

Chapter 19

Social Media and the Knowledge Gap: Research on the Appearance of COVID-19 in Turkey and the Knowledge Level of Users

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to test the relationship between the use of social media and the knowledge gap regarding COVID-19 in the Turkish environment. For this purpose of this empirical field, research was carried out throughout Turkey involving a large sample (N= 1033) in an effort to reveal how level of knowledge of social media users in Turkey regarding an issue in a particular question is shaped. The study discusses the data obtained in the field research. The conclusion, contrary to what is expected, emphasizes that social media environment has a particular presence as a communication tool, which closes the knowledge gap and fosters knowledge acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, which started in the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei province in December 2019, spread to the whole world in a short time, and it was declared a global outbreak (pandemic) by the World Health Organization in March 2020. After the initial period of shock, it was difficult to agree on the symptoms of the disease, then there came a time when individuals began to reach the level of being able to diagnose COVID-19 on their own. During this time of outbreak, it does not seem possible to decrease the spread rate of the disease in a short time. This situation is the main reason for the need to obtain more information about the disease in question. Individuals are searching for ways to protect themselves from COVID-19,

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such as reading about the symptoms of the disease in question and seeking remedies to prevent it. If the person infected with COVID-19 is not at the level of necessity to be treated in the hospital, they can seek out different treatment methods and drugs that might be used for curing the disease. Individuals may prefer to get answers to their questions about COVID-19 from the media and access the information they need through these platforms.

In the eyes of communication researchers, this search method urges us to think about the knowledge gap theorem (Tichenor et al., 1970; Donohue, 1975, p.6). The knowledge gap theorem is mainly built on the idea that the messages delivered by the mass media feed the difference in knowledge levels among people from high socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and those from poor socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Thus, the difference in the levels of knowledge is also increasing thanks to social media day by day, as observed recently. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien were the first ones to mention- the knowledge gap hypothesis (1970) and later they were followed by other communication researchers. They argue that the difference in the level of knowledge exists due to differences in communication skills and education levels. It is worth noting that communication skills and education levels also differ depending on one's socioeconomic status, prior life experiences, and changing interests.

Moreover, the messages from the media also increase this gap, and it changes from one individual to another (Griffin, 1990, p. 564; Moore, 1987, p. 196). A similar point of view is also expressed by the researchers below, and they declare that "the information obtained from the media by different individuals varies depending on their social class and individual characteristics (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000, pp. 231; Fredin et al., 1994, pp. 183; Bekalu & Eggemont, 2013, p. 746). Therefore, this argument explains the reasons for the existence of the knowledge gap between two separate social classes; lower class and upper class (Donohue et al. 1975, pp. 5-7; Tichenor, 1970), since members of these classes come from different walks of life and have a different status in the social strata. Most of the research conducted on this matter resulted as a confirmation to this assumption of knowledge gap theorem. (Chang et al., 2017, p. 584; Scheufele, 2002, p. 58; Kwak, 1999, p. 402). However, today's fast-changing communication technology brings up the possibility of revising the results of the knowledge gap studies (Goh, 2015, p. 883). Because nowadays one can access information effortlessly just by clicking on a cell phone. Anyone with an internet connection can obtain in-depth information on the subject s/he is enthusiastic about. Under these fortunate circumstances, almost everyone has the opportunity to take part in at least one of the social media platforms. There are many advantages of these social media platforms; for instance, they provide their users with services to have fun, communicate with their acquaintances, share their lives with their target audience, enjoy their free time. In addition to these, users can use social media platforms to obtain information. What is noteworthy here is that individuals -with different characteristics in many aspects- have different levels of information obtained from media content. The fact that the majority of the population in Turkey spends a lot of time on social media, makes us think whether getting information about COVID-19 on social media creates a knowledge gap amongst individuals coming from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

In the context of the research regarding the above question, our study mainly aims to portray the current situation in Turkey. It starts with the question of to what extent social media platforms, which have a wide range of usage and purpose today, shape the knowledge gap between individuals with heterogeneous characteristics. In order to understand this, the study is built on two pillars. The first pillar of the study consists of a brief overview of the knowledge gap hypothesis. The second pillar of the study, which aims to clarify the key points, is the empirical part. In the last step of this part, taken to understand how the knowledge gap is shaped amongst social media users in Turkey, three different variables are tested

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