



Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Are we ready for the Next One?

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Letter to Editor

The world we live in is full of unpredictable events. One of the most recent examples is the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019, and until September of 2023, a total death toll of 6,960,783 has been reported by WHO [1]. This is not the first pandemic of this century and probably won't be the last. Here, I talk about the observed influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on our lives and how we should consider them as opportunities or threats to improve public health.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives in many ways. Now, we live in the post-COVID world, with many temporary and permanent changes. The pandemic itself was a disaster with lots of financial and non-financial costs. On the other hand, this pandemic brought many opportunities with itself.

An important difference between the COVID-19 pandemic with the previous ones is the presence of social media. Nowadays, social media is a bold part of our lives. As the pandemic

hit and lockdowns started, social media utilization rose significantly, and its role in daily life became much bolder. During the pandemic, there was an increasing desire to use social media among people of different ages, professions, and regions [2,3]. Here, I want to talk about some aspects of this simple change from the point of view of public health.

As the pandemic began, many activities were stopped, some voluntarily and some by new governmental regulations. For example, academic education took an extended break when the pandemic hit. Before that, there was no "tele-learning" in many universities. It took time to construct the required infrastructure and start learning again. One of the most critical advantages of building infrastructures for tele-learning is knowledge sharing in a much broader aspect. Students from all over the world could participate in new courses and webinars that were mostly unavailable before. This experience is not limited to the students. While many people worldwide had less to do, they started talking to each other and, in many cases, other people



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of their own profession. The brilliant point of this situation was the creation of various groups in social media such as Telegram and WhatsApp. While many of the medical staff were working to control the crisis, others who were at home started discussing various subjects and cases on social media. The result was a vast and unprecedented knowledge sharing, which might not have happened without the pandemic. Although there are lots of studies on the other side, most people who sat in their houses during the lockdown were no medical staff or scientists. They spent a lot of time reading online content on social media, including the news about the pandemic. Today, social media is an important news source for people [5,6]. There are many pages on Instagram or Twitter with many followers, and anyone can access their content. It should be noted what happens if an influencer publishes something that can affect society about health subjects, as in the case of Novak Djokovic, the famous tennis player. Although he declared that he was not against vaccination, he refused to get the COVID-19 vaccine. This cost him being out of some tournaments [4]. Can this affect public opinion? Worse is that there are people who are actually against vaccines and try to spread their ideas.

Spreading such information can have consequences, and there have been efforts to stop it. Instagram has claimed to remove such content [7]. You can't find any content by searching "#vaccineskill." I tried it, and you can see the results in **Figure 1**. This is good to control what is being published on the internet, but it is almost impossible to find and delete everything that can have falsified information. Although with the development of technology and artificial intelligence, we get closer to that point, after all, it is just a treatment for a bigger problem, and we were supposed to prevent such issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that superstitions and illusions are not over and can have disastrous effects on society by spreading false information. As Tom Nichols declares, the "Death of Expertise" is happening [8]. There has been a gap between the experts and the people, but the question is, "Did the COVID-19 pandemic reduce this gap?". Medical staff, scientists, and researchers endeavor a lot to control the pandemic. So, all these efforts are supposed to reduce this gap, but something is missing here: Communication. Establishing effective communication between the medical experts and the people can help us manage the next pandemic better.

While the pandemic obstructed medical research in some ways, it also opened new areas that should be discovered to find new opportunities. Further investigations are needed to dig in, and maybe the results can help us with the next pandemic.

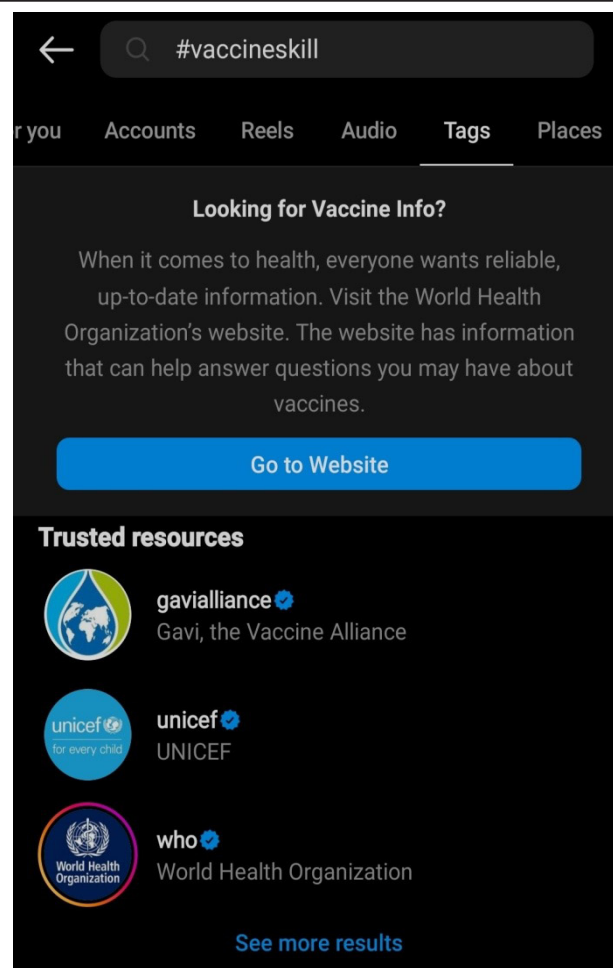


Figure 1

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