from the participants:

Q1- How do you know COVID-19-related news? (Check all that apply)

Q2- Do you tend to believe the COVID-19 news you hear?

Q3- Do you consider yourself aware of COVID and its implications?

Q4- Which of the following protective measures do/did you follow? (Check all that apply)

Q5- Did you get vaccinated against COVID-19?

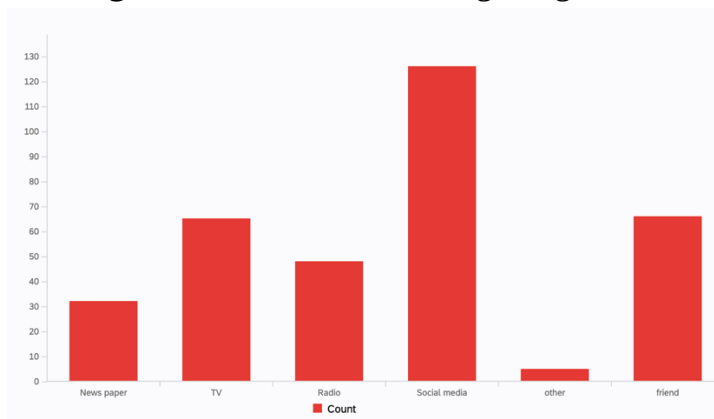
Regarding the first question “How do you know COVID-19-related news? (check all that apply),” the participants were given six choices, a. “Newspaper,” b. “TV,” c. “Radio,” d. “Social Media,” e. “Friend,” and f. “Other.” The participants had the option to choose more than one choice. “Social media” was selected 126 (36.84%) times, “friend” was selected 66 (19.30%) times, “TV” was selected 65 (19.01%) times, “radio” was

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selected 48 (14.04%) times, “newspaper” was selected 32 (9.36%) times, and “other” was selected 5 (1.46%) times.

Fig.3. The media sources of getting news



Concerning the second question, “Do you tend to believe the COVID-19 news you hear?” the participants were given three options: a. “All what I hear,” b. “Some of what I hear,” and c. “Don’t believe at all.” As for the “All what I hear” option, it was selected 7 (5.07%) times, “some of what I hear” was selected 120 (86.96%) times, and “don’t believe at all” was selected 11 (7.97%) times. Regarding the third question, “Do you consider yourself aware of COVID and its implications?” two options were given to the participants: a. “Yes, I am aware,” and “No, I am not aware of it.” The first option “Yes, I am aware” was selected 125 (91.91%) times, and the second option “No, I am not aware of it” was selected 11 (8.09%) times.

Regarding the fourth question, “Which of the following protective measures do/did you follow? (Check all that apply),” the following choices were provided:

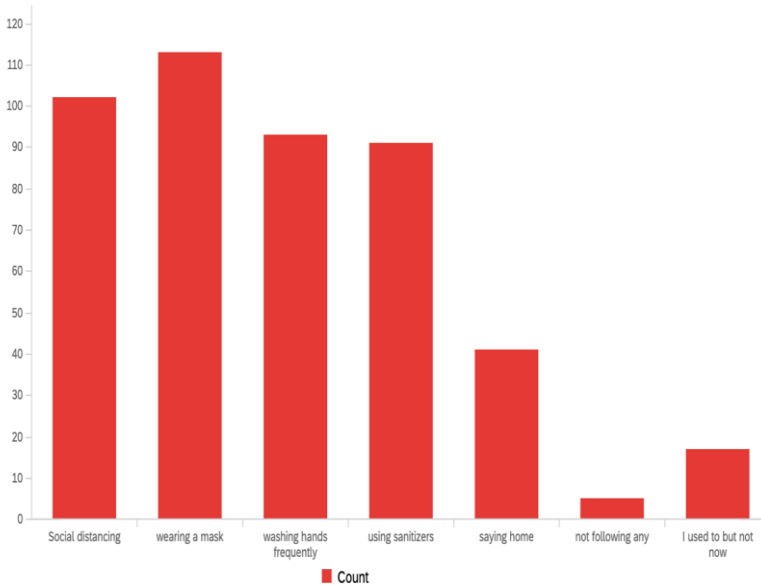
- Social distancing
- Wearing a mask
- Washing hands frequently
- Using sanitizers
- Staying home

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- Not following any
- I used to, but not now.

The following bar chart shows the participants' adherence to the recommended preventive measures to help protect them from getting the COVID-19 infection.

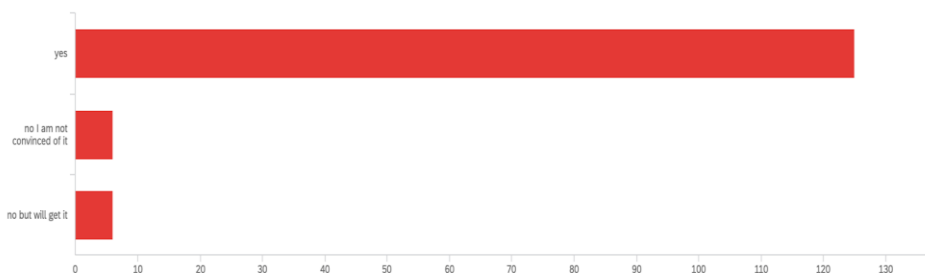
Fig.4. Preventive measures followed by the participants



Finally, regarding the fifth question about the COVID-19 vaccination status, 125 (91.24%) participants reported receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, 6 (4.38%) participants said they have not taken it but plan to do so, and only 6 (4.38%) said they are not convinced of the vaccine and will not take it. The graph below shows the number of vaccinated participants in comparison to the number of unvaccinated participants.

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Fig.5. Numbers of vaccinated and unvaccinated participants



As the results show, the sweeping majority of the participants use media, either new or old. This indicates the power of media and its spread to different levels of people's lives. According to the findings, from the old media, the most prevailing old media outlet was the TV as about 40% of the participants reported following TV on a daily basis while fewer participants indicated that they follow newspapers (26%) and others (34%) listen to the radio. These media outlets play as a source of information and such information can lead and guide followers, watchers, and listeners into what to do or how to behave since most of these old media outlets host specialists in their fields to guide people on what to do when it comes to issues like that of the pandemic.

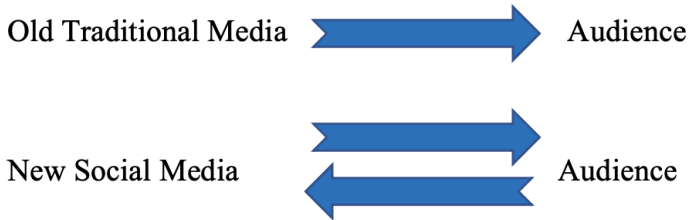
5.4 The Dominance and Power of New Media

Regarding the types of media, the new media seemed to have dominated old media. Such finding is consistent with the literature. According to the Niche Theory, new media outlets (such as internet-based social media platforms) tend to replace old traditional media because new media can meet the needs and satisfactions of the audience more effectively (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012). The audience's needs are met by new media more effectively because new media provide the audience with a bidirectional communication style, unlike old traditional media

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which provides a unidirectional communication style. The following diagram illustrates these two styles:

Fig.6. Uni- and bi-directional communication styles of new and old media



In old media, viewers are passive receivers of news. In new media, the audience can shape and reshape the news. They have the power through new media features, such as using hashtags, to react to the news (Black, 2016; Clark, 2016). They have the option to respond to the news, to form groups, to communicate with experts, and to save and share the news. These features are not available with old forms of old traditional media, except for phone calls where viewers or listeners can call and discuss the discussed matters, but even with this feature, not all viewers are able to do this since some audiences might not have an available phone, not have the available time, and may feel too introvert to call and discuss. Social media bypass all these weaknesses and offer much more robust ways of empowering audiences and making them agents in the process of news making and sharing.

5.5 Media and Shaping Public Awareness

Audiences' awareness was shaped by following different types of media. Descriptively, there is a clear connection between following news and adhering to the recommended preventive measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. According to the findings in this study, the majority of the

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participants reported being aware of the virus and its symptoms and reported following the WHO preventive measures such as wearing a mask, washing hands, using sanitizers, keeping a distance, and staying home. Also, according to WHO (2020), receiving the vaccine is part of people's awareness of the pandemic and its seriousness. In this study, 125 (91.24%) participants reported receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, 6 (4.38%) participants said they have not taken it but plan to do so, and only 6 (4.38%) said they are not convinced of the vaccine and will not take it.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the role and impact of new (social media) and old (traditional media) media outlets in shaping people's awareness to adhere to the recommended preventive measures by WHO (2020) to limit and eventually stop the spread of COVID-19. This study used a quantitative method through disseminating a Qualtrics survey that was distributed online. While 164 participants submitted the survey which included multiple-choice questions on the participants' practices towards protecting themselves and others from getting infected with COVID-19 infection, 137 participants completed the survey while 27 did not. The findings of this study were reported through descriptive statistical analysis. The findings indicated that new media (social media) played a bigger role in shaping people's awareness and in helping them adhere to the suggested COVID-19 preventive measures. More research using different media theories is suggested to be conducted so that public awareness in future pandemics can be predicted and shaped in the proper way that would help limit and diminish pandemics.

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