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Published in:
MUM 2021: 20th International Conference on Mobile and Ubiquitous Multimedia

DOI:
10.1145/3490632.3490666

Published: 01.01.2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
People’s Perspectives on Social Media Use during COVID-19 Pandemic

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In this paper, we explore people’s perceptions and usage of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it had changed compared to the pre-pandemic times. As salient findings, we report increased activity in social media, which followed both from the increased opportunity to spend time in social media, the need to be socially connected, and the motivation to follow pandemic related updates. The perceived emerging content visible in social media postings were face masks, home and outdoors activities, remote events, and different challenges. Social media also made people aware of the divided opinions related to the pandemic, and could lead to more careful self-censoring of own postings. Our study is based on interviews of 29 and online survey of 172 people.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: COVID-19, social media, pandemic, user studies, online culture

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic which in spring 2020 took a form of a global health emergency changed many aspects of everyday life on a rapid pace. It caused many transformations on everyday practicalities, including mobility restrictions, shift to remote school and work, and recommendations for social distancing and face masks. This created a set of challenges for running everyday life [21, 31]. A survey conducted in nine European countries showed that the COVID-19 lockdown caused a 65% increase in screen time [31]. Increased screen time includes a vast COVID-19-caused increase in digital communication such as text messaging, voice and video calls, and social media usage [28]. Also quarantine mobile applications have emerged, contributing both to tracking of the virus but also to the community feeling [39]. Communication technology has penetrated to all sectors of life, being now an omnipresent part of our everyday life. In the era of social media and smart phones, we can be connected to our social networks and different information services 24/7. Especially, in social isolation, where face-to-face meetings were limited or forbidden, the role of the social interactions happening through technology platforms became emphasized. In this paper, we investigate people’s perceptions of their social media use during COVID-19 pandemic, focusing especially if they perceived changes in the usage and content. Our research is based on dataset of 27 interviews and online survey with 172 participants, and focuses on the holistic user experience on social media use.
2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Social Media as a Central Communication Phenomenon

Social media usage has become a central phenomenon of technology mediated communication, and due to smart phones, its use has become omnipresent in our society. There is a vast amount of research on social media and different aspects of it, research databases containing thousands of publications on the topic for each recent year. Research on social media ranges from motivations, consuming, sharing, and content types, and focusing on different use cases such as marketing [5], e-governance [25], citizen activism [23], and news services [30]. Already a decade ago, Whiting and Williams identified ten uses and gratifications for using social media, namely social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others [38]. It has been shown that much of the communication in Facebook can be regarded as phatic communication, i.e. filling a social function rather than being informative [33]. Social media is also an intensively used tool for self-expression, facilitating both people’s tendency to present images of their true, actual, or ideal self [12]. The selfies culture is also a predominant trend of social media use today [26, 37]. Sung et al. have identified four motivations for posting selfies, these being attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment [37].

Recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of research, which addresses the critical aspects of social media use. There is a serious concern that the increased screen time will create health problems [36]. According to the research findings, social media exposure also has a significant relationship with information overload and information anxiety [34]. A large scale study among young adults in US showed that participants with high social media use felt more socially isolated than the ones with lower social media use [32].

2.2 Social Media during Pandemic

During COVID-19 pandemic, people excessively used social media for not only following recent information about COVID-19 [6, 24], but also in terms of obtaining emotional and peer support [41]. There are studies aiming to identify COVID-19 related topics and sentiments in Twitter. According to the results, people are tweeting for example about the origin of the virus, its sources, its impact on people, countries, and the economy, and ways of mitigating the risk of infection [1, 40].

Due to its reach, social media has become a powerful platform to spread information and affect on people’s behavioural patterns. A study analysing Twitter content related to face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted with a finding that Twitter was utilised by a wide range of users in order to encourage others to wear masks [3]. Basch et al. have studied how TikTok has been used to promote mask use to various segments of the population [7]. On the other hand, social media is not only employed for spreading official public health messages, but also e.g. humorous COVID-19 mask memes [14]. Humorous memes have also found to provide a coping mechanism for the pandemic, especially for individuals suffering from anxiety [4]. Also other research efforts have been put in examining the effects of social media on people’s emotions and mental wellbeing during the pandemic times. Respondents who participated in a survey conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan reported that social media had a significant impact on spreading fear and panic related to the COVID-19 outbreak [2]. The findings are opposite with a survey conducted among Cypriots, where respondents’ social media use did not create any panic or anxiety amongst them [24]. However, a larger scale study in China revealed that mental health problems, which did occur in high prevalence, were positively associated with frequent social media exposure during the COVID-19 outbreak [16]. Increased screen time goes hand in hand with
addictive social media use, which is positively linked to the burden of COVID-19 [9]. Research findings imply that taking a social media break has a role in improving people’s mental wellbeing in pandemic times [41].

As one of the key research topics, a relatively large number of research has been published about COVID-19 misinformation on social media. Indeed, for this the parallel spread of misinformation, the term infodemic has emerged [11, 15]. Two survey studies with more than 1,700 U.S. adult respondents give evidence that people share false claims about COVID-19 partly because they simply fail to think sufficiently about whether the content is accurate or not [29]. Misinformation deal with conspiracy theories that started to spread on social media alongside COVID-19. About conspiracy theories during COVID-19, see e.g. [10]. As Karen M. Cook concludes in her article, the pandemic has created perfect circumstances for conspiracy theories that flourish in crisis times due to experiences of threat, uncertainty and insecurity, and have negative consequences for people’s compliance with preventive behaviours [13].

2.3 Positioning and Contribution of Our Work
A large portion of the COVID-19 related social media research has focused on quite narrow themes, such as memes, infodemic, or mental health. Moreover, the research methods in existing publications heavily rely on survey data. Although large datasets provide useful information about the large patterns related to social media use, they often fail in grasping the richness of the phenomenon. In our paper, we seek to focus on the holistic user experience, and focus on their personal experience on social media use during COVID-19. Differing from the prior art, our research emphasizes the qualitative nature of the findings, collected through interviews and an online survey.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Context of the Research
The research consisted of two studies, face-to-face interviews and an online survey. The data was collected in October-November 2020, when the second wave of COVID-19 epidemic had begun in Finland, Europe, and national and regional social distancing restrictions had been agreed to prevent a new spread of the epidemic [17]. People had a fresh memory about a state of emergency declared by the Government on mid-March 2020 in Finland over coronavirus outbreak. It had introduced a load of restrictive measures including e.g. closing down the premises of educational institutions and suspending contact teaching; an instruction to work remotely whenever possible; closing all national and municipal cultural and sports facilities and limiting public gatherings to no more than ten persons [18]. Through the restrictive measures the coronavirus epidemic had been halted, and the measures gradually lifted starting from mid-May 2020 [19] leading to a couple of months enabling more ‘normal’ life routines before the new escalation of the epidemic.

3.2 Interviews
The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and organized jointly with a face mask making workshop at the premises of the University of Lapland, Finland, in October 2020. An open invitation was distributed through social media and posters for the event, organized with up-to-date social distancing measures, to bring people to make a fabric face mask for themselves and at the same to time participate in a research study. The participants first signed a consent form and filled in a form about background information before the interview. In total, there were 29 participants, ranging from 19 to 39 years with the average age of 25. The participants consisted of university students and staff with different backgrounds, with 10 % being men and 90 % women. All participants reported that they were active social media users.
The most common social media channels used were Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. The interviews were audio recorded.

The study consisted of the following steps:

- Filling in the consent form and background questionnaire
- Interviews (voice recorded)
- Showing example(s) of social media posting(s) on the smartphone

In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe how COVID-19 pandemic is visible in the social media channels they use, and what kinds of COVID-19 related social media content they have produced and/or shared by themselves. In relation to the both questions, we also asked the participants to show social media posting examples from their smartphones.

The interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings according to the thematic coding principle. One researcher established the codebook, reviewed by two other researchers. Two researchers then independently went through the interview data and coded it according to the codebook. A third researcher was used to decide on the code with the cases, where the two researchers had given different codes to a data item.

### 3.3 Online Survey

The themes that emerged in the interviews were further investigated in online survey, which was organized after the interviews. The survey responses complement the data gathered through interviews with a wider sample, and provide more quantitative insight to social media use and content during COVID-19 times. Thus, the interviews provided a background for the selection and formulation of the survey questions. The survey was distributed through social media and at the University of Lapland. The survey consisted of five sections. The first section gathered background information, and the second about the amount and habits of social media use during COVID-19 pandemic. The third section continued to examine the awareness and visibility of COVID-19 pandemic in social media, after which the the content related to the pandemic was charted. Lastly, the participants answered questions related their own behaviour in social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey consisted of both Likert scale and open text field questions.

In total, 172 participants completed the survey (76% women, 21% men, and 3% other or not wanting to their gender). The participants’ age ranged from 20 years to 70 years, with the average of 32 years. Altogether, 78% reported to use social media several times during the day, and 17% once a day. The most used social media applications were WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and Spotify.

### 4 FINDINGS

In this section, we report the combined findings from our online survey and interviews. We refer to individuals as survey respondents (e.g. R21) and interview study participants, (e.g. P3).

#### 4.1 Increased Social Media Usage during COVID-19

**4.1.1 More Usage due Available Time and to Access Pandemic Information.** People reported experiences and observations about their increased social media usage both in the interviews and in the survey (Figure 1). In the online survey, two thirds (67%) of respondents reported an increase in social media use, while almost one third (29%) estimated that it had remained the same. One reason behind the increased social media usage was simply that participants were more at home and had more time while less other activities to do. This was reflected in the comments for instance as, "But
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Fig. 1. Survey responses of participants’ social media behaviour during COVID-19, ranging from 1 (less activity) to 7 (increased activity).

anyway I spent more time in there [in social media] because there is nothing much to do otherwise” (P23), or by another: “The use of social media has increased: when I’m at home, especially on bad days, I grab the phone more easily” (R46). There were also perceptions of increased amount of posts in social media feeds: “People started spending more time at home, and the routine was broken. I observed more activity on Instagram and Facebook.” (P1), “And then people also post more. I have noted that people have more time to post.” (P24).

Participants browsed for information about the COVID-19 situation through social media channels: “I follow more of what is being discussed in there [in social media]. On a general level, but also for fun. I gather information about the [COVID-19] situation.” (P23). What also increased the usage was that social media became a key channel to be in touch with others during COVID-19 restrictions and physical distancing: “People have started using it [social media] more. They have had to learn it for being able to keep in contact with, for example, old relatives or other risk groups.” (P22). In the next subsection, we report detailed results about distance meetings and events forms of interaction and participation during pandemic times.

4.1.2 Remote Meetings and Events. Remote meetings and events became a central form of interaction and participation during COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). In the survey, a majority (65%) of respondents had met their close ones remotely more than usually. The experiences are described in respondents’ open field answers: “Before the corona, for example, I never made video calls with friends or arranged remote evening parties” (R86). The phenomena is also highlighted in the interviews as described by a participant telling: “Even though I communicated with them with audio only previously, I started to have those video chats with my friends and family.” (P1). Also personal events that have traditionally been face to face gatherings were now arranged remotely: “I have participated in e.g. for funerals and two different birthdays remotely” (R72).

The shift to remote mode concerned also wide audience events as event organizers searched for special arrangements in the exceptional times. From the survey, 64% of respondents had increasingly participated in remote events such as virtual concerts or theatre shows. People had versatile observations and experiences about participating in remote events. For example: “The pride parade was organized very differently than usually. There was only a limited number of people who were allowed to participate in the actual parade. Otherwise, it was a virtual event.” (P2). Or as described by a respondent: “I attended virtual concerts, which was an amazing experience!” (R24).
Remote conditions opened up new opportunities to participate as well in special occasions as in everyday life activities over long distances. This was well reported by a participant who had recently moved from Poland to Finland. “To me personally, what was interesting, was to participate in a performance even if I was two and a half thousand kilometres away. [...] And also the same with yoga classes. I can participate in the [yoga] school back in Poland.” (P29).

COVID-19 pandemic also introduced several live social media sessions for people to jump in and participate. “There were people who started to make some live content. [...] There was this one I was following, two guys who had a live session everyday.” (P1). “There have been many such live events especially for children and young people. For example a TikTok person with a lot of followers has been engaged. And you were then supposed to come at a certain time to do something there [in TikTok] live.” (P26). “Especially in last Spring, all communality, Instagram lives etc. were really invigorating and brought content to the days (R40).”

4.2 Pandemic in Social Media Content

4.2.1 Face masks as Icons of Pandemic Times. According to the participants’ experiences, it is obvious that face masks have become one of the main icons of COVID-19 pandemic in social media. Participants shared an experience that photos consisting face masks had conquered social media feeds: “The top thing that came to my mind [of COVID-19 era social media] was the face mask use in images and videos” (P6). Participants also shared face mask content by themselves, as illustrated by a participant who told: ‘I was on my way to south by train, and there is a strong mask recommendation, so I had to put on the mask then. And then I wanted to take a picture of it for friends.” (P24). Using a face mask was something people also wanted to emphasize in the social media content they produced: “Now, I’ve noticed a lot face mask use [in social media content], and people also might want to bring it up” (P14). “I’ve published snapchat pictures from a store where I have a mask on my face (R27).” In addition, face masks were also literally a way of self-expression, as described by a participant: “[Showing a picture at own social media account in the interview:] There is me and my friend. Both of us use face masks, self-sewn fabric masks” (P17). Or by another: “[Shows a piece of social media content:] And they have just ordered fabric masks made by a domestic small entrepreneur from the Etsy online store and are now introducing them in use. How they work in real life and what they look like.” (P27). Overall, face mask pictures seemed to become normal in social media content along the pandemic: “Half a year earlier, if someone had posted such a mask image, people would have been quite confused. But now it’s the new normal.” (P21).
4.2.2 More Home and Outdoors, Less Events. COVID-19 pandemic had changed the way how people expressed their everyday life in social media. The key themes emerged in the interviews, and the survey responses provided more quantitative insight to the key social media content topics and the perceived change when compared to the pre-COVID times, Figure 3.

![Survey participants’ experiences of social media content during COVID-19 when compared to pre-pandemic time, ranging from 1 (much less postings) to 7 (much more postings).](image)

Increased time at home creates more home-centred posts: “Now more of that kind of home stuff is being done. The change in the [social media] content is evident.” (P10). This home-centred content includes e.g. cooking: “This is the content I shared on Instagram [shows a picture]. It’s basically cooking. I started to spend more time at home.” (P1). In addition, COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase in outdoors related content: “Outdoors trip photos. Here are the latest [shows content with a phone]. We were in Pyhä-Luosto National Park.” (P19). “There are outdoor images on Instagram. In the way that ‘yes, it is still good to be here in the woods’.” (P20). “Nature pictures come from every place, I have a bad conscience that I myself don’t use the corona times to be in nature” (R6). Changes in content are also related to COVID-19 specific experiences such as quarantines: “Especially in the spring [2020], the situation was even more new, and it was a strict lock-down. That’s when people posted such humorous pictures of their remote mode lives.” (P9).

The reported social media content representing home and outdoors centred life and COVID-19 specific experiences replaced the content related to activities that COVID-19 pandemic had restricted. According to participants’ experiences, this was visible especially in the lack of content posted from physical gatherings such as public events and spending nights out with friends. “[...] there are no festivals or anything else. That kind of content has diminished.” (P10).

Spending nights out has turned to spending nights at home: “Less pictures of events, more of personal home evenings” (P13). Participants also brought out the question of acceptable content in the sense of what they chose to post, e.g.: “There is no content like being in a bar dancing or in crowds. At least you don’t want to publish it, if you have one.” (P19). People practised self-censorship as illustrated by comments in the survey: “I know people who are thinking aloud whether pictures of the New Year celebration can be published at all if it can be deduced that there have been more than ten people present. That person decided to post photos only of themselves and their partner and omitted the group photos.” (R47). “We’ve been to a cottage / ski resort with a group of friends, and I haven’t posted anything from there so that no one would know about it.” (R40). The social media content describing ‘life in the crowds’ were rather posted as
memories from the pre-COVID-19 times: “When they have not been able to travel during the corona period, people publish their old travel experiences and images. One acquaintance published them for several weeks.” (R4).

4.2.3 Creativity and Social Media Challenges. Changed everyday life expressions were as well related to certain COVID-19 time activities posted and spread in social media channels. “In the spring [2020], it seemed that people came up more of different ways to spend their free time. There were all those really weird activities people came up with and were creative about.” (P9). These activities included e.g. an increase in DIY content: “In the beginning [of the pandemic], [...] various DIY stuff became more common” (R92), or channel-specific phenomena such as “these [COVID-19] TikTok dances [were visible in social media]” (P28). Participants reported also observations about other COVID-19 related phenomena such as huge amount of social media challenges. According to the participants’ general observations, social media challenges consisted e.g. yoga and other workout challenges, as well as humorous ones. The latter included such as the Toilet Paper Challenge, which required people to juggle a roll of toilet paper with their feet, or the Quarantine Pillow Challenge, where participants used a belt to wear a pillow like a quarantine couture. “There was such a change in trends in the spring that a challenge culture emerged again. [...] There were so many of them that one could no longer keep up.” (P22).

4.3 Affecting Opinions and Behaviour

4.3.1 Following Authorities for Information. Social media had a central role in increasing awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic with timely instructions and recommendations. From the survey, 70% of the respondents reported that social media increased their pandemic awareness, Figure 4. The experiences revealed, how social media was a key channel to follow up-to-date COVID-19 instructions and recommendations in order to live accordingly. In the first place, participants reported how they followed authorities’ social media accounts: “I started to follow THL [Finnish institute for health and welfare] when the worst isolation time came. There I received such good quality information.” (P2). For some, social media was even the only source of information: “Social media is my only source of news at the time, so I get information about the COVID-19 mostly through Instagram” (R54).

People had an experience that a wide variety of organisations shared content about the preferred behaviour in the current situation: “For example, the university’s Instagram account will tell you well when the COVID-19 guidelines change” (R53), “Especially companies remind you to wash your hands and wear a mask” (P11). It was also remarkable how social media celebrities and influencers had a major role in sharing COVID-19 related information, as illustrated by participant who told: “[shows a piece of social media content:] It features actress Jennifer Aniston taking a picture of herself wearing a mask. In the caption she urges the use of face mask and talks about how to behave safely in public places during these times.” (P8). One participant had experience about acting as an influencer herself: “I belong to a producer group that shares fact-based corona content on Instagram. It is such an influential collaboration with the government. [...] The intention is that through influencer marketing, the facts are spread, not the gut feelings.” (P17).

4.3.2 Peers as Information Channel. People as well used social media to share up-to-date information among peers: “I have shared fact-based information” (P18). In addition, social media was a channel to speculate COVID-19 related up-to-date information and experiences with friends: “If there is a friend coming to visit [in this town], she then asks what is the situation in there, and how to behave. [...] Mostly thinking about how’s the situation right now. And how it affects your own doings.” (P22). People also shared their experiences from COVID-19 tests: “Many of my relatives and such might write if they have taken a corona test. They might write about it on Facebook and that way inform a little about how it’s going.” (P15). Sharing COVID-19 related content also deals with peer example and peer pressure: “I try to
appear exemplary in the content published by others. e.g., in a mask in a public place” (R63), and “Now I wear a mask. Also because others do. I feel stupid if I don’t wear one. And on the other hand, with those who don’t wear a mask and I do. I a bit resent those people. I take it seriously and annoy those who don’t.” (P19).

### 4.3.3 Facing Polarized Voices and Misinformation in Social Media

Overall, people’s experiences revealed that there was not a shared consensus about COVID-19 situation in social media. This came up both in the interviews and survey responses. Figure 4. Instead participants and respondents had noticed rival voices and polarised opinions dealing with corona topics. “[In the beginning] when experts recommended something, it was not challenged. But clearly now [half a year later] it feels like different voices are emerging, and different conspiracy theories, and different kinds of questioning. In a way, maybe it has started to be more politicised.” (P20). “People are surprisingly even fanatical in their positions e.g. against masks and vaccination” (R4). “I have stopped following many people in social media because of corona-related disinformation and corona denialism” (R150). The rival voices and polarised information was visible for instance in the confrontation of ‘alternative’ and ‘fact based’ information: “[The content I have shared] hasn’t been, well, such wingnut stuff.” (P21). “This is what I find really scary. Somehow just the fact that she [a social media influencer] is talking about not having to wash her hands. So it’s a very scary extreme. I find it very destructive, and I hope people don’t learn from her. But it’s scary that she has a lot of supporters.” (P21). On the other hand, people had experienced that the situation and the divided opinions were not stable but changing over time “In the beginning, it was very much a question whether masks were necessary. [...] Now it has become a pretty mundane thing.” (P17).

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Increased Role of Social Media

Similarly to results reported in earlier research [28], also our findings revealed increased social media use during COVID-19. The increased use of social media during pandemic was generally found to be due the combination of improved opportunity for the usage, as well as the social needs, and the interest to get more COVID-19 related information. A central theme that emerged through various topics was how social media had a central role in creating the feeling of connection between people during the pandemic. Also, the condition that people were forced to spend more time at home provided an easy opportunity and facilitated the increased social media use. In the absence of physical meetings,
social media offered means to stay in contact and gain peer support, and people took the opportunity to use it more extensively. It has been reported that the effects of COVID-19 lockdown on people’s life went beyond the practicalities, causing e.g. uncertainty and loneliness [27]. Our participants reported, how social media was a central channel for keeping in touch, and how they had come up with much more online meetings and video calls with family and friends.

The results also show how people were widely exposed to COVID-19 related information through social media, and often also started following new channels to gain up-to-date and reliable information. On the other hand, it was evident that the participants had noticed also how the opinions expressed in the social media were not always unified, and how different conspiracy theories and misinformation spread through social media channels. The same phenomenon has also been reported in prior art, see e.g. Bruns et al. [10]. The increased use of social media makes it also to an easy place to catch people and their attention. Different actors in social media, such as authorities, influencers, communities, and peers compete on the user’s attention.

5.2 Collective Social Media Cultures during Pandemic

Based on our participants’ experiences, social media was found to gain a stronger role in collective actions, and more active collective social media culture emerged due the pandemic. This was evident not only from the more frequent attendance to different online events, but also in starting organizing online gatherings e.g. among a geographically distributed family. The lockdown times also inspired different campaigns and challenges, which people could participate from home. This had a social function as being part of the community, but also in keeping the spirits up during the pandemic.

Bodrunova (2020) has argued how online mass-participation activities during the COVID-19 lockdown have grown into examples of contributive action, which focus on online projects where people participate by contributing into socially and/or politically meaningful action such as virtual protests, and which as means of social coping with the crisis [8]. Our study provided some similar findings, although this was not a dominant theme in people’s reports on their social media actions. A study about wellbeing and fear of missing out (FOMO) on digital content in the time of COVID-19 showed that FOMO has not disappeared during the pandemic, but has been replaced by related feelings towards new online activities such as online concerts and virtual gatherings [22]. In our study, participants did not report negative feelings, but the appearance of and the participation in online events was reported as a positive phenomenon. However, the online events were not seen to be as appealing as attending to their physical counterparts would have been.

5.3 Peer pressure, Self-censorship and the Question of Acceptable Content

The findings also highlighted the role of peers both as information source and in promoting socially acceptable behaviour patterns during pandemic. Marketing research has reported how social media networks create peer support and increase the trust in the context of consumer behaviour [20]. Prior art has shown how friends’ opinions matter in social media, and influence on an individual’s mindset [35]. Peer postings have thus an opportunity to influence on the behaviour of the user in the social network. Our results reveal how peer opinions were sought e.g. when determining the safety of some area or activity. The participants also seemed to actively use the role of peer as an influencer, when they were promoting e.g. face mask use in the social media for their friends and followers.

The study also revealed that there was a peer pressure to publish socially acceptable content in social media. This included, for instance, showing that one was using a face mask, and that they spent their freetime at home or in an isolated environment. The absence of party or travel photos was seen primarily to occur due to stopping of such activities altogether, but it was also commented that such content would not be socially acceptable to post. It was clear
that people realized this, and self-censorship was taking a place or expected. This would be an interesting research
direction for a deeper investigation.

5.4 Limitations

We acknowledge that our research is limited by the method, which relies of people’s own expressions and self-reporting.
In addition, we acknowledge the bias due to the geographic limitation of the participant sample, as the study was
run in Finland, Europe. Also, the sample of participants highlights university students and staff, as the interviews
were arranged at the university premises. The widely distributed online survey partially tackles this issue. We also do
acknowledge that there is a gender bias, as out of 29 interview participants, 90% were women. This was somewhat
less in the online survey, but even there three quarters of the participants were women. In addition, it should be noted
that the interviews were organized jointly with a face mask making workshop. From this it can be concluded that all
participants recognize the importance of wearing face masks as a means of preventing the virus from spreading. As
presented in the findings, there are many polarized voices in social media, including people who are anti-mask. These
voices have been unintentionally excluded from the study. To sum up, the participant pool is not representative of all
social media users. However, we believe our research provides interesting viewpoints from the holistic user perception
point of view and on the subjective experiences what people had.

Our research contributes to the research discussion on the role of social media during pandemic, so far largely
dominated by large scale quantitative studies which do not dig deeper into the rich experience base and holistic view
by the social media users. Our research provides a user perception angle, and overview of the versatility of themes
perceived by people in their overall social media use.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have presented people’s perceptions of social media use during COVID-19 pandemic, based on 29
interviews and a survey with 172 participants. The findings report on increased social media use, which is linked to
1) increased opportunities due to the time spent at home, 2) to the increased need to be in contact with the people
in the absence of face to face meetings, and 3) on the need to follow pandemic related information. The visibility of
COVID-19 pandemic in personal social media content was due posting with face masks, increased posting made from
home and outdoors activities, and attendance to virtual events instead of physical ones. In addition, participants had
started following new information channels in social media in order to gain up-to-date information on pandemics. They
faced also the polarized opinions visible in social media, where they also acknowledged the spreading of pandemic
related misinformation and conspiracy theories. Other emerging findings revealed the themes of self-censorship and
participants being aware of posting socially acceptable content in social media.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work has received support from Korona Co-creation Smart Social Distancing project, funded by Business Finland.

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