Social Media & COVID-19: A Global Study of Digital Crisis Interaction among Gen Z and Millennials

A Whitepaper by

ılıılı Pollfish

Pollfish

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"We're not just fighting a *pandemic*; we're fighting an *infodemic*."

– Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,
Director-General, World Health Organization
(WHO), February, 2020.

The Purpose of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated the news during the course of 2020 and going into 2021, trickling into virtually all news verticals. With the abundance of coverage this topic has received and continues to gain, **a bevy of misinformation has emerged along with it.**

This is especially prevalent in the digital space, where bad-faith actors are given free rein, mainly due to the dark web and social media. Given that social platforms are widely used by the younger generation, they therefore hold enormous sway in how they consume their news.

As such, for just over one year, it is objectively accurate to label **the spread of COVID-19 misinformation as having been spun into an infodemic.** A portmanteau of "information" and "epidemic," this term refers to the fast and widespread dissemination of false information about something — in this case the coronavirus and its extended subtopics (its origin, cure, vaccine, symptoms, etc.).

An infodemic has several self-evident drawbacks and to tackle them head-on, it is necessary to vet the situation to learn just **how pervasive it is, who exactly it has affected, what specific kinds of misinformation have been circulating** and **how this misinformation has shaped the feelings and opinions** of the population in question.

On behalf of the World Health Organization, two key actors: a global marketing organization (Wunderman Thompson), a university (The University of Melbourne) along with Pollfish, have set out to study this phenomenon, particularly in regards to the younger generation.

Using the Pollfish online survey software, and through the consolidated efforts, Wunderman Thompson and the University of Melbourne have produced a study on the role and effect of social media in fomenting an infodemic surrounding COVID-19 among Millennials and Generation Z.

Key Actors of the Social Media & COVID-19 Study

On behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO), the key parties involved in studying the COVID-19 infodemic within social media are Wunderman Thompson, The University of Melbourne (Australia) and Pollfish,

The WHO is an international public health organization, serving as the public health arm of the United Nations. With its main objective defined as "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health," it leads health responses and coordinates international health through various programs.

Wunderman Thompson is a New York-based global marketing communications agency, serving 90 markets with 200 offices. This agency is part of the WPP Group, an international advertising group. It classifies itself as part agency, part consultancy and part technology company, working to help brands achieve growth.

The University of Melbourne is Australia's leading public research university and a world leader in education, teaching and research. It holds the number 31 ranking for top universities in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2021).

Pollfish is a self-service market research survey tool offering real-time responses from consumers in a network of over 140,000 of the world's most popular websites and apps. It sustains a customer reach of over 650,000,000 global consumers.

Why Pollfish?

The three researching parties involved in this study chose Pollfish over a wide variety of available survey platforms. Their trust in Pollfish points to a multitude of strengths and core differentiators that the platform offers.

The Pollfish platform is **a robust SaaS program equipped with various capabilities** that create a quick and seamless polling experience, both for the researchers and the survey responders.

First off, it employs the organic sampling method known as Random Device Engagement (RDE) as opposed to survey panels. The former acquires responders by garnering random people from their organic digital environment, while the latter obtains responders via pre-recruitment methods.

RDE is an innovative method to extract targeted respondents via randomization, a method that helps avoid incurring any biases. (See the below section on the methodology for an expanded explanation).

Secondly, the Pollfish platform provides a unique edge in that it helps researchers frame questions, the kinds that eliminate variations due to the inadvertent mislabelling of a question. For example, in the screener portion, the platform institutes guidelines for survey questions before each survey receives approval for release. Additionally, on the product support side, surveys are reviewed before they launch to avoid this issue.

Research

Professionals

Thirdly, our survey platform model supports all kinds of research professionals (marketers, analysts, demand generation managers, etc.) that need to produce both quantitative and qualitative surveys and expect to retrieve quality data. Generating and running the surveys is a friction-free process, allowing researchers to make informed decisions with minimal disruption to their innovation process.

In fact, all surveys are assigned an estimated completion time, so that researchers know what to expect in terms of a wait time and time frames for their survey campaigns.

This survey solution provides an immensely easy to use DIY platform — allowing researchers to screen respondents at a granular level in the screener — and infuses a vast amount of question types in the questionnaire.
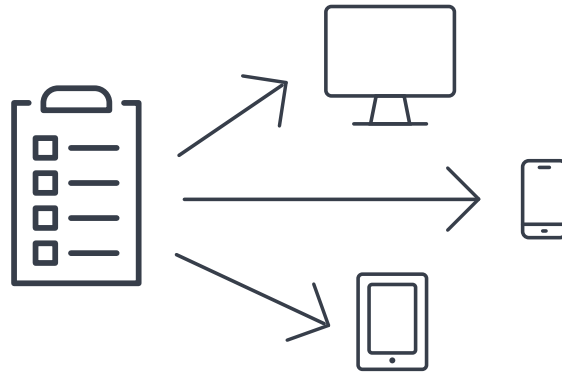
The platform offers several other key capabilities for the survey producing and launching

The key utility of Pollfish is its offering of a fortified survey platform that enables market researchers to gain insights on virtually any topic they choose.

Methodology

The participants in this study executed their research by implementing a set methodology of targeted individuals and timeframes. These actors consolidated their methodology with the surveying methodology that the Pollfish platform operates on, called organic sampling.

Relying on Random Device Engagement

Specifically, they used the signature Pollfish organic sampling method, known as **Random Device Engagement (RDE).** RDE engages random people in their organic digital environment — that is, the digital properties they frequent voluntarily, without being prompted to join via email or recruited via a survey panel.

Instead, as the monikers "organic sampling" and "RDE" suggest, these methods net survey respondents by appealing to users organically, with no advanced planning or recruitment. Random Device Sampling is a superior polling method on several accounts.

140,000
Websites and Apps

650,000,000
Users

Firstly, it engages **a much wider swath of potential survey respondents**, as surveys appear in digital elements that can be viewed by all that visit the digital hosts of these elements. This does not merely indicate a larger sampling availability base, but randomized users — on a sweeping network of over 140,000 top websites and mobile apps, servicing over 650,000,000 users.

Randomization is key to the surveying process, as it **minimizes sampling bias.** This bias occurs as a result of a respondent selection process, specifically when a survey sample is not chosen at random. When respondents are *not* randomly chosen, it leads to the overrepresentation of a particular segment of a targeted population, as only certain types of respondents are partaking.

Additionally, **non-organic** and **non-random sampling** take respondents out of their normal routines, thereby easily causing them to stray from their typical thought processes. In turn, this produces artificial considerations that can influence responses.

Alternatively, there are online panels, another non-random and non-random sampling method. Although this method is key in performing longitudinal studies (continuous observations of the same variables over a period of time), this method is faulty, in that it fosters panel fatigue and panel conditioning, which render a host of survey biases such as prestige bias, along with high attrition rates and low response rates within retained cohorts.

Random Device Engagement is the antidote: as all respondents are fully randomized. RDE assures that a survey is exposed to a sweeping network of over 140,000 top websites and apps, which service over 650,000,000 customers online. These digital users, therefore, partake completely randomly, as they join on their own will. As such, it is not subject to sampling bias.

RDE deploys surveys across various websites, advertising networks, mobile apps and other digital portals to reach and amalgamate a diverse potential sampling pool. A common version of this kind of distribution is on advertising modules on smartphones, but it can exist in the gaming and virtual reality spheres, proving that this method is taped into the modern digital space.

RDE thereby revitalizes typical survey incentive methods, as these additional online platforms provide novel ways to incentivize users to take part in a survey. For example, online gamers can be coaxed to take part in a survey via earning points or digital cash in the game, instead of typical monetary incentives.

Online users can also be incentivized via entry into a sweepstake, a game or a giveaway thanks to Random Device Engagement.

The Pollfish platform provides a unique edge, in that it helps frame questions to eliminate variations due to the inadvertent mislabelling of a question. For example, in the screener portion, the platform institutes guidelines for survey questions before each survey receives approval for release.

How the Study Was Conducted

Wunderman Thompson and the University of Melbourne, teamed up with Pollfish and set their own methodology in motion, with technical support from the WHO. As aforementioned, they got the study off the ground via targeted individuals and timeframes.

The following explains how they studied their targeted population, along with the length of the study and other particulars.

23,500
Respondents
Aged 18-40

Primarily via
Mobile Devices

Across
24 Countries

The survey campaign covered 23,500 respondents within the younger population, those aged between 18 to 40. This is a global study, as respondents represented 24 countries. They were primarily reached via their mobile devices.

The study was initiated in late October 2020 and concluded in early January 2021. This campaign was a joint effort by Wunderman Thompson, The University of Melbourne and Pollfish, carried out on behalf of The World Health Organization.
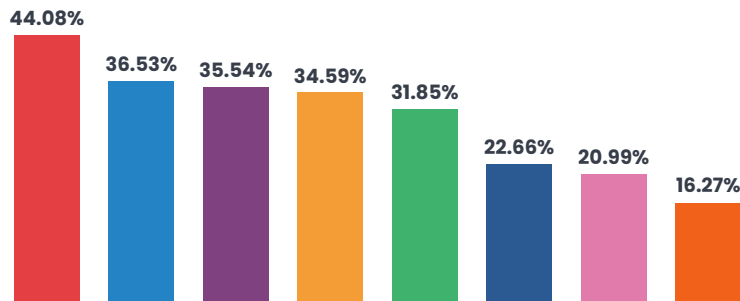
Key Insights

The following information is a roundup of the key insights that Wunderman Thompson and the University of Melbourne gleaned from their survey research with Pollfish. These insights posit the new landscape of how digital news is found and consumed in the age of COVID.

Most notably, these insights explain how Pollfish was uniquely positioned to provide such critical data in an accurate fashion — one that attracted a new generation of online users with shorter attention spans.

National Media Still Reigns Supreme for Gen Z and Millennials

Despite other sources relaying COVID-19 news and facts, both Generation Z and Millennials still largely rely on national mainstream media for this information.

First Source of COVID-19 News

44.08% | 36.53% | 35.54% | 34.59% | 31.85% | 22.66% | 20.99% | 16.27%

When asked for their first source of COVID-19 news and information:

- 44.08% of respondents said national newspapers, TV and radio
- 36.53% said internet search websites
- 35.54% said international news media
- 34.59% said social media content by traditional media
- 31.85% said social media content from the WHO

Personal interactions rank lower as:

- 22.66% get COVID-19 information first from family
- 20.99% from friends
- 16.27% via friends' social media content

How Pollfish did it: The Pollfish platform is built on a mobile-first design standard, meaning that the surveys are optimized for this particular medium. Mobile is the primary medium for web content consumption among the younger generations, so it is no surprise that they spend a great deal of time on their mobile devices.

By reaching Gen Z and Millennial respondents via mobile, the platform captures these subjects where they naturally spend most of their time. As such, there was no intimidation to respond in a particular way, as respondents behave more naturally when they're in their natural environments.
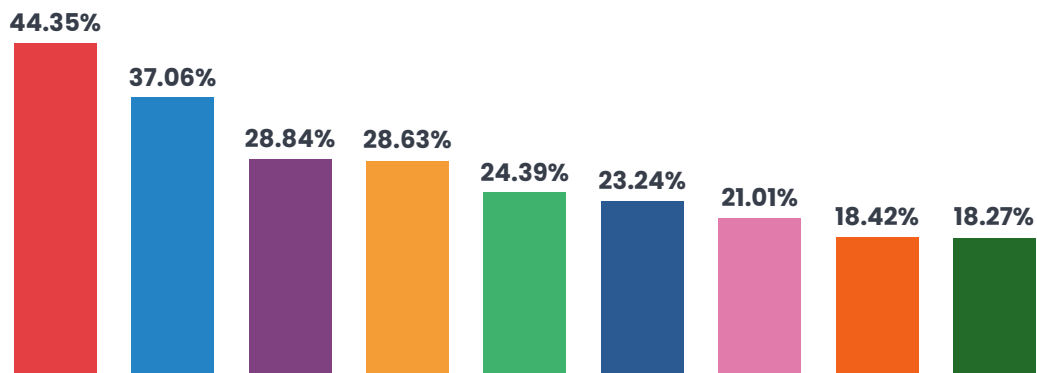
As such, they are inclined to answer more truthfully, thus avoiding biases like acquiescence bias, the tendency to answer to more agreeable/less harsh answers; and prestige bias, the act of responding to be seen in a desirable way. (Although the surveys are anonymous the screener portion may prevent certain respondents from taking part in the survey. Thus, respondents may veer towards false responses to be accepted or expected in taking the survey.

Science Content Considered Shareworthy

Science content is seen as credible when it comes to sharing COVID-related content on social media for both males and females. It ranks as the top content of choice for social sharing.
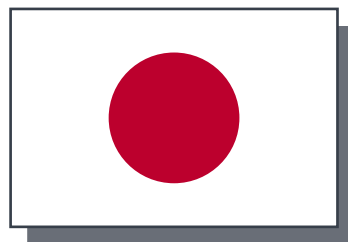
Kind of COVID-19 Content Posted On Social Media

When asked about the kind of COVID-19 information they would most likely post on their social media:

- 🟥 44.35% of the respondents said "scientific" content - the top choice for both male and female respondents.
- 🟦 37.06% said content that is "relevant to me"
- 🟪 28.84% said content that is concerning
- 🟧 28.63% said content that includes an article
- 🟩 24.39% said posts with video content
- 🟦 23.24% said content with an image
- 🟪 21.01% said content with a narrative
- 🟧 18.42% said content that creates an emotional reaction
- 🟩 18.27% said humorous content

These responses change on a country-by-country basis. For example, those living in Nigeria and Japan are most keen on sharing social media content that is "concerning."
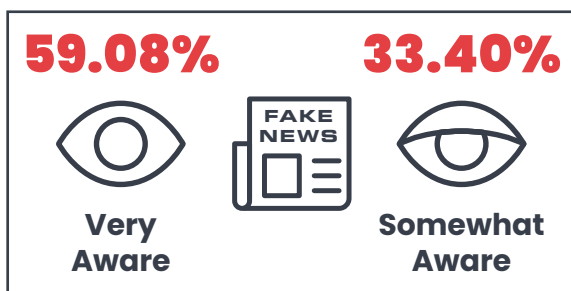
How Pollfish did it: Answering questions on how social media users post to their networks is often a personal matter, as many of these users hide their social media profile activity for the sake of digital privacy. The younger population is tech-savvy and privy to the fact that anyone can look for them online and find them within seconds. Thus, this kind of question can be hard to crack.

The Pollfish platform is able to extract these answers in that it enables the publisher apps, mobile sites and other digital properties to offer incentives to survey respondents. The platform is designed to make the incentives easy to notice and lure respondents with. Incentives are a key aspect for publishers and researchers alike, as most people are less than enthused at taking an online survey. Pollfish creates a clear display of the incentive, taking the guesswork out for app users who come upon a survey.

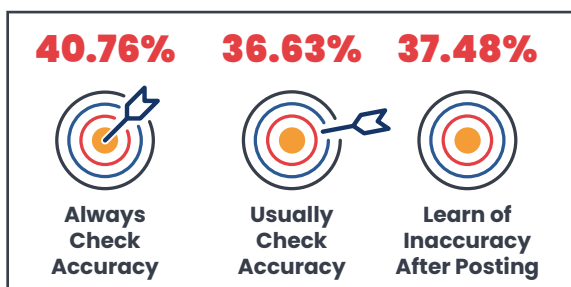## A High Awareness of Fake News Yet Apathy is Present

Generation Z and Millenials are largely aware of fake news, but a significant chunk also shows signs of apathy to it. This is to say that they don't' all care if they posted content that they later found to be incorrect.

59.08% **33.40%**

FAKE NEWS

Very Aware   **Somewhat Aware**

When asked if they were aware of fake news surrounding the coronavirus:

59.08% of respondents said they are very aware of fake news regarding COVID-19

33.4% said they were somewhat aware

40.76%   **36.63%**   **37.48%**

Always Check Accuracy   **Usually Check Accuracy**   **Learn of Inaccuracy After Posting**
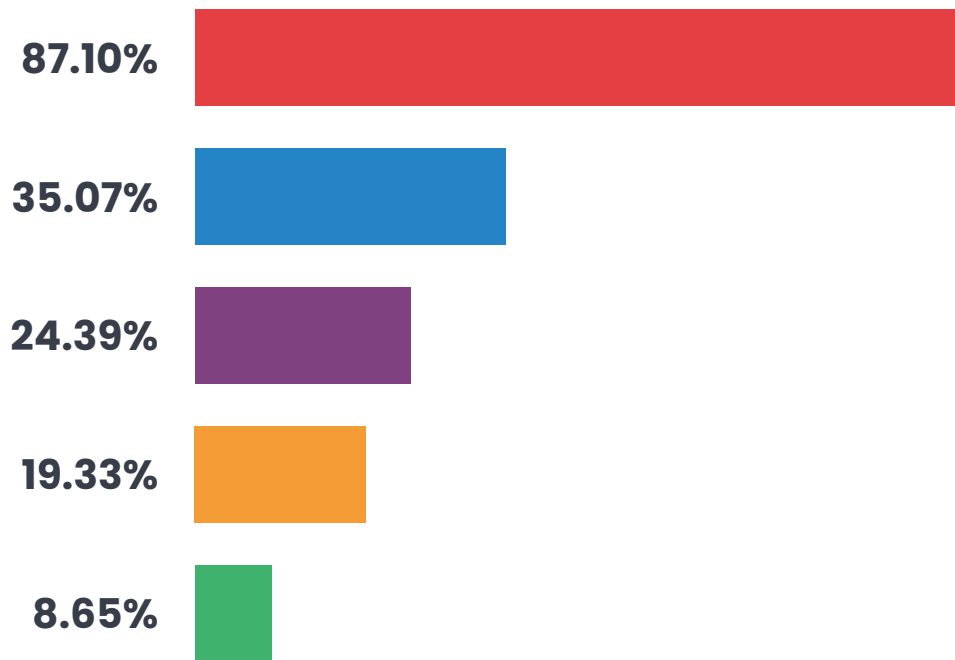
When asked about sharing content before posting it to social media:

40.76% said they've always made sure the content is accurate before posting it on social media

36.63% said they make sure most of the time

37.48% said they shared content on social media and later found out it was incorrect

How People Handle Accidentally Posting Fake News On Social Media

87.10%

35.07%

24.39%

19.33%

8.65%

Of the latter:

- 87.1% said they later removed or corrected the fake news content
- 35.07% said they ignore false content when coming upon it
- 24.39% said they report content with fake news
- 19.33% said they comment on fake news posts
- 8.65% said they unfollow the accounts that share fake news

How Pollfish did it: With many survey platforms, identifying inaccurate responses is left up in the air. There is no industry standard that requires a survey system of checks to exist, especially to operate while a survey is running. On the contrary, Pollfish relies on a system that ensures quality answers, i.e., ensuring honest answers only.

This is because Pollfish established technical quality checks and measures to ensure that no respondent is speeding through the survey. For example, respondents that type in gibberish responses are not allowed to proceed in that their surveys are disqualified. Another example involves disqualifying respondents that give straight-lining answers (answers where one multiple-choice answer is consistently chosen).

The Biggest Concerns Over COVID-19

Gen Z and Millenials have expressed their greatest worries in relation to COVID-19 and over half of them listed their family and friends contracting the virus as their greatest concern. However, many other anxieties are stemming from the coronavirus.

56.08%

said the risk of family or friends getting sick

54.38%

said the economy crashing

When asked about their top COVID concern:

56.08% said the risk of their family or friends getting sick

54.38% said the economy crashing — this was the top concern among respondents in various countries: Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Italy, Morocco, Nigeria, Spain, Turkey and several more

Greatest worries over social impacts of COVID-19:

38.62% said not being able to visit family, friends and loved ones

34.01% said changes to their lifestyle

22.70% said declining relations with their social community

38.62%

said not being able to visit family, friends and loved ones

34.01%

said changes to their lifestyle

22.70%

said declining relations with their social community

How Pollfish did it: Capturing these answers accurately can be a challenge for survey providers as respondents may be thinly veiling their true beliefs, while some may be responding with false answers altogether. To avoid inaccuracies, Pollfish employs a layer of artificial intelligence (AI) into the system to track responses as the platform receives them.

The platform itself weeds out red flag answers as it acquires responses. As such, the process occurs in real-time, stamping out the need to manually check for responses after they have been received.

How they Really Feel About the Government and the Media in the Midst of COVID

The dominance of COVID-19 news and other content mentions in 2020 and the present has been overwhelming for Generation Z and Millenials. They also aren't thrilled with their governments' responses.

58.93%

Feel Overwhelmed

52.52%

Stopped Paying Attention

When asked how they felt about COVID-19 content circulating the media:

58.93% of respondents said they feel overwhelmed by all the information coming their way

52.52% said they have stopped paying attention to it

This generation feels as though, despite the bevy of COVID content, they are not being provided with certain critical information.

58.93%

Said The Media Isn't Telling Them Everything They Need to Know

52.52%

Said The Government Isn't Giving Them The Full Picture

59.96% said that the media is not telling them all that they need to know

57.70% said the government is not giving them the full picture

50%

Say The Government Isn't Doing Enough

50%

Say The Government Has Been Overreacting

56.93%

Feel Optimism For The Future

When asked if the government has been sufficiently controlling the pandemic, about 50% of respondents said the government isn't doing enough. 50% said they feel that their government has been overreacting.

Despite feelings veering toward the negative, 56.93% reported a feeling of optimism for the future with vaccines present.

How Pollfish did it: The Pollfish platform enables researchers to put forth a wide variety of question types. If they want to dig deeper into a subtopic, they can add further questions relating to it, but only used with respondents that respond in a particular way.

Known as skip logic, Pollfish incorporates an advanced version of this, where respondents are routed to question if they answer in a particular way. This creates various survey paths that will differ from respondent to respondent. This method helps reveal crucial aspects in the psyche of respondents. In terms of COVID-19, health communicators, as well as those in any sector can take these findings (and others from the study) to better understand this population and transmit information to them.

Amassing Research in a Covid and Post-Covid World

In the current climate of the Covid-dominated world, along with the ensuing post-Covid world, it is more important than ever to gather accurate information. While the internet, namely social media networks, connect us with key events and people, **they do not always circulate accurate information,** as **the Pollfish study with Wunderman Thompson and the University of Melbourne proves.**
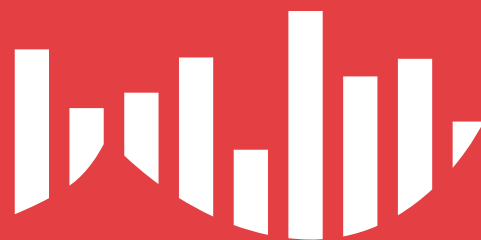
The same can be said about collecting information about your target market — if you are a market researcher, or target population — if you are a general researcher. Your target audience should be monitored through precise means, allowing you to glean timely and accurate information about your target group. Although the internet is awash with secondary resources, they may not always be accurate.

All forms of research are susceptible to fall prey to nefarious individuals and organizations who manipulate data and disseminate false information. As such, brick-and-mortar and digital businesses, along with all kinds of organizations seeking to conduct research ought to perform primary research. In order to do this, they need to adopt an effective online survey tool.

A potent online survey platform does not merely provide the means to create a survey; **rather it can deploy the survey across the most trafficked websites and mobile apps**, the kind in which most people spend much of their digital time, especially in the period where working from home has taken precedence.

Furthermore, aside from culling data and meeting all demographics quotas, **an agile survey platform disqualifies respondents who provide incomplete surveys, biased answers and other low-quality data.**

These kinds of mechanisms represent a pivotal stage in the age of mass information and digital research. As such, with all of these capabilities, along with those mentioned in the previous sections, **Pollfish is uniquely positioned to reinvent survey research**, empowering businesses, organizations and even individuals to amass only the most necessary and accurate information about their targeted subjects.

Pollfish

Pollfish (www.pollfish.com) is an agile market research platform offering real-time responses from mobile consumers. Using a modern sampling methodology called Organic Sampling that merges mobile delivery, artificial intelligence, and a massive audience network, Pollfish is able to narrowly target highly specific audience segments within their audience network of over 650M global respondents, spanning 160 countries and 51 languages, with better data quality and faster completion times than competitive survey solutions. Trusted by brands, media companies, and agencies alike, Pollfish data has powered stories in almost every major news source in the US, including New York Times, Washington Post, Fox News, and Inc.