

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Information Literacy of Business Sharing Group Users

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Abstract

Purpose/Thesis: The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic made the digital space take a larger part in our everyday life. This article determines whether COVID-19 has in any way affected information literacy of users of a specific type, i.e. members of business sharing Facebook groups.

Approach/Methods: The research involved a literature review and an analysis of data collected by the means of a survey.

Results and conclusions: 104 people from eight groups from Lesser Poland, as well as Tri-City, Silesia, and Mazovia, took part in the pilot study. The survey covered the following themes: recognizing information needs and obtaining information, evaluating and using information, defining and self-assessing information literacy. The results showed that the participants did not think that COVID-19 had a significant impact on their information literacy, and they assessed their level of their own competences as adequate, or high.

Originality/Value: The article contributes a new study which may inspire further discussions on the subject of social media users.

Keywords

COVID-19. Information behavior. Information literacy. Information user. Social media.

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed our everyday life. We witnessed systemic changes, regulated by authorized subjects, as well as changes on a smaller scale, in lives of individuals forced to increase their digital activity. The effect of the coronavirus on academia is obvious: we only have to consider the sheer number of publications on the subject. The Scopus database records over 48.5 thousand items (10% of which are papers in humanities and social sciences); Web of Science – over 28 thousand (the state for September 23, 2020).

This article aims to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic had any impact on Internet users' information literacy. The study focused on Internet users with accounts on Facebook who joined business sharing groups launched during the pandemic.

The article responds to a certain gap in scientific research. Thus far, nobody analyzed the relationship between COVID-19 and information literacy of social media users, particularly

members of businesses sharing groups operating on Facebook, launched to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic. This article may therefore substantially extend the horizons of our research and initiate a new discussion.

While the terms such as “COVID-19,” “information literacy,” and “information users” have been given exhaustive explanations and their presence in scholarship is well-established, we should clarify what business sharing groups are. They have not been defined in scholarship, but we may intuit that they concern business information, which comprises business metainformation, information regarding firms, markets, products, services, and so on (Cisek, 2002). Business information is produced by economic agents (suppliers of goods and services, as well as consumers whose demands determine the production); consumption of business information affects the economy (Materska, 2007, 100). The persistent reference to the economic aspect indicates a close relationship between business information and economic information, which nevertheless should not be conflated (Januszko, 2001, 23).

Business sharing groups are online communities defined by following characteristics: 1) they were launched for a specific business-economic purpose, 2) they are two distinct groups of users: consumers (seeking information about goods and services they demand) and producers (sharing information and determining the supply); 3) the users share business information, which concerns good and services, particularly their properties, characteristics, and the manner of purchase. To define these communities, we need to bear in mind that the pandemic and the restrictions it imposed on the activity of economic agents gave rise to a specific type of business sharing groups, designed to reduce the need to leave the house, and to support local businesses (hence the name *I support local businesses*).

To increase information efficiency, suppliers had to post highly structured messages, including such information as the name of the firm, their online address (a website or a social media account), industry, hygiene procedures, prices, as well as details relating to orders and deliveries. In turn, consumers had to use a specific browser and categorize their searches according to its hashtag system.

2. Literature review

As mentioned above, COVID-19 has attracted interest of many academics. Relevant papers in information science concern the significance of information and the role of information systems (Ågerfalk et al., 2020), communication and sharing information (Adam et al., 2020; Yusof et al., 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2020), phenomena of infodemic, disinformation, and fake news (Leitner, 2020; Marin, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2020), as well as the role of information professionals in combating these pathologies (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020; Naem & Bhatti, 2020).

Regarding the subject literature, it would be difficult to miss the emphasis which the current research places on the relationship between the pandemic and information as well as information processes occurring on social media. Lavinia Marin (2020) discussed information disorders and the role of information context on social media. Pedro Lázaro-Rodríguez (2020) analyzed the evolution of the news on COVID-19 published on social media to determine which media outlets meet the users' information needs better. Cristina

Pulido Rodríguez and her colleagues (2020) focused on two networking services, Twitter and Sina Weibo, which they analyzed for the circulation of fake news on the coronavirus.

COVID-19 aside, it is clear that social media are a popular subject in scholarship. Studies of the contextual factors on social media discuss the types of shared information (Chia et al., 2015; Kümpel et al., 2015), as well as knowledge and information sharing (Das & Mahapatra, 2018), understood as “the process of sharing knowledge and information in order to make better use of existing resources (...) and to produce new knowledge and information on their basis” (Świgoń, 2015, 16).

The research shows that there is a strong relation between sharing personal information and establishing connections on social media (Steijn & Schouten, 2013). The mass-scale information sharing, initiated by individual users, created the so-called “Facebook effect” (Bağ, 2016, 142). The motivating factor behind the transmission of information and knowledge is social networking sharing culture, which values fairness, identification, and openness (Pi et al., 2013); individuals are prone to put more trust in groups that are smaller, closer and more exclusive (Ma et al., 2019), as well as moderated (Iyer et al., 2020). Trust is consolidated by social bonds and friendships (Ghaisani et al., 2017). They constitute the defining advantage of discussion groups (Nisar et al., 2018, 3). The *raison d'être* of Facebook groups is to give their users access to varied resources addressing their needs (Filipek, 2016). We should remember that the mode of communication affects the users' attitude and shapes their needs, which is particularly important in business (Mazza & Palermo, 2018, 51).

Social media users function in a digital environment. The scope of their competences may change. Information literacy has been studied before; information literacy's relation to social media and e-information is the subject of Sandra Kerka's *Extending Information Literacy in Electronic Environments* (2000), a study concerned with the future of information literacy which inspired this paper. According to Kerka, electronic environments require an adjustment of information literacy which turns information literacy into capacity for critical thinking and assessing sources (Kerka, 2000, 31–32). This is particularly important for the digital natives, who are so accustomed to the virtual world that they may not realize that they need to verify information (Beheshti, 2012).

This line of thought was an inspiration for a study of COVID-19's impact on information literacy of members of select Facebook groups. Self-efficacy was an important concept for the study, as the belief in one's ability to successfully perform tasks is one of the factors affecting users' information activity (Kurbanoglu et al., 2006).

3. Methodology

The research had two distinct stages, and a different method was used in each. Literature review (above) constituted the first stage which allowed the author to determine the state of scholarship and identify the gaps therein. The second stage involved an online survey carried among members of select Facebook business sharing groups. This decision was determined by two factors. Firstly, digital environments play an increasingly major role in individuals' everyday life, while the Internet (including social media) became their basic tool for fulfilling various needs. Secondly, the newly-established business sharing groups enjoyed significant popularity, and rapidly acquired members. The number and activity

of these communities drew the author's attention: they suggested research potential and promised interesting results. This was a pilot study. It was conducted over three weeks (in August 2020); the responses to the survey were voluntary and anonymous. The participants came from eight different groups on Facebook (from Lesser Poland: Kraków, Nowy Sącz, Myślenice, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska; from other parts of Poland: Warsaw, Tri-City, Silesia – Gliwice, Dąbrowa Górnicza), which met the following criteria:

- (1) they were launched 'as a result' of COVID-19;
- (2) they used the name *I support local businesses*;
- (3) they accepted the author's request to become a member;
- (4) they allowed the author of this paper post a link to the survey.

The survey comprised two distinct parts and 32 questions (most of them closed-ended). The first part contained seven demographic questions about gender, age, education, employment, place of residence, industry, and role in the Facebook group. The second part contained 25 questions about information literacy. Each question pertained to one of three main themes: 1) recognizing and addressing information needs, 2) evaluating and using information, 3) defining information literacy and self-assessing its level. The results are presented below. For the reader's convenience, the Facebook groups' names were shortened: Support local businesses – KRAKÓW – SLBK; Support local businesses: MYŚLENICE – SLBM; Support local businesses: NOWY SĄCZ – SLBNS; Support local businesses: Kalwaria Zebrzydowska municipality – SLBKZ; Support local businesses: WARSZAWA – SLBW; Support local businesses: TRI-CITY – SLBT; I support local businesses: Dąbrowa Górnicza – SLBDG and Support local businesses: Gliwice and the surrounding areas – SLBG.

4. Results

4.1. The participants

In total, 104 business sharing group members responded to the survey. 66 participants belonged to 8 groups based in Lesser Poland, in Kraków (41), Nowy Sącz (12), Myślenice (9) and Kalwaria Zebrzydowska (4). The remaining (38) participants belonged to groups in Warsaw (13), Tri-City (13), Gliwice (7) and Dąbrowa Górnicza (4).

Over 70% (73) of the participants were women; the majority of women was based in Kraków and Kraków (30 in total), then in Nowy Sącz and Nowy Sącz powiat (10) and in Warsaw (10). The majority of men was also located in Kraków (see Table 1).

As far as the participants' age was concerned, majority (49%) said they were between 31 and 40 years old (51 participants). The second largest age group was 25–30 years olds – 26 participants (25%), then 41–50 years olds – 20 (19%). Only four participants were over 50 years old (4%). The least represented age group were the 18–24 years olds – there were only 3 (3%). The detailed age distribution by gender and Facebook group is presented in Table 2.

Over 65% of the participants had higher education (49 women and 19 men). The remaining 35% had secondary education (24 women and 12 men). As far as employment is concerned, majority of the participants was employed (79% – 82 people). The survey

also reached 21 employers (20% of the participants) and one student (from SLBW). The employed participants worked in various industries. As Figure 1 shows, majority of the employed worked in trade – 28 (27%), then food industry – 17 (16%), education – 13 (12.5%), and tourism – 11 (10.5%). The least represented industries were events, finance, and telecommunications.

Tab. 1. Participants' gender

No.	Group name	Place of residence	Number of participants	
			F	M
1	Support local businesses: KRAKÓW (SLBK)	Kraków	23	6
		Kraków powiat	7	5
2	Support local businesses: MYŚLENICE (SLBM)	Myślenice	2	1
		Myślenice powiat	3	3
3	Support local businesses: NOWY SĄCZ (SLBNS)	Nowy Sącz	8	0
		Nowy Sącz powiat	2	2
4	Support local businesses: Kalwaria Zebrzydowska municipality (SLBKZ)	Kalwaria Zebrzydowska	1	0
		elsewhere in the municipality	2	1
5	Support local businesses: WARSAW (SLBW)	Warsaw	10	4
		Legionowo powiat	0	0
		Mińsk powiat	0	0
		Otwock powiat	0	0
		Piaseczno powiat	0	0
		Pruszków powiat	0	0
		West Warsaw powiat	0	0
		Wołomin powiat	0	0
Other powiat	0	0		
6	Support local businesses: TRI-CITY (SLBT)	Gdańsk	3	1
		Gdynia	1	2
		Sopot	0	2
		Gdańsk powiat	3	1
		Other powiat	0	0
7	I support local businesses: Dąbrowa Górnicza (SLBDG)	Dąbrowa Górnicza	2	0
		The surrounding areas	2	0
8	Support local businesses: Gliwice i okolica (SLBG)	Gliwice	1	3
		Gliwice powiat	3	0
TOTAL			73	31

Tab. 2. Age of participants (F = female, M = male)

No.	Group name	Age of participants									
		18–24		25–30		31–40		41–50		50+	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
1	SLBK	2	0	7	4	13	4	6	2	2	1
2	SLBM	0	0	0	2	4	2	1	0	0	0
3	SLBNS	0	0	3	0	5	0	2	2	0	0
4	SLBKZ	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
5	SLBW	0	1	4	1	6	2	0	0	0	0
6	SLBT	0	0	2	1	4	5	1	0	0	0
7	SLBDG	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0
8	SLBG	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	2	0	0
TOTAL		2	1	18	8	36	15	14	6	3	1

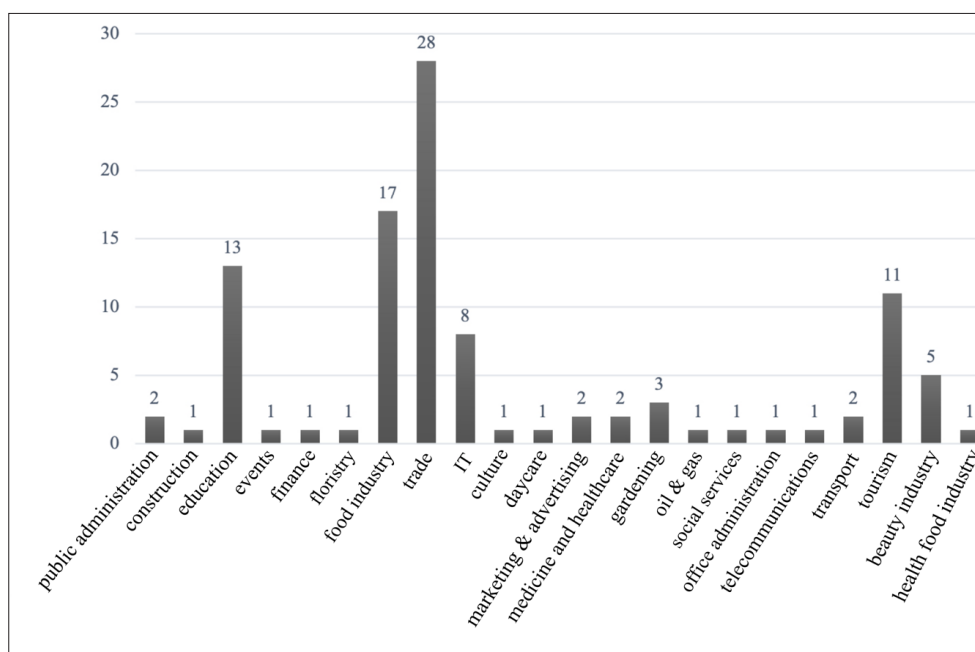


Fig. 1. Participants by industry

The last demographic question concerned participants' role in the *Support local business* Facebook group. Over 80 participants (77%) stated that they functioned in the group as consumers. Producers and service providers were the second largest group – 14 participants (13.5%). 10 participants (9.5%) stated they functioned in the group as both consumers and producers.

4.2. Recognizing and addressing information needs

The survey included 12 close-ended questions on the subject. The first two questions concerned the capacity to recognize an information need. Over 94% (97) of the participants claimed to have it. It seems significant that almost one third (31 participants) answered that their capacity to recognize and address information needs had not been as well developed before the pandemic. Only seven participants declared that they still struggle to recognize their information needs. These participants said that they had struggled with it before the pandemic. Three of these participants were members of SLBK, the remaining four belonged to SLBKZ, SLBDG, SLBG and SLBW.

When asked about their preferred source of information, the participants chose news websites – 55 (SLBK – 22, SLBT – 8, SLBNS – 7, SLBW – 6, SLBG – 5, SLBM – 4, SLBDG – 2, SLBKZ – 1), social media – 38 (13 – SLBK, 8 – SLBW, 5 – SLBM and SLBNS, 3 – SLBT, 2 – SLBKZ and SLBG), online radio/TV – 5 (4 – SLBK, 1 – SLBT), traditional TV – 5 (2 – SLBK and SLBDG, 1 – SLBKZ), print newspaper – 2 (SLBK) and radio – 1 (SLBG). 63 participants (60.5%) said that their preferred source of information was the same as before the pandemic.

The survey also included questions about the credibility of various sources of information. The participants identified news websites as the most trustworthy – 56 (54%) of the participants said they trusted them the most. Other sources were deemed to be much less trustworthy – only 16 (15%) of the participants preferred printed newspapers, 12 (11%) – experts, 11 (10.5%) – social media, 6 (6%) – online radio and TV, 2 (2%) – traditional TV, and 1 (1%) – radio. 68% of the participants (71) declared that they trusted the same sources before the pandemic.

The remaining questions in this section concerned information-seeking behavior. Asked about the process, 82 participants (79%) said that they intentionally searched for information. 22 participants (21%) came across information on accident. It turned out that 75% of the participants (78) had no articulated strategies for seeking information. Out of 26 participants who declared familiarity with certain strategies, over 80% (21) stated that they employed them to seek information (12 – SLBK, 3 – SLBW and SLBNS, 1 – SLBM, SLBT and SLBG).

The survey also accounted for the affective aspect of information-seeking. Asked if they experience emotions while seeking information, 53% of the participants (55) answered in the affirmative. 12 participants (11.5%) strongly denied, and 37 (35.5%) were not able to answer. The participants who claimed to experience emotions while seeking information were asked to select three options: 41 (74.5%) participants felt satisfied, 23 (42%) – hopeless, 13 (23.5%) – anxious, 10 (18%) – frustrated, 4 (7%) – angry, and 1 participant felt happy. The combinations of feelings experienced simultaneously were as follows: hopelessness-satisfaction (11 participants), then anxiety-satisfaction (3), frustration-hopelessness (2), anxiety-frustration/satisfaction (2), frustration-hopelessness-satisfaction (2), frustration-satisfaction (1), frustration-happiness-satisfaction (1). We see then that the participants experienced strong emotions while seeking information. Furthermore, 58% (32) of the participants declared that their emotional experience of information-seeking before the pandemic had been similar. 14 participants said that they did not remember the emotions they experienced while information-seeking before, and nine participants declared that they never experienced suggested emotions while information-seeking.

4.3. Evaluating and using information

The second theme of the survey was evaluating and using information. Asked how they use information, 66% (69) of the business sharing group users declared that they use information for personal purposes. Over 91% (63) of them said that this had been the case before the pandemic.

The study showed that before the pandemic, only 15% (16) of the participants had verified their information in other sources. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19, as many as 73 (70%) participants had been verifying their information. According to 81% of the participants, the most important quality of information was its credibility. The second most important quality was currency (only 7% of the participants considered it to be important) and accessibility (7%). The qualities considered least important were adequacy to the information need (2%), specificity (2%), and author (2%).

47 participants (45%) said that the same quality had been the most important to them before the pandemic. 38 participants (36.5%) were unable to give an unequivocal answer, and 19 participants (18.5%) said that their priorities regarding the qualities of information had changed during the pandemic.

The survey also touched on the legal aspect of information. Asked if legal and ethical considerations affected their use of the acquired information, the definite majority of the participants – 94 (90%) – answered in the affirmative. 45 participants (43%) said that these concerns had been important to them before the pandemic; 37 (35.5%) admitted that they had not been very important, and 22 (21.5%) could not give an unequivocal answer.

The last two questions regarding the use of information straddled information behavior and personal information management (PIM). Asked what they do with acquired information, 64 participants (67%) said that they processed and shared it with others, while 17 (16%) said they processed the information, but did not share it. A significantly lower number of the participants (7; 7%) declared that they did not process the acquired information: they either immediately used it, or dismissed it. The lowest number of the participants (6%) said that they saved acquired information for future reference. Asked how the abovementioned processes had changed over the pandemic, 76 participants (73%) answered that they had not changed at all.

4.4. Defining information literacy and self-assessment

The third theme of the survey was information literacy and the participants' assessment of their own level of it. The section comprised three questions. The first question was designed to gain insight into the participants' understanding of information literacy and its significance.

Nine participants (4 – SLBK, 2 – SLBT, 1 – SLBNS, SLBKZ and SLBDG) said that information literacy did not play a role in their life. Seven out of these nine had secondary education. Only two participants (one from SLBM and one from SLBDG) believed that information literacy was related to evaluating information (members of SLBK). Three times as many participants (6) answered that information literacy related only to the use of information. This group included four members of SLBK, one member of SLBM and one member of SLBDG. For 37 participants (slightly over 35%), information literacy was

synonymous with digital, media, and IT literacies. Majority of the participants (48; 46%) emphasized that information literacy involved the ability to find, evaluate, and use information.

When it came to assessing the level of their information literacy, only one participant assessed it as very low (a member of SLBK). 13 participants assessed their level as low (5 – SLBK, 3 – SLBM and SLBDG, 1 – SLBKZ and SLBG), 41 as adequate (16 – SLBK, 9 – SLBT, 5 – SLBW, 3 – SLBM, 2 – SLBKZ and SLBG and 1 – SLBDG), 40 as high (14 – SLBK, 8 – SLBW, 7 – SLBNS, 4 – SLBT, 3 – SLBM and SLBG and 1 – SLBKZ), and nine as very high (4 – SLBK, 2 – SLBNS, 1 – SLBG and SLBW).

Regarding the relation between their feelings relating to COVID-19 and their information literacy, only six participants (6%) unequivocally said that the pandemic had a significant impact on their information literacy and behaviors. This group included members of SLBK (3), SLBM (1), SLBG (1) and SLBW (1). A substantially larger group of participants – 49 (47%) – claimed that the pandemic did not affect their information literacy and behaviors. An equal number (47%) assessed the level of the pandemic's impact on their competencies and behavior as low.

5. Conclusions

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic wrought many changes in the socio-economic order, as well as in the generally understood information world. This is witnessed in the scholarship, which has recently prioritized the impact of coronavirus, and its relation to information, nearly to the exclusion of other topics. A particularly visible and palpable effect of the pandemic is the increased prominence of technology and our “settling” in a digital world, which includes social media. As a result, digital communication became more intense, while Internet users developed new practices to fulfill their need for human interaction, as well as to support local businesses so that they may survive in this difficult time. It was in context of these developments that business sharing Facebook groups were launched: they facilitate communication, and support local business owners.

104 members of business sharing groups participated in the survey. They were based in places such as Kraków, Nowy Sącz, Myślenice, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, Tri-City, Silesia, or Warsaw. The survey covered the issues of recognizing information needs and acquiring information, evaluating and using information, defining information literacy and assessing their level.

Majority of the participants were between 31 and 40 years old, and had higher education. A definite majority joined business sharing groups as consumers, employed in industries such as trade, food industry, tourism, or education. The results did not suggest that gender, age, employment, position, education, or place of residence determined participants' information literacy or information behaviors.

The most obvious effect of COVID-19 noted by the participants was that they began to verify their information in other sources. They also learned to recognize and define their information needs. A definite majority of the participants consciously sought out information, even if they did not know – and did not employ – any articulated strategies. They used thus acquired information primarily for personal purposes: most often, they processed and shared it. Furthermore, the pandemic made them more aware of the affective aspect of their information behavior and literacy.

The participants' opinions on information literacy itself were interesting as well. The results showed that majority of the participants realized that information literacy involved seeking, evaluating, and using information. However, it seems significant that many participants still associated it with IT, media, and digital literacy. This might be a result of Internet's pervasiveness: it has become almost impossible to live without it.

As the study shows, the impact of the pandemic was manifest to different degrees in different areas of information literacy. This suggests that the participants' answers did not always reflect their emotional experience. According to them, the pandemic did not have a significant impact on their information literacy, and they assessed the level of their competencies as adequate, or high. That their assessment does not correspond to reality seems to be the most interesting result of the study.

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Wpływ COVID-19 na kompetencje informacyjne użytkowników grup typu business sharing

Abstrakt

Cel/Teza: Wybuch pandemii koronawirusa „wymusił” wzmocnienie znaczenia przestrzeni cyfrowej w codziennym funkcjonowaniu jednostek. Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie o to, czy COVID-19 przyczynił się w jakikolwiek sposób do zmian w obrębie kompetencji informacyjnych określonego typu użytkownika informacji, jakim są członkowie grup internetowych z obszaru business sharing.

Koncepcja/Metody badań: Do rozwiązania powyższego problemu badawczego posłużyły przede wszystkim: ankieta oraz krytyczna analiza piśmiennictwa naukowego.

Wyniki i wnioski: W badaniach pilotażowych wzięły udział 104 osoby z ośmiu grup reprezentujących zarówno region małopolski, jak również Trójmiasto, Śląsk i Mazowsze. Ankieta dotyczyła takich zagadnień, jak: rozpoznawanie potrzeby informacyjnej i pozyskiwanie informacji, ewaluacja i wykorzystanie informacji, definiowanie i subiektywna ocena kompetencji informacyjnych. Jak wynika z przeprowadzonej analizy, w odczuciu użytkowników grup, epidemia COVID-19 nie wpłynęła w znaczący sposób na ich kompetencje informacyjne, a oni sami oceniają poziom swoich kompetencji dostatecznie lub wysoko.

Oryginalność/Wartość poznawcza: Artykuł uzupełnia dotychczasowe piśmiennictwo o nowe badania i może być inspiracją do dyskusji nad szerszą grupą użytkowników mediów społecznościowych.

Słowa kluczowe

COVID-19. Kompetencje informacyjne. Media społecznościowe. Użytkownik informacji. Zachowania informacyjne.

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