

Attitudes Towards Social Media

(White Paper)

INGEV/ifbilgi



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April 2020

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Executive Summary

The research study, conducted between February 15 and March 6, 2020 on a representative sample of the Turkish population over 18 years of age, leads to interesting insights about penetration of technology as well as perceptions of and trust in social media in Turkey. People in Turkey consider social media as a free atmosphere while also displaying significant distrust in social media platforms.

I. Introduction

The present paper aims to communicate and discuss the findings of the social research conducted by INGEV with contributions from the Faculty of Communication of Istanbul Bilgi University. The general title of the longitudinal research is “Human Development Monitor” encompassing three modular foci: social cohesion, gender equality and television drama series, and trust in social media. In this paper the focus is on the “trust in social media.”

Social media has become a new communication and meaning production layer of social communication. By social media we mean internet-based communication technologies fundamentally relying on user-generated and interactive content, disseminating information, ideas, images (etc.) through online social networks which are designed and maintained by social media platforms of various kinds. It should be noted that social media is still an emerging phenomenon since the underlying digital technologies are in a rapid pace of growth and transformation.

As the social media establishes itself as a major social communication modality, a number of previously known distinctions that shape the social fabric seem to get modified. Among these, there are the distinctions between public and private, self and society, digital and offline, intimacy and remoteness, privacy and sharing, etc. Advances in mobile technologies added further important and disruptive challenges to these distinctions. Social media has become a tool that break down the spatial barriers of communication. This has been effective not only in terms of the so-called “new media” contents, but also contents that belonged to the traditional methods of production such as television.

In the context of such developments, social interaction, news gathering, social networking, social identity formation, and a host of similar notions need to be rethought. It is evident that at the center of such rethinking, information regarding the perceptions of social media, feeling of trust in them, and modality of usage need to be investigated. We wonder if people in Turkey view social media as a trustworthy choice for collecting and disseminating information. Our research aims at illustrating the penetration level of new communication technologies, people’s attitudes, and their feelings toward the social media.

II. Methodology

The survey involved 1555 computer-assisted telephone interviews in 26 cities utilizing a stratified sample in line with NUTS Level-2 criteria. The margin of error is $\pm 2.49\%$ in 95% confidence interval. The nation-wide survey is representative of Turkish population over the age of 18.

III. Findings

The research comprises two types of observations about social media. First, it offers findings about the penetration rates of various digital tools and social media platforms. Secondly it provides a number of insights regarding attitudes in Turkey toward social media.

Penetration Rates

More than half of the households in Turkey have a computer (57%). The rate of those who own a smart phone with an internet connection (80%) however indicates significant internet penetration. There is no statistically significant difference in internet penetration with respect to gender, but age and SES group variables do indicate differences. Penetration figures decrease with increasing age. As expected, the ownership of computer, home internet access, and smart phone with internet connection is highest in the AB SES group (84%, 89%, and 97% respectively). As we move to other SES Groups such as C1 C2, D, and E, we observe a drop in these percentages. For instance, only 35% of DE SES group have a computer at home, 43% home internet, and 61% smart phone. Smart phone ownership in DE SES group has the comparatively highest rate among the three technologies in question. This in turn signifies that mobile phones are ubiquitous in all SES groups of the Turkish society.

WhatsApp is the apparent leader among the eight social media apps (77%) included in the study. It's followed by YouTube (63%) and Instagram (61%). In any further analysis, it should be noted that WhatsApp is not properly a "social" medium since it is designed for personal communication. However, daily observations suggest that "WhatsApp groups" composed of large numbers of participants are a significant source of social interaction as well. It should also be noted that the users of WhatsApp also use YouTube or Instagram (or both, sometimes along with other platforms) which allow cross dissemination of content from one app to the other. WhatsApp, in this respect, integrates itself into the flow of information involving rest of the social media platforms and contributes to the circulation of content on social media. Comparatively, Twitter has the lowest percentage of users in Turkey among five major platforms (WhatsApp-77%; YouTube-63%; Instagram-61%; Facebook-52%; Twitter-33%). Meanwhile SnapChat, Telegram and Tik Tok all have 11 or lesser percentages of users in Turkey.

When we analyze the gender, age and SES breakdowns, the most striking differences emerge for those who are 55 years old or older. Except for WhatsApp with 53% user rate in this age group, the rest of the big five social media platforms do not seem to be of interest to the older population. The same observation is valid for DE SES group, 57% of which are users of WhatsApp with various intensity levels while user rates for YouTube and Instagram are the highest among remaining social media platforms with 40% each. Rates for Facebook and Twitter are even lower. Highest usage rate for WhatsApp and YouTube are observed among the 35-54 age group as well as the AB SES group (respectively 76% and 86% of these groups

use these platforms “very often”). 54% of the 18-34 age group state that they also use Snapchat often.

Trust and more

Questions that inquire the purposes of social media use yield interesting results. Following news and fact-checking are the two major reasons (88% for both) why people use social media. Comparatively, the least frequently expressed reason for social media use is to share one’s opinions about social issues in Turkey (54%). The reason for use of social media does not demonstrate significant difference when broken down with the gender variable.

Top two reasons given about the reason for use (“to gather information about different issues in Turkey” and “to check the accuracy of the information I get”) do not demonstrate significant variation when checked under age group breakdown. Older people (55+) say they use social media to gather “information about lives of my acquaintances” at a slightly higher rate than other age groups. On the other hand, using social media to share updates about one’s own life has the highest percentage (65%) among the young (18-34).

Getting news and fact-checking are the top two reasons for social media use among the AB SES group (93% and 91% respectively). Use of social media for fact-checking drops to 77% in DE group.

One indicator of being an active user on social media is membership in a social media group. Research findings suggest that approximately one in four users in Turkey is a member of at least one social media group (27%). Numbers show statistically significant differences among respondents when broken down with independent variables of gender, age groups and SES groups. Men, people between 35 and 54, and AB SES group are comparatively more likely to join a group on social media than other segments in their respective breakdowns.

The research determined five different categories of social groups: “Friendship networks,” “professional networks/workplace networks,” “hobby groups/networks,” networks for social and political issues,” and “sports groups/networks.” Among these, “friendship networks” have the highest participation (77%) followed by professional (66%), hobby (62%), social/political (43%) and sports (37%) networks. Women are significantly less likely than men to be a member in professional (18 percentage points less), social/political (16 points less), and sports groups (29 points less) on social media. Membership rates among friendship and hobby networks are very similar between females and males. As expected, the age group 55+ has the lowest likelihood of belonging to a professional/workplace network. The youngest group (18-34) on the other hand seem less interested in political/social groups with only 36% group membership compared to the 56% rate among the 55+ age group.

Turkey’s perception of social media as a reliable source of information is measured by the degree of agreement with four different statements in the questionnaire: (1) Social media provides independent news; (2) I don’t believe in the news on social media; (3) Social media is full of false accounts; and (4) Social media is a good source of information. Apparently, nearly 50 to 60% of Turkey’s population demonstrate trust in the social media by agreeing with the statement (1) with 57%, and statement (3) with 61%. On the other hand, a significant portion of the population seems to remain undecided when asked about belief in the news on social media (statement 2) and in describing social media as a good source of information (statement 4). It is interesting to note that while 57% of the population “agree” or “certainly

agree” with the statement describing social media as a source that provides “independent” news, even a higher percentage (61%) “agree” or “certainly agree” with the statement indicating that social media is full of false accounts.

Participation in social media is measured by the degree of agreement with four statements. Two of these are; “I believe in news that are in line with my views” and “I share news and posts that are in line with my views”. About a third of social media users verify the existence of a situation described as an “echo chamber”; a metaphor for a social media situation where users remain in an almost closed system of messaging which reinforce and strengthen one’s pre-existing views. Another statement inquires whether people actively respond to posts they disagree with. The last statement reads; “I am usually a passive audience on social media.” The results show that majority of people in Turkey do not respond to posts they disagree with (57%). Nearly half of the population (47%) describe themselves as “passive audience” with a significant number of them being uncertain (28% “neither agree nor disagree”).

The questionnaire also asked respondents to express their level of trust in social media and traditional media outlets. Interestingly enough, with the exception of WhatsApp (37%) traditional media (printed newspapers 35%, television 35%, and radio 33%) rank slightly above the social media platforms (online news web sites 27%, Twitter 26%, Instagram 17%, Facebook 10%, and Telegram 5%). It is also important to note that these ratios represent all people in Turkey, including those who don’t have an account in any of the social media platforms. If only users of each platform are considered, rates of those who express trust in Twitter, Instagram and Facebook go up to 54%, 50% and 50% respectively, exceeding all traditional touchpoints mentioned in the questionnaire.

These findings show slight variations under breakdown of gender, age and SES variables. Men trust the printed newspapers and the web sites of newspapers less than women. In contrast, women seem to trust Facebook less, albeit with a narrow margin. Breakdown by age groups show statistically significant differences. Broadly speaking, trust in media (social and otherwise) drops with increasing age. With regard to the SES groups, lowest levels of trust are observed for DE group with regard to WhatsApp, Twitter, and Radio. It’s also worth noting that Twitter usage drops to 22% in this SES Group, so lack of trust could stem from lack of familiarity.

IV. Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

In complex social matters numbers do not speak for themselves. CATI research technique involving a large and representative sample might be the perfect tool to identify the existence as well as the breadth of social facts. However, as this is a quantitative methodology, the information gathered would lack depth. This means that answers to questions beginning with “why” and “how” should not be expected from sheer numbers. Answering why and how questions requires interpretation of quantitative findings. Interpretation, in turn, always bears a certain amount of speculation. With this warning in mind, we would like to explore the following questions:

- what is the extent of the use of social media?
- which social media platforms are the most popular?
- why do people use them?
- to what extent they trust in the social media platforms?

- Which variables divide population in the use, activity and trust dimensions?

Freedom and Distrust

Despite popular perceptions and attributes, the modality of use and feelings of trust toward the social media in Turkey display a curious picture. Our findings indicate that two major notions emerge as an outstanding characteristic of Turkish population with respect to social media: *need for more freedom* and (in contrast) *distrust in social media*. In addition to these, people in Turkey seem to give higher weight to traditional media than the new media when it comes to the matter of trust. The only exception to this statement is WhatsApp, which is not considered as social media proper. As the trust levels go up significantly when we look only at the users of each social media platform instead of the whole population of Turkey, it is thought that lower trust in social media is considerably affected by lack of familiarity.

Penetration and “Digital Divide”

The highest internet penetration is observed for mobile devices with internet access. In this area we also observe a strong divide among different age and SES groups with respect to the ownership of computer and internet access in the household. Older population and lower SES groups have less access to these technologies. Similarly, ownership of a mobile device with internet access is considerably low in DE SES group. “Digital divide” is considered to be one of the main hindrances against economic growth and access to social services such as education and medical care as well as livelihood opportunities and the job market. Needless to say, the issue of digital divide in age and SES categories must be addressed by official authorities and NGOs since both economic and human development is heavily dependent on access to digital technology. The good news in this field is that there is no digital divide with respect to gender.

From Text to Visual

Globally speaking, it is possible observe a particular trend in the introduction and development of the types of social media. It can be said that the new media is growing more visual with more video content and less text. Setting aside WhatsApp, the figures in Turkey affirm this trend as the population in Turkey is more into YouTube and Instagram followed by Facebook which can be considered as a mixed platform combining visuals and text. It can be asserted that the short text messaging medium Twitter is preferred much less than visual social media. Not surprisingly, our culture is becoming more and more visual as technology advances. The only exception to this trend is WhatsApp. Nevertheless, WhatsApp needs to be interpreted separately since its identifying parameter is not the type of content—it is a private messaging app bringing together people who are close to each other, despite the existence of large “WhatsApp groups.” It seems that Turkey is not very “social”; we prefer private conversations in closed groups to sharing information and personal opinions in large, anonymous groups.

Non-Social Social Media

No matter how awkward it may sound, the use of social media in Turkey does not seem to do justice to the adjective “social.” Alongside with possible cultural factors, the hesitation to open up to larger and anonymous groups of people might have socio-political factors specific to the current conjuncture in Turkey. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, the discordance

between the reasons of use (information gathering and fact-checking versus sharing personal opinion about topics of Turkey) is another indicator of such an observation. It can be said that the people in Turkey do need (accurate) information and they join social media for this purpose. On the other hand, the same population displays a certain degree of shyness when it comes to sharing their opinions with unknown others.

A similar pattern is observed in the question on joining a group on social media. The findings point to a warning with respect to civil participation in Turkey since only a quarter of the population say they've joined a group on social media. Examination of the details reveal that "friendship networks" lead the types of groups people join, followed by "professional/workplace networks." Groups formed for "social and political issues" is substantially weak when compared with already existing relationships like friendship and profession. Gender plays a significant role in this category. Women seem much less interested in joining a socially/politically oriented groups. Similarly, young people do not prefer this type of interaction with others.

Social Media as News Source

It is generally assumed that the people in Turkey are in need of accurate news about the events in the world and in Turkey. Our research confirms this assumption to a certain extent since more than half of the population indicated that they use social media to get unbiased news. However, even a larger portion of population think that the social media is full of false accounts. Only about a third of Turkey designate social media as a good source of information. As for the truth of the news, population in Turkey remains ambivalent—half of the population indicate that they cannot decide while a slightly more than a quarter say they believe in the news on social media.

Conclusion

When we combine the insights of passivity, hesitancy to share, and rejection to join in groups built around social/political issues, we can say that the social media in Turkey still has room for improvement in playing the leading role in democratization. In this respect, individuals and NGOs need to be encouraged towards providing a safe and secure place for the propagation of multiple opinions which is a prerequisite for democracy. We are still far away from this ideal condition. It should also be asked why men and higher SES groups are more active, eager to share and participate. We believe that the issue of feeling "backed-up" on the part of higher SES groups and men might be the chief reason for this. In this respect, it is possible to argue that the social and economic circumstances of different segments of the Turkish population have significant influence on how the social media is perceived and how it functions.