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Audience Research Study

Youth in Cambodia: Access to and use of news media

Cambodia

IMS

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1. Introduction and research objectives

This is an audience research study aims to track young people's use of and access to news and media in Cambodia today. The study was commissioned by International Media Support (IMS) and carried out between June and September 2021.

Forty years after the genocide, Cambodia continues to work to restore its identity and economic momentum. Youth in Cambodia have emerged as a digital-first population but face resistance from their war veteran parents. As a result of this generational gap, youth feel unsupported, overlooked and unequipped to make their transition into adulthood. Migration to seek employment in the big cities is increasingly common among youth. Yet they often face challenges due to poor education, a lack of information, and missing career development guidance.

In the last five years, there has been an apparent shift in the ways young Cambodians access news and information. Access to the internet is no longer limited to content consumption. Content creation is now a major mode of engagement online. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram are reaching a new audience of internet users. In order to support these engaged communities and seek avenues to help the next generation ease into their future, this audience research study aims to better understand young Cambodians' news perception, media and information-seeking habits.

To address the research objective, the following research questions need to be answered:

1. What is young Cambodians' concept of news?
2. How do young Cambodians gain access to news and information?
3. What are the media and information-seeking habits among Cambodian youth?
4. What is their media usage behaviour?

2. Research design and methodology

To address the research objective, this research was designed to only provide indicative insights while ensuring a high level of generalisability through purposive sampling of research participants and using qualitative methodologies: focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). The FGDs were used as a primary method to attain a general understanding of perceptions of news and media among youth in Cambodia and their information-seeking habits. Once the FGDs were concluded, IDIs were conducted to confirm the validity of the findings from FGDs and further probe young Cambodians' media usage journey and willingness to subscribe to paid content.

The unprecedented surge of COVID-19 in Cambodia caused restrictions that limited research possibilities. Instead of traditional face-to-face FGDs and interviews, the study therefore implemented a successful modification of the methodology to use online FGDs and interviews via 'Zoom'. Over the course of one and a half months in September 2021, 40 FGDs (with 5 people per group) and 40 IDIs were conducted. Respondents were between the age of 16 and 25 years old and were selected from six different locations: Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Siem Reap, and Takeo.

2.1 Sampling strategy

To ensure generalisability, participants were selected using a stratified purposive sampling strategy under 3 clusters: age group, type of user, and location. From this approach, the study captured different categories of young media users for analysis.

Age group: 16-20 and 21-25 years old

- The reason for the classification of respondents into different age groups was two-fold. From a behavioural perspective, this classification allowed researchers to capture different levels of maturity among respondents. The hypothesis is that the two age groups differ in their perceptions of and needs towards media. From a cultural context point of view, it allowed us to minimise potential biases stemming from skewed age dynamics and encourage equal participation among respondents.

Types of users: social media users vs non-regular social media users

- To ensure a high level of generalisability and to reflect the different levels of media usage among young Cambodians, respondents were stratified into types: social media users and non-regular social media users
- **Social media user**s are defined as those who have access to a mobile phone and/or internet connection; frequent users (at least 5 times a week) of social media.
- **Non-regular social media users** refer to those who are infrequent internet/social media users (less than 5 times a week) or do not have access to internet/social media.

Locations: 1 capital city, 5 provinces

- The selection of the six key urban locations with a higher concentration of population across Cambodia was selected to seek a wide range of views and ensure diversity of respondents. These areas include Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambong, Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, and Takeo.

Research summary: 40 FGDs and 40 IDIs - a total of 240 respondents

Research methodology	Online FGDs (5 people per group) Online in-depth interview Using Zoom
Participants specification	**Age:** 16-25 years old **Types of users:** ● *Social media users:* Have access to a mobile phone / internet, and use the internet *at least* 5 times a week, AND prefer social media as the primary source of information

	• *Non-regular social media user*: Seek information through conventional methods (TV, Radio, word of mouth), OR have access to a mobile phone / internet, but use the internet *less than* 5 times a week, and prefer conventional media as a source of information
Locations	**6 locations:** Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambong, Kompong Cham, Prey Veng and Takeo.

No.	**Locations**	**Focus Group Discussions (Number of *Groups* / 5 people per group)**				**In-Depth Interviews (Number of *People*)**			
		Social-Media Users		**Non-regular Social Media Users**		**Social-Media Users**		**Non-regular Social Media Users**	
		16-20	**21-25**	**16-20**	**21-25**	**16-20**	**21-25**	**16-20**	**21-25**
1	Phnom Penh	4	4	1	1	4	4	1	1
2	Battambang	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
3	Kampong Cham	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
4	Siem Reap	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
5	Prey Veng	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
6	Takeo	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
	Sub-Total Number of Groups	14	14	6	6				
		28		12					
	Total Number of Groups	40							
	Sub-Total Number of People	200				14	14	6	6
	Total Number of People	240							

2.2 Limitations to research methodology

It is important to note that the research was done under challenging circumstances due to COVID-19. For the safety of both the researchers and respondents, the methodology was shifted completely to online activities. The most valuable insights from qualitative methods like FGDs often rely on the dynamic of the groups, the interaction and the deliberations on topics that feed off from one respondent to another. More elaborate exercises can be done that further catalyse the group dynamic, thus further enhancing the quality of the answers. With online focus group discussions, the groups' interactions are lessened. There is a feeling of being isolated despite being in a group call. Respondents often felt intimidated by one another or almost made no verbal exchanges unless intentionally being told to do so by moderators. Exercises sometimes lacked valuable interaction coming from a group discussion. External factors such as poor internet connection and background noise also contributed to the distance between the respondents.

The discussion guide was designed with said limitations in mind. Comfort among participants was encouraged by introductory rounds, warm-up questions and sharing of background. In specific exercises where a single agreed group answer was requested, moderators would assign a team leader to debate on various perspectives and come back to the moderator with a group decision answer. These small yet conscious practices helped to minimize the limitations of the chosen method and leverage the value of online FGDs to some extent.

3. Findings

3.1 Getting to know the Cambodian youth

At the beginning of each FGD or IDI participants were introduced to a warmup exercise. The purpose of this exercise was for the moderators to get to know the respondent's background and vice versa. The aim was further to encourage a more natural interaction between participant(s) and researcher as if conversing with a friend/friends. Among the young Cambodians recruited, respondents came from various educational backgrounds and social-economic classes and their employment status differed. This variety in socio-economic background resulted in an assortment of perspectives on news and information and different levels of understanding of media usage.

As mentioned in the research methodology, the respondents can be profiled on the basis of three clusters taken from the background questionnaires (Appendix: Respondent's Profiles) that were used to screen respondents prior to their participation in the research: Age group, type of user, and location. While these categorisations are used to generalise experiences across participants in the study, the analysis is qualitative. The insights in this report must be treated as indicative only, not as a representation of Cambodian youth as a whole.

The respondents were classified into two age groups: **younger respondents (16-20 years old)** and **older respondents (21-25 years old)**. Based on the consolidated data, the younger respondents were predominantly students in high school or middle school, with two in ten studying to attain their bachelor's degree. In comparison, three in ten among the older age group were students. Most of the 21–25-year-old respondents had entered the workforce and were employed for wages, while some were self-employed. The differences in age and employment status were also reflected in the average monthly income (USD) between the two groups. The older participants had an average income of $217 per month. This is nearly two and a half times more than the younger respondents, who had an average disposable income of $91 per month. Since the younger respondents were mostly students, it is presumed that their income was from monthly pocket money given by their guardians or from part-time jobs.

Two types of users were selected in the research methodology to distinguish between the levels of engagement with social media among Cambodian youth: **social media users** and **non-regular social media users**. Social media users were generally more educated, with more respondents having attained or working to attain a bachelor's degrees compared to non-regular media users. Most Non-regular social media users had at least a high school level education. There was no

significant difference in employment status between the two groups aside from the fact that slightly more social media users were still students.

Additionally, the research took place in six geographical locations around Cambodia, including the city centre of Phnom Penh and five major provinces, namely Battambang, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Takeo, and Siem Reap. This allowed us to analyse differences in behaviour across geographical locations. Respondents from Phnom Penh generally had higher incomes and were more often bachelor degree students compared to respondents from other provinces. Given the pre-determined age group for the study, it was also expected that more respondents across all locations would be students, and that few would be employed for wages.

3.2 Perceptions of Cambodia's media landscape

Over the last few years, the Cambodian media landscape has evolved drastically. In addition to the traditional media platforms such as television and radio, the introduction of the internet and social media has transformed the way news and information are accessed. The observed trend across all groups is captivated by how fast and convenient news information in Cambodia is distributed. With a wide range of news media to choose from, respondents express how easy it is to stay updated – whether it concerns news updates related to daily events or endless sources of entertainment from games to music to TV shows.

Top-of-mind media awareness is now a battle between television and 'the internet', which respondents also refer to interchangeably as 'Facebook'. Most of the young people in this study have grown up with television news. As such, television is the medium youth tend to fall back on as a reliable source of information. Channels such as Hang Meas, Bayon, and PNN are among the most popular TV channels as these are often broadcast in their households. Now, with the rise of the internet, some of those channels are also found on various social media platforms.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and recently, TikTok, have become more convenient sources of news, knowledge, and entertainment. All of the interviewed social media users in this study had a Facebook account of their own. Even among non-regular social media users included in the study, eight in ten had their own personal Facebook account, or at least were intrigued enough to log into family members' accounts. The thrill of using social media is perfectly illustrated by an older FGD respondent who enthusiastically tried to explain to the moderator where to find movies online: *"Bong [1], bong can watch anything you want now, no need to buy DVDs like before. You can watch Chinese, Korean, they have everything".*

Radio is mentioned as the next most common media source. For a 19-year-old respondent in Kampong Cham, radio plays in the background while he harvests his rice field. For a 22-year-old woman in Phnom Penh, radio plays as background noise during her long commute to work. However, it is noticeable, especially among the social media user groups, that there is less active engagement towards radio than towards television. It is rather a passive activity, where they find themselves watching or listening because their parents or family members are watching it during mealtimes. This is especially true among the social media user groups. A younger respondent in Takeo mentioned: *"I still listen to radio because my grandma listens to her daily praying, so I just listen with her".*

3.3 Too much information is a double-edged sword

The luxury of having news and information delivered right at their fingertips does not come without its own sets of consequences for the young people in this study. All groups shared concerns over how polluted the media environment can be, specifically on social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok. Even among non-regular social media user groups, who generally do not question the media quality, it is acknowledged how toxic the tone can be online:

"I do not use a lot of Facebook, but some people tell me social media is a mess, many out of control things happen, fake news, swearing between online sellers, some family affair…etc." (22 years old, Siem Reap, Non-Regular Social media)

For social media user groups who have been long-time users and have a lot of experience on the platforms, there is a trend to mention the low morality of posts and news articles. Online selling scams, pages using click baits, or pages encouraging the invasion of people's privacy are common ways of attracting attention.

"Nowadays, so many online sellers go on Facebook Live to swear or complain. Last time this one online seller even said she will talk about the scandal only when her live reach 100k" (23 years old, Phnom Penh, Social Media User).

3.4 How do we know who to trust?

Despite being aware of some questionable pages on social media, respondents generally place high trust in government-based pages for news updates. Trusted pages include the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Fresh News, and Prime Minister Hun Sen's Facebook account to name a few.

The general trust in government information among youth explains why television is the most trusted source of news aside from their family and peers. The perceived level of professionalism and belief that television channels must obtain formal licensing contribute to the high levels of trust. Additionally, some respondents in the study believe that having the government regulating and monitoring what is showed on television channels makes it much more credible.

Appendix: Top 3 sources for news and Information:

By Types of users

Social Media Users	Non-Regular social media users
▪ Social Media ▪ Friends, family, neighbours, ▪ The internet	▪ Friends, family, neighbours ▪ Television ▪ Teachers

By Age Group

16-20 years old	21-25 years old
▪ Friends, family, neighbours ▪ Social media ▪ Television	▪ Social media ▪ Friends, family, neighbours ▪ Television

"I believe before they air something on TV, they have a lot of people checking the sources, they won't just post like Facebook."

"From what I heard, TV channels have a license from the government, so the news has to be true for them to show on TV."

The study also captured behavioural changes among the selected Cambodian youth in relation to COVID-19 and how they have adapted to the new normal during this unprecedented time. Waking up to health protocols and restrictions has become a daily ritual. For youth, close relations such as family, friends, and neighbours as well as television and social media have become top sources to receive regular news. Social media platforms such as Facebook has gained attention among the interviewed groups as a source of quick and reliable news despite placing higher trust in television. *"When I wake up, I check Facebook to know the number of COVID-19 cases because many people share it. TV is too slow; they only show during their time slot".*

Although some are aware that social media news can be questionable, it is still deemed one of the more reliable sources. To young people, social media posts are often perceived to be from the people you can trust, such as family members, local authorities, influencers, and public figures. While many have turned to social media for their news update, non-social media users still find themselves more reliant on sources that are shared by 'trustworthy' figures. In addition to close family, friends, and television, teachers are another top source of news and information. Especially among younger groups, teachers are perceived to be respectable figures. Younger respondents report that they have built a closer relationship with their teachers since schools have migrated online, because they now maintain regular communication.

By Location

Battambang	Kampong Cham	Phnom Penh	Prey Veng	Siem Reap	Takeo
-Internet -Television -Social media	-Friends, family, neighbours -Authorities -Television	-Social media -Friends, family, neighbours -Internet	-Television -Friends, family neighbours, -Social media	-Social media -Friends, family and neighbours -Authorities	-Friends, family and neighbours -Authorities -Social media

News and information have, as mentioned above, become easily accessible across all groups. During interviews, one exercise prompted the participants to answer what "news" means to them. In Khmer, the term can be translated into two words, meaning 'news' and '**knowledge/ចំណេះដឹង**'. Some groups had conflicting views as to whether news and knowledge share the same purpose. To some, 'news' is merely perceived as the hot daily news of recent events but does not necessarily offer the longevity that knowledge does. For others, news is linked to 'information/knowledge'; being informed of social events can help elevate general knowledge and self-awareness.

"News to me is something we need to be informed for our safety, such as Covid-19 precautions, traffic accidents, but not really to educate or giving knowledge"

21-25 y.o, Phnom Penh, Social media user

However, the general trend among youth in the study is to perceive 'news' and 'knowledge' to have completely different purposes. When asked spontaneously, the term **'news'** is often associated with the rising number of COVID-19 cases – a reoccurring news event, which they are exposed to daily. When further probed, to many, news refers to flash/hot news related to social events or societal issues, which the public is encouraged to be aware of. News is almost like a warning so one can be ready to withstand. Additionally, news is a source of prevention and ensuring one's safety. To the selected respondents in this study, examples of news include traffic accidents, new variants of COVID-19, vaccination dates, school opening/closure dates, restrictions, and protocols. Interestingly, a few respondents refer to news as the platforms where they receive their updates such as television and Facebook.

Different to the term 'news', respondents were also asked about their perception of the term **'knowledge/ចំណេះដឹង'**. The discussions from this question illustrate a clear distinction from what news mean to them. Many respondents agree that knowledge is a practical skillset, which helps them to improve. Knowledge entails a form of self-development, a specific skill (soft or hard skill), a new language, a business trade etc. It is an individual intrinsic benefit which can be compared to a long-term investment. A few respondents believe that attaining knowledge offers them the ability to think critically. With knowledge they are able to analyse situations themselves, which prevent them from being cheated or scammed, for example when doing business.

3.5 Topics of interest

With COVID-19 being a constant reminder of the new normal, it is inevitable that selected respondents would like to receive quick news updates on the number of cases or any changes in regulations so they can prepare and adapt. Aside from these updates, a common trend among respondents shows how aspirational the young people are. Many participants wish to gain more soft skills and seek out knowledge to improve their future self. Some younger groups look for advice and tips related to school, while some older groups look for job-related tips. Both age groups commonly look to build their inner strength through motivational content and confidence-building skills.

Top topics of interest: sorted by age groups

16-20 years old	21-25 years old
▪ Being brave and confidence ▪ Study tips (online) ▪ Scholarships ▪ Critical thinking ▪ Business tips ▪ Languages ▪ Khmer history	▪ Motivation ▪ Build confidence ▪ Business advice and tips ▪ Language

4. Evolution of digital platforms during COVID-19

COVID-19 catalysed a change in digital environments and further fostered a shift to digital platforms to inform and engage communities. To some, restricted movement meant they were unable to take part in regular activities and social gatherings while for others it resulted in lost jobs and financial instability. Many respondents in this study find themselves having more spare time to be at home with their families. For the selected social media users this change has meant they find themselves spending even more time on social media than they would before COVID-19.

Regular users spend at least 6 to 10 hours a day on the internet. They are practically always on their phones and use it while they carry out their daily activities. During the daytime they tend to use platforms that they can mindlessly put in the background or look at while also focusing on their actual task. Applications such as Facebook, TikTok and to a lesser extend Instagram are commonly used for these purposes. Another trend observed among the group is a heavy use of smartphones and social media before bedtime. They will spend time on YouTube or Facebook pages where they can watch movies, listen to music, or browse through content that they find enjoyable.

"I sell Leas Hal (clams), and nowadays because of Covid-19 there aren't a lot of customers, so I am always on Facebook. When there is a customer, I sell then I go back to using my phone. By the time it's 7pm my phone already runs out of battery!"
(19 years old, Prey Veng, Social Media user)

Non-regular users, on the other hand, see internet activity as a privilege for those that have free time. Among those that have been online, they only spend 2-3 hours per day as they need to for school activities, or some find themselves listening to music for an hour or so before bed. As one 25-year-old male worker from Takeo mentioned, his internet usage is mostly limited to weekends where he checks out YouTube. He finds himself too preoccupied during weekdays to use the internet. Similarly, a 17-year-old female in Prey Veng said that *"aside from the 1-2 hours online class I have, I go back to help my mother sell downstairs, so I don't have free time. I just leave my phone upstairs. The same with weekends, I also help my mom sells snacks"*.

In essence, COVID-19 has challenged the way youths adapt and incorporate the use of digital platforms into various aspects of their lifestyle, including for entertainment, for school, and for work. This development emphasises the importance of having devices to access the internet. Smartphones have become such a requirement during COVID-19 especially for younger users, that parents have become more willing to purchase them new smartphones to adapt to these changes.

4.1 Role of smartphones

"it's not because I don't want to use social media. I see people use, it looks fun, but I don't have a smartphone. Maybe when I have enough money I will buy one"
(22 years old, Non-Regular Social Media user, Prey Veng,)

"I am still a student, and I can't find part-time job at the moment so I cannot afford to spend on the internet"
(17 years old,, Non-Regular Social Media user, Takeo,)

For youths, smartphones are the predominant devices used to access the internet. Whether it be for entertainment, school or work, the internet is accessible through a small device that fits in their pocket and can be brought everywhere with them. A few mentioned they do not own laptops or only have a laptop that belongs to their household. Nothing like other devices, a smartphone gives them a sense of privacy and individual customisation to the applications they would like to use.

The reliance on smartphones to access to the internet, has unfortunately become one of the main barriers for non-regular users to be more active online. Some say low income, especially affected by COVID-19, is an obstacle. They cannot afford a smartphone or to buy data. In fact, price sensitivity to data usage is a common complaint across all groups in the study. Many find themselves draining their data packages, so some turn to switch off their data when not in use.

Smartphones, however, are not the only factor deterring some of the respondents from accessing the internet more regularly. Other factors include poor internet connection and restrictions placed on smartphone use. The latter is especially true among younger respondents, as they are deemed too young and should be focusing on school.

4.2 Social media usage behaviour

Social media use also varies among the selected respondents when it comes to what activities they get up to online. However, their usage patterns are generally superficial, jumping from one thing to the next. On **Facebook**, they commonly scroll through without interacting too much aside from a few likes on their friends' or family's posts. Some share posts related to news on COVID-19, others share music, short film clips, and motivational quotes. Still, any information that they find important or useful, they would be more comfortable sharing in a private group message. **YouTube**, aside from being a source for music, acts almost as a secondary source of information to support additional research from Facebook. Both **TikTok** and **Instagram** are also used to pass time and only to scroll through or like shared posts. The "Story" feature is not generally used by this group. They only check the stories of those they know, such as friends, to see what they are up to, and only a few groups use this feature themselves.

This superficial use and low preference towards one specific platform is also evident in how **notifications** are managed on their smartphones. Most of the selected respondents have not changed the standard notification settings from when their phones were set up. Some mentioned they did not know you could change the

"I bought the phone, and the notification just came like that. I want to know everything anyway, so I don't bother to change"
(17 years old, Phnom Penh, Social Media user)

settings. A few experienced social media users mentioned they only have notifications turned on for chatting applications.

"I am not paying, I can find everything on Youtube these days, why would I pay for it? There is just no need"
(19 years old, Takeo, Social Media user)

With the wide array of readily available content online, youth deem it unnecessary to spend money on content such as **subscriptions**. Only a small number of social media users are found to have spent money on subscription content such as Netflix, Spotify, and Apple Music. Especially younger groups do not have their own income so they do not want to spend extra money on data. When further probed how much they were willing to spend on subscriptions, **2 to 5 dollars per month** appears to be an acceptable range.

The differences in behaviour on social media platforms and media usage patterns can also be classified into three categories: entertainment, school, and work.

Entertainment	- **Facebook** offers a wide range of roles for this group, aside from news update, they use the platform to seek funny clips, free online movies, and online games throughout the day. The amount of time spent on Facebook varies from one hour to six hours depending on the user profile. - **Tik Tok** is purely used for entertainment purposes to scroll for funny clips. - **YouTube** is a great source for music, movies, and videos. Several of the younger respondents also use it to search for lifestyle videos including makeup tutorials. While the application is not commonly used throughout the day like Facebook, a lot of social media users and non-regular social media users alike spend at least 1 to 3 hours each time they go on YouTube. A few mention that they try to be conscious of data drainage when using this platform, so they downloade music and listen offline. - **Instagram** is not as popular and is only commonly used by social media users. Even so, a lot of them mention that their usage is limited. They mostly just go on it to browse through photos of influencers, online shopping pages and pictures of friends.
School	- **Zoom** is a commonly used app for online studies in Cambodia. Students spend from 1 to 3 hours a day on it. However, most of their schoolwork is done offline. Most students use Zoom on their phones, while only a few people interviewed mention they use it on their laptops.

	- **Telegram** is the second most used application for school purposes. It is the primary platform for teachers to share files and documents as they maintain high resolution. Telegram is also used for updates outside of the educational context. Public Telegram Groups (i.e., not friend groups) is a feature which is increasingly used by this group. They join these public groups to get updates on scholarships, job applications or just general news. - **YouTube** plays a secondary role and function as a support tool where students can make extra research if they need further explanation of class teachings. The visuals and sound also help them with comprehension. - **Google search** is also mentioned as a tool to gather additional information but it is not a popular method.
Work	- Chatting applications such as **Telegram, Messenger, and WhatsApp** are used to send files and documentation as well as a tool for communication among colleagues. The 'share location' feature is particularly useful for a few of the respondents that are currently employed. For example, to a non-regular social media user in Takeo, this feature is essential to make deliveries for his own business. - **YouTube** is used in a similar way to those that use it in school. It is a secondary platform used to gather additional information or further clarification on issues. A respondent who owns his own restaurant mentions that he uses YouTube to search for tutorials and new recipes to add and modify to his current menu.

4.3 In social media we trust – misinformation on social media

Although social media is making waves as a new way to get news and information, respondents across all groups also expressed how social media platforms are becoming "messy". The platforms are understood to be polluted with misinformation and scams. To the youth in this study, 'fake news', as they call it, is commonly associated with clickbait posts.

"I know it's fake because sometimes the caption says it's about this topic, but when I open it, it's completely different. Or for example, sometimes I see news related to Covid-19 saying there is a lockdown, but I check with my friends, no one said that.
(23 years old, Siem Reap, Social Media user)

The recent rise in COVID-19 related misinformation on social media is another issue troubling the selected Cambodian youth. Some of the younger participants from outside of Phnom Penh admittedly have a hard time distinguishing who and what to trust.

"I check the comment sections and see what people talk about on there, and then I check number of shares, if I am still not sure then I will ask my family member"
(18 years old, Phnom Penh, Social Media user)

Yet this awareness of misinformation presumably also means that the selected respondents are not gullible. They do not tend to easily trust everything they see online. Fact-checking posts by running them by people they trust like teachers, peers and family members is a common trend observed among social media users in the study. Notably, the younger groups who are still students often seek confirmation from their teachers. What is even more interesting, respondents seem to share a common understanding of how to leverage features on the platforms to run fact checks. On Facebook, comment sections, number of likes and number of shares are proof of news validity. Some even go to the extent of checking the number of followers of the pages where they find the post.

However, when faced with misinformation, how the groups choose to deal with it is rather passive. When asked what they do when they recognise something to be misleading or fake, some respondents mention that they simply scroll past it. Those that have more experience with social media will unfollow the page, so it does not come up again. Even those that would like to inform their family and peers, prefer to privately message them rather than announce it on their social media accounts.

4.4 Influencers

Influencers are rapidly gaining importance as a marketing strategy on social media platforms. Originating from the western world, social media influencers are individuals who have built a reputation around their knowledge or expertise on a specific topic. They typically have a regular posting pattern about their topic of interest, and they use their social media channel and platform to amass large followings of enthusiastic, engaged social media users who pay close attention to their views.

In recent years, we have also observed an increase in content creators entering Cambodia's social media landscape. Based on the present study, there are general differences between who the social

media users and non-regular social media users choose to follow. Social media users in both age groups tend to follow content creators. Individuals who have a reputation online as experts within a particular niche and have gained their reputation informally through online activities. Brands and companies are starting to recognise these personalities and influencers as effective partners in or targets of their marketing strategies. Individuals with large followings can create trends and encourage their followers to purchase the product they promote, earning them the status of "social media influencers."

Table: Top 5 influencers/ public figures

Social media users	Venerable Kou Sopheap	Chea Srey Nea	Dr. Mengly J. Quach	DJ Nana Tips	Heng Visal
Non-regular social media users	Venerable Kou Sopheap	Try Dana	Leng Navatra	Ouk Sokunkanha	Seng Bora and Srey oun Natural beauty

Social media users in this study tend to follow influencers based on their content type. They are also more likely to follow influencers and consume content they find relatable or they feel adds value to their life. The two most popular influencers they follow are "*Venerable Kou Sopheap,"* whose content promotes mental health care, calmness, and patience and "*Chea Sreynea,"* known to the public as *"Srey Nea"*. *Srey Nea* is a lifestyle vlogger who creates content on a wide range of topics from fashion and make-up tutorials to business and life experiences. Other influencers, such as *"Dr. Quach Mengly"*, *"DJ Nana tips"*, and *"Heng Visual"*, are also mentioned multiple times for their respective content regarding personal development, business and finances, life experiences, general knowledge, and entertainment.

The venerable Kou Sopheap is more favoured by the older group of social media users. They find his content about mental health care and the concepts of patience and calmness relatable. These are lessons that can be applied to their daily lives, and some have set aside a specific timeslot in their daily routine to listen to him before bed.

"Bong Nea is an outstanding grade A student, She's smart and cute. She's an inspiration to me and I considered her to be successful in both her education and family life."
– 16, Ta Keo, Social media User

It is worth noting that the selected respondents from the younger group responded well to these influencers because they find their personalities *authentic, approachable, and relatable*. Based on the way respondents address these influencers using honorifics, i.e., "Bong Sal or Bong Nea" illustrates that the influencers have established a relationship with their audience. Young people look up to them as a big brother or sister, and hence trust and listen to what they have to say.

On the other side of the spectrum, non-social media users brought up public figures or traditional celebrities. These individuals differ from the content creators mentioned above. They built a reputation outside of social media and simply use the platforms to enhance their popularity and influence. They post about their lives or host a live video to sell their product directly to the consumers rather than creating their own content. These individuals may be popular with non-regular media users, who otherwise do not spend time on social media, because they are known from other media platforms such as television or radio.

The older age group among the non-social media users are more inclined to follow raw, unedited, and unpolished content as opposed to carefully executed ones. *"Try Dana"*, a cosmetic mogul turned jeweler who is well-known for her brand of lotions called "N.N.P", is favoured by this group. They view her as a successful individual. She is notoriously known for posting pictures with flashy jewelry and luxurious cars on her social media platform. Furthermore, she is often seen giving ample amounts of money to sellers on the streets in her posts. The selected participants praise her for her kindness towards the less fortunate. She came from a modest background and started a very successful online business selling lotion. Another notable mention is *"Nak Oknha Leng Navatra,"* who came from a similar background and posts similar content on his personal social media account.

Notably, our findings show that popular social media influencers, such as *Srey Nea* and *Try Dana*, wield a new kind of power on social media. These influencers know how to rally their audiences. The number of viewers in Try Dana's live sessions on Facebook indicates the scope of their influence. A single impromptu live session can garner up to 75K viewers.

Srey Nea, who emerged as one of the most favoured social media personalities in this study, was able to influence a non-regular social media user to follow her content. As the 17-year-old, non-regular social media user puts it, *"I don't have my own phone or my own Facebook account, but I'd use my sister's phone to look at Srey Nea's content on Facebook. I like her and her videos."*

5. Conclusion

Over the last few years, there has been an apparent shift in the way young Cambodian's access news and information. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have further catalysed the rise of the digital era. This study reveals that to young people today the concepts of "news" and "information/knowledge" are intertwined. "News" is classified as daily updates on events and social affairs, while "knowledge" is information that offers long-term intrinsic value.

Given the convoluted media landscape in Cambodia, young people are exposed to an overwhelming amount of unfiltered media content and misinformation. Awareness and recognition of "fake news" consequently lead to a habit of fact-checking with trusted people to ensure the authenticity of the news. This habit is not without its flaw, as the people in this study sometimes experience difficulties detecting misinformation and rarely take specific action when they encounter mis/disinformation – despite scrolling past it.

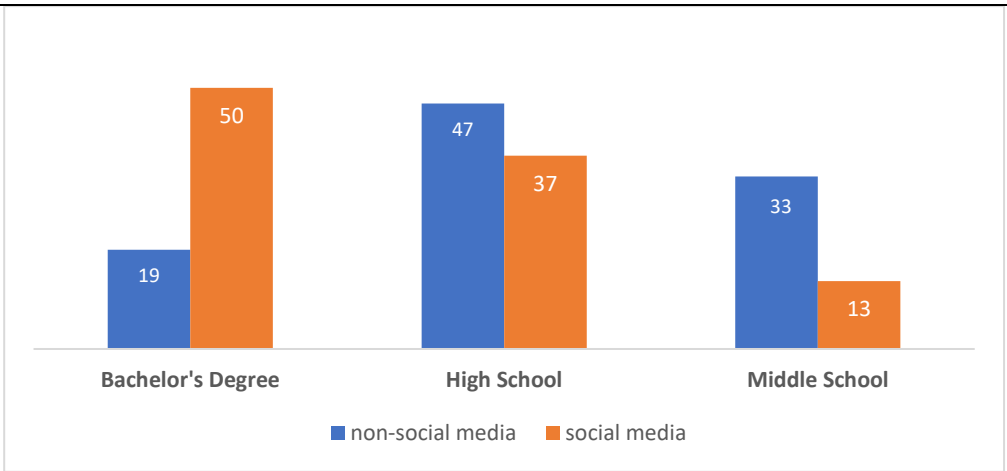
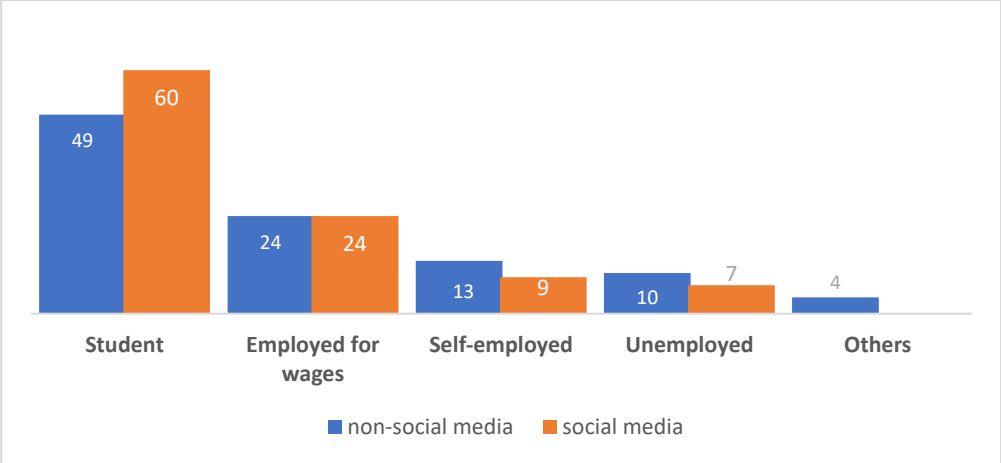
Accessing information now goes beyond traditional media; it has moved online. This is especially noticeable with COVID-19 changing the way media is consumed. In Cambodia, smartphones constitute a critical source of information and point of access to the internet. The ability to access news and social media from the tip of their fingers is a privilege that excites youth. They are motivated to hop on and explore this social media train. However, this privilege comes at a price and it creates a barrier for those with limited income and those who face financial issues due to COVID-19.

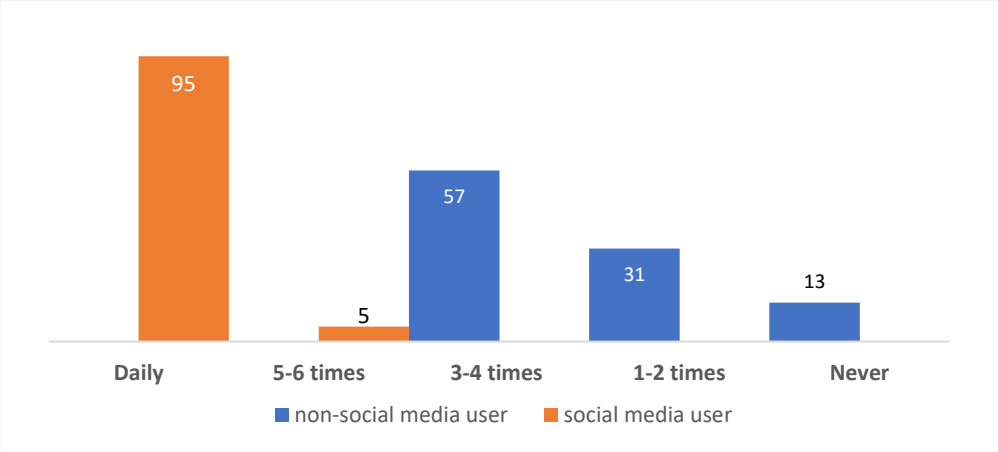
This audience study illustrates how young Cambodians remain hopeful despite the tremendous impacts COVID-19 has had on their lives and their sense of future stability. They have aspirations and are inspired by success stories they are presented with online. They look to the success of other young influencers who have broken the mould and are starting to pave the way for future content creators. Influencers who have opened up Cambodia’s job market to a brand-new industry. This aspiration is the key driver for young people’s motivation to seek knowledge beyond the daily social updates. They seek content that promotes self-development, motivation, business experiences, and skill improvement.

For many young Cambodians, content is readily available and easily accessible. As such, they have not yet considered the need for paid or exclusive content. Information comes in such abundance that they see no need for it. Tuning into the content they subscribe to, one starts to understand why. Take notification settings as an example, almost all participants have notifications turned on but pay little attention to them. Their user behaviour tells a story; while self-development may be the goal for many, their social media use is still at a superficial level.

Appendix

Audience Research Study: Respondent's Profile:

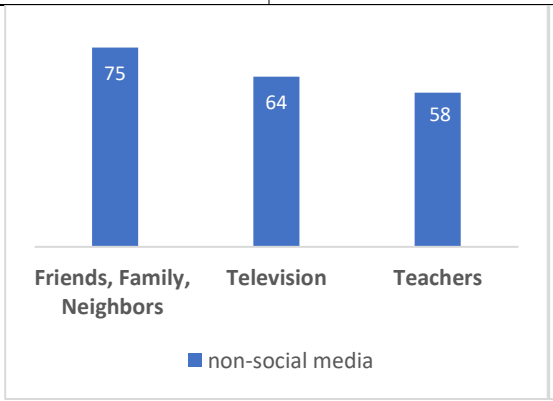
	By: Type of users
Average monthly income (USD)	***non-regular social media user:*** **$137** ***social media user:*** **$160**
Education Level (%)	
Employment Status (%)	
Frequency of accessing the Internet / Social media per week (%)	

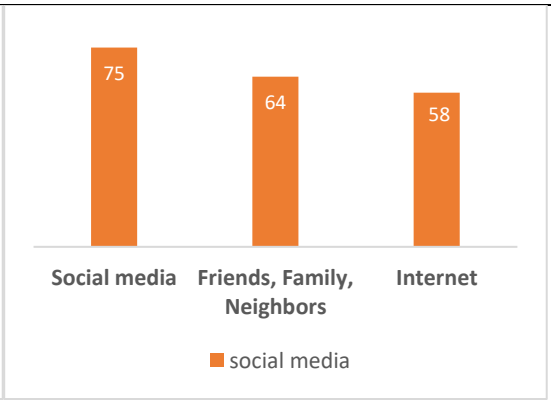


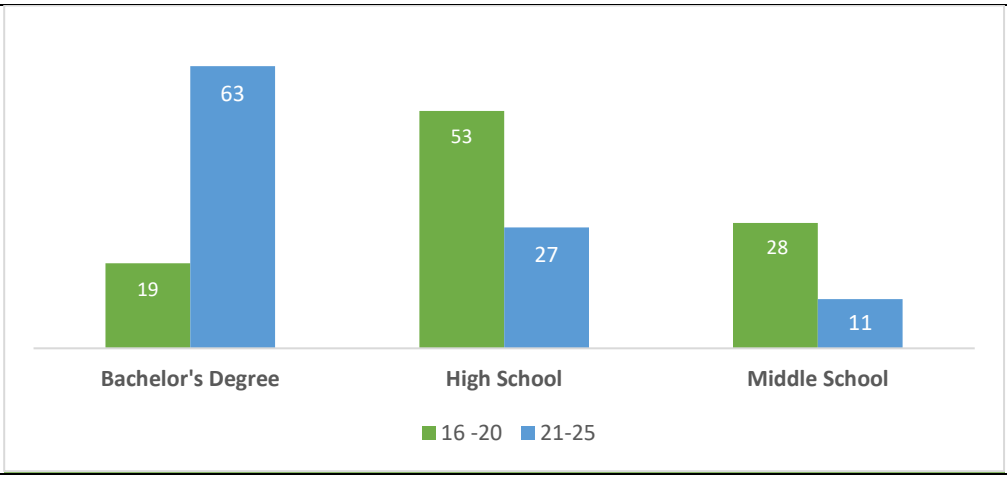
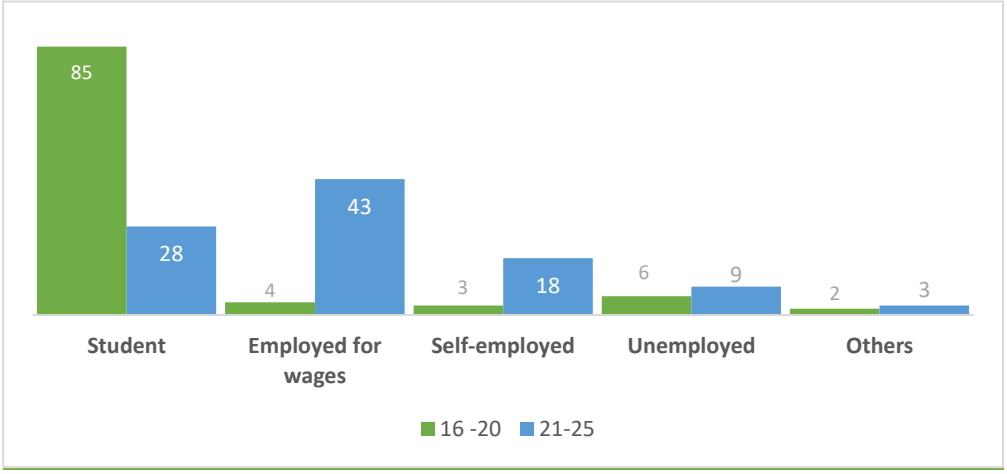
Personal Profile (%)

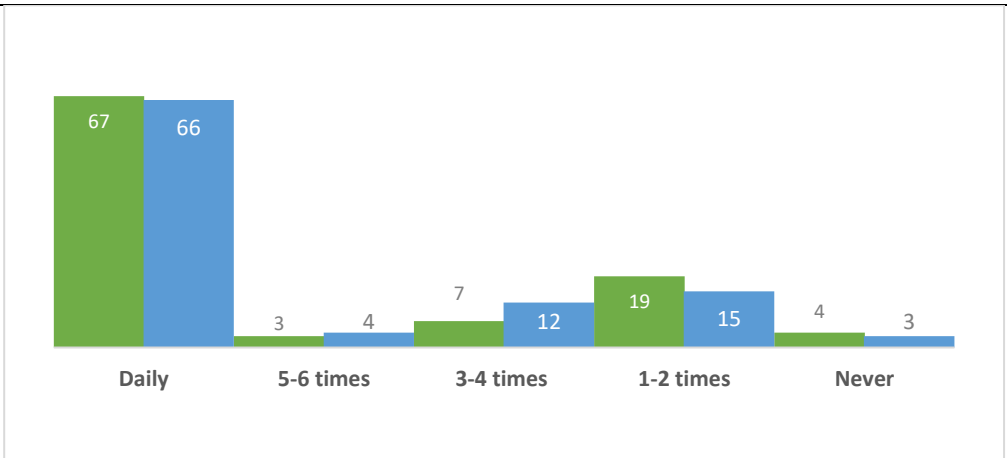
	Non-social media Users	*Social media users*
Facebook	***88%***	***100%***
Tiktok	***22%***	***78%***
Youtube	***18%***	***77%***
Telegram	***47%***	***86%***
Instagram	***8%***	***66%***
Others		***8%***

Top 3 sources of information





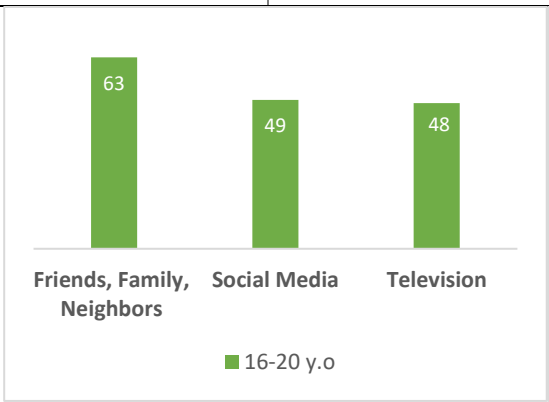
	By Age Group
Average monthly income (USD)	***16-20 years old:*** **$91** ***21-25 years old:*** **$217**
Education Level	
Employment Status (%)	
Frequency of accessing the Internet / Social media per week (%)	

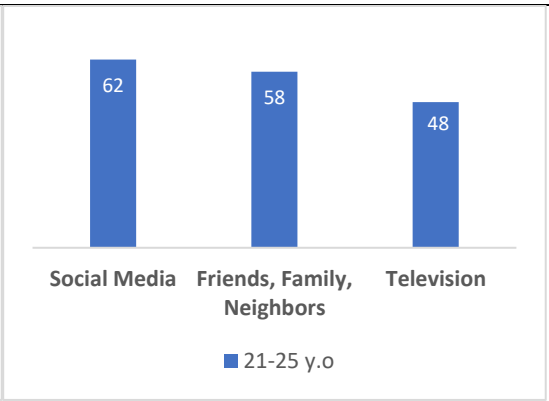


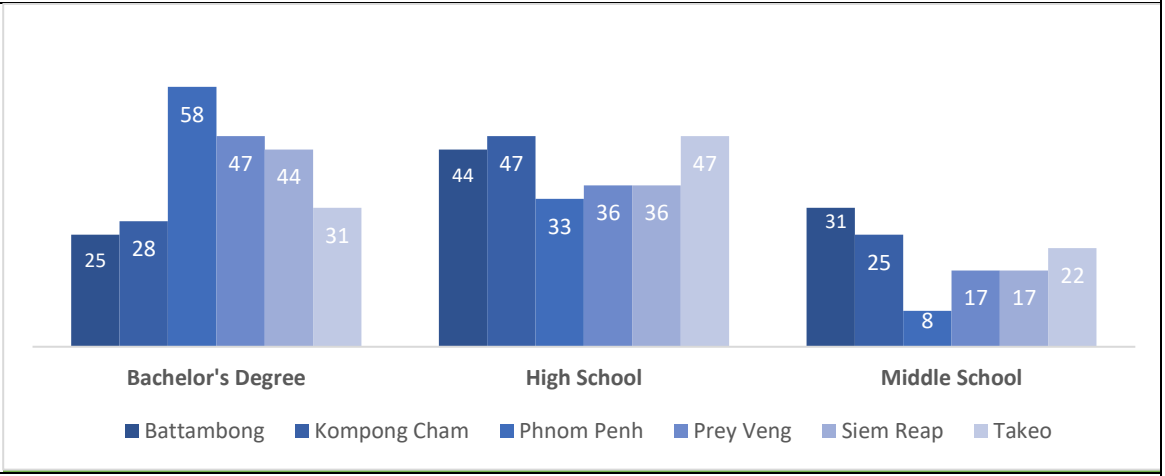
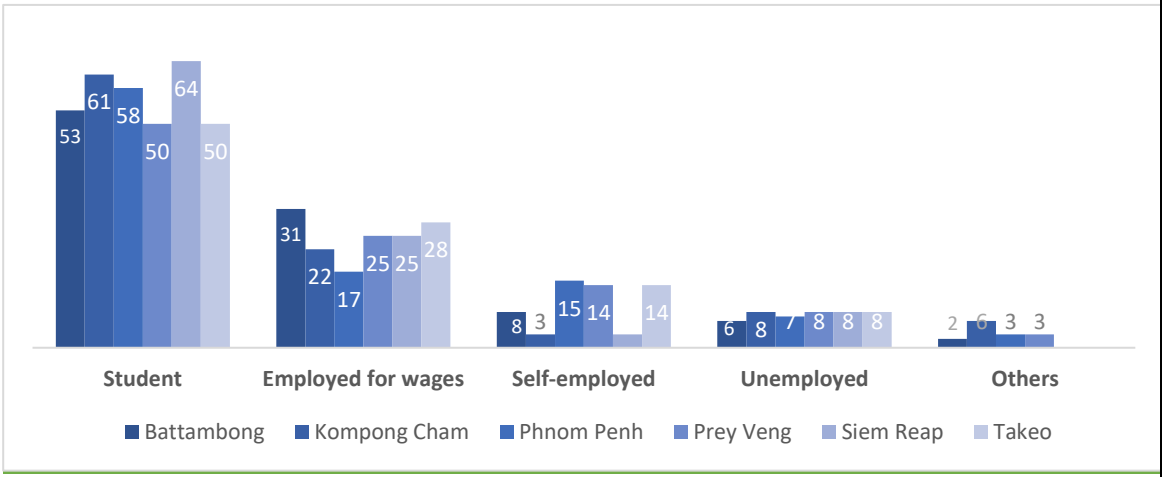
Personal Profile (%)

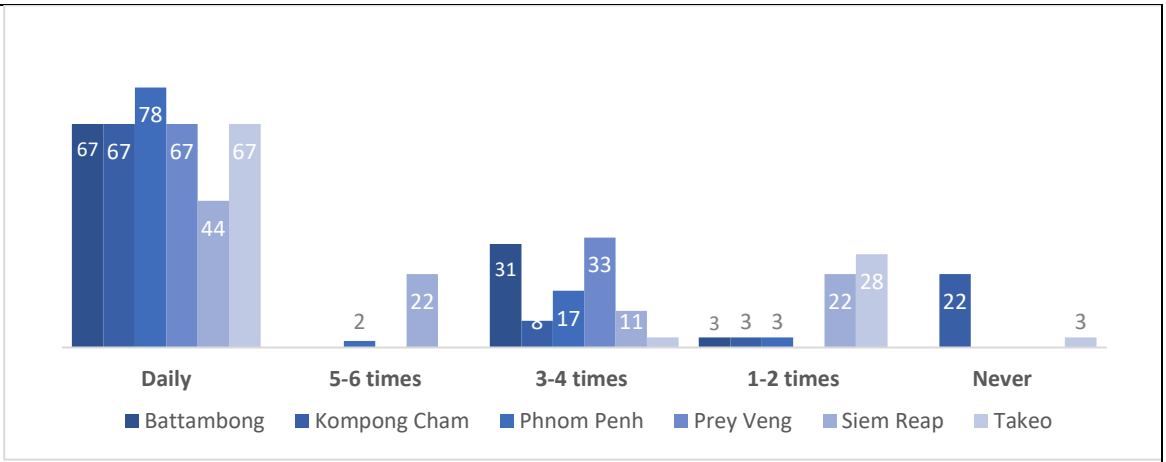
	16-20 y.o (%)	*21-25 y.o (%)*
Facebook	**96**	**97**
Tiktok	**64**	**58**
Youtube	**62**	**57**
Telegram	**73**	**75**
Instagram	**53**	**45**
Others	**3**	**8**

Top 3 sources of information

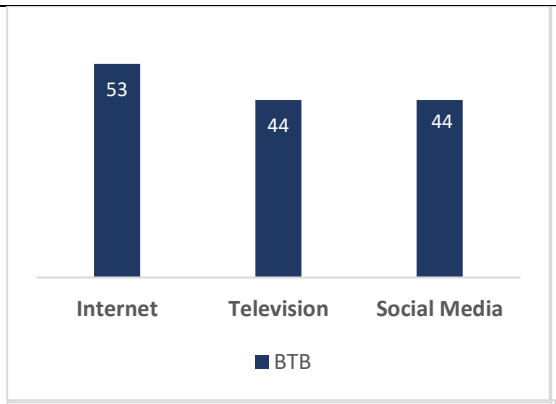
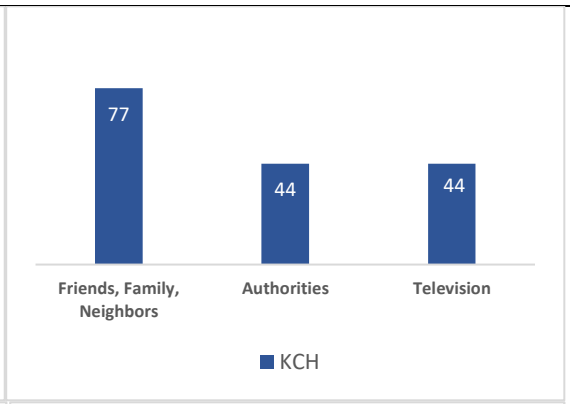
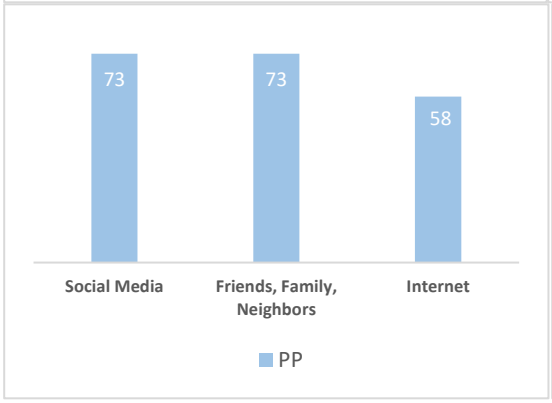
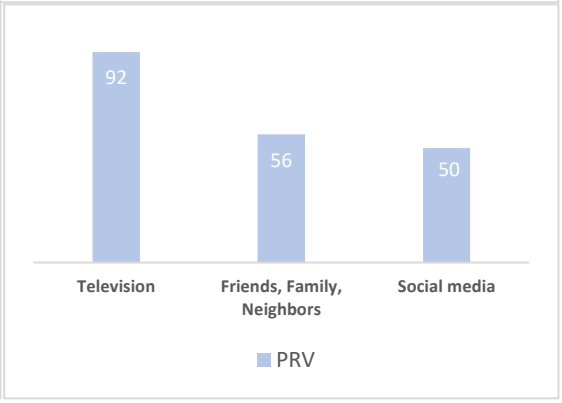
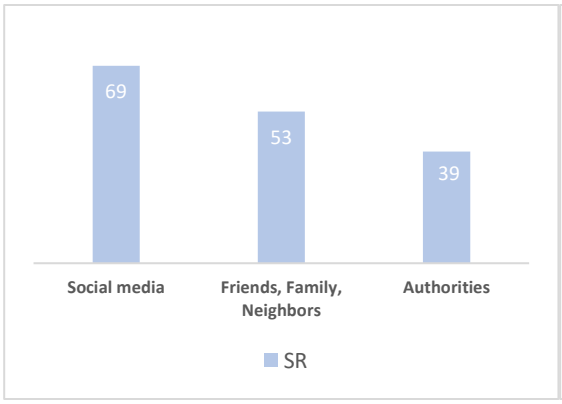
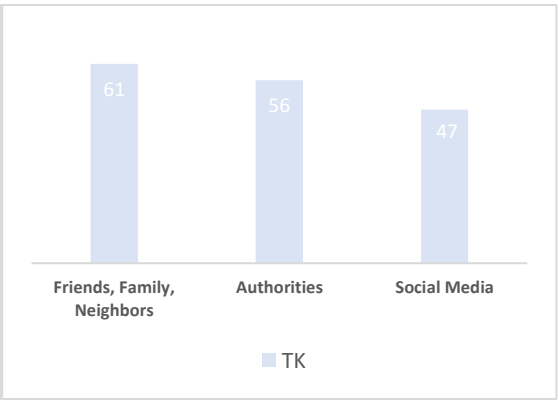




	By Location *low base size for BTB, KCH, PRV, SR and TK
Average monthly income (USD)	***Battambong:*** **$180** ***Kompong*** **$153** ***Cham:*** **$188** ***Phnom Penh:*** **$174** ***Prey Veng:*** **$97** ***Srey Riep:*** **$114** ***Takeo:***
Education level (%)	
Employment Status (%)	
Frequency of accessing the Internet / Social media per week (%)	



Personal Profile (%)

	BTB	*KCHAM*	*PP*	*PRV*	*SR*	*Takeo*
Facebook	**100**	**78**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**97**
Tiktok	**53**	**61**	**58**	**78**	**58**	**61**
Youtube	**53**	**69**	**78**	**50**	**75**	**17**
Instagram	**50**	**39**	**57**	**58**	**31**	**53**
Telegram	**53**	**69**	**80**	**92**	**72**	**75**
Others		**3**	**3**	**3**	**17**	**11**

Top 3 sources of information