

COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - a synthesis of literature review

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media during the widespread outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is associated with significant effect on psychological well-being of people. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube played a crucial role in making the isolated people feel connected, providing information regarding the precautions, disease statistics and safety measures. At the same time, a huge amount of health-threatening misinformation, rumor and fake news is spreading at a faster rate which causing panic, fear and anxiety among people. This review outlines both the positive and negative impact of social media on psychological well-being of people during the coronavirus pandemic. The existing relevant literature were retrieved via a literature search. Published articles were classified according to their overall themes and then summarized. The results showed that use of social media significantly associated with psychological well-being. Viewing stressful content (i.e., severity of the outbreak, statistics of infected people, misinformation or rumors about outbreak) was associated with more negative psychological outcomes like depression. However, viewing heroic acts, speeches from experts, knowledge of the disease as well as various entertaining and creative contents were associated with more positive psychological impact and less depression. The study highlights the need for timely public health communication from official sources to get people know the authentic information, close monitoring of social media to manage rumors as well as ensuring effective use of social media to create awareness about the outbreak. However, the available literature has emerged from only a few of the affected countries and may not reflect the experience of persons living in other parts of the world. Thus, in future, it is suggested to cover more representative research from other affected countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Social media, Psychological well-being

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) first reported in early December in Wuhan province of China (Pan et al., 2020). In January 2020, WHO stated that there is a high risk of COVID-19 spreading to different countries around the world and in March 2020, WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic. Governments across the world implemented social distancing and isolation measures to reduce the risk of infection (Zhai and Du, 2020). Cities were locked down,

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COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

holiday break was extended and travel restrictions were announced. The lockdown following the sudden outbreak has transformed people from being social to isolated human beings as a means of combating the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020).

During such sudden outbreak, the public needs access to timely and reliable information about the disease. Today, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc. have become primary sources of information. These platforms are gradually replacing traditional media platforms (Merchant RM, Lurie N. 2020). People mainly used social media to interact with the public and collect crowd-sourced information (Schroeder et al., 2013). Thus, social media gives a platform for sharing public opinion and perceptions which can be volatile and sensitive during a grave situation as COVID-19 pandemic. In the first few months of 2020, information and news reports about the coronavirus disease were rapidly published and shared on social media. It helped the general people to learn about the virus, precautions and various safety measure. Social media helped isolated people to connect with their friends, family and other loved ones through calls, chat and live videos. These media platforms also provided funny videos and creative arts as a major source of entertainment for the quarantined, locked and isolated people (Han et al., 2020). But social media platforms are also associated with misleading reports and conspiracy theories related to the origin of the virus, its spread, invention of vaccine, mass buying of face masks as well as of other safety measures. Whereas the people around the globe are stressed and nervous due to the fear of being infected and losing loved ones, losing livelihoods, job insecurity, feelings of helplessness etc, the rumors spread on the social media has added stress and hysteria to millions across the world (Stawicki SP et al., 2020).

The constructive features of social media can help people develop positive psychological outcomes but the negative emotion expressed on social media may impact viewers negatively and affect their mental health (Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009). Individuals with poor psychological conditions may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat (Bastani P, Bahrami MA, 2020). The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and the news spreading by social media related to uncertainty and fear may push majority of the population into higher psychological risk which can cause long-term stress, anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem, negativity, frustration, low motivation and overall downfall of mental health (Hua and Shaw, 2020). Therefore, it is worth investigating how different social media platforms influence the psychological well-being of people during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This article is a narrative review of the existing literature on the role of social media on psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. A search of electronic database like Google scholar, Medline, PubMed, Research gate was undertaken using the search terms “novel coronavirus”, “COVID-19”, “social media”, “psychological well-being”, “mental health” in various permutations and combinations. A total of 39 citations were retrieved using this method. Peer-reviewed publications, case reports in peer-reviewed journals and published working papers has been selected to conduct the study. On reviewing the above citations, 17 articles were excluded because they dealt with other aspects of the COVID-19 outbreak. Duplicate articles were removed and the titles and/or abstracts of the articles were evaluated for relevance to the objective of present study. A careful and systematic review of the selected articles lead to the findings of this study.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, various infection control measures such as travel restrictions, isolation procedures, lockdowns and public gathering bans were announced worldwide. Therefore, people have been highly dependent on information in various media (Larson HJ, 2020). Both traditional and new media disaster coverage are associated with critical psychological outcomes (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014). Traditional media is mass media without interaction while new media is social where interaction occurs and people get more engaged (Sun, Rubin & Haridakis, 2008). Social media, now a days, are seen as fast and effective platforms for searching, sharing and distributing information among the general population. Thus, social networking platforms are very important source of global information transmission in disaster contexts at various levels (Park et al., 2020). When the COVID-19 outbreak started, the public was keen to find appropriate online resources and information for their own protective needs, thus, the dependency on social media increased rapidly. The interactive nature of social media may have both positive and negative impact on psychological well-being of people (Zhao et al., 2020).

Social media includes multiple sources of content thus the quantity of information increased but the quality of messages is uncontrolled (Resnyansky, 2014). Unlike the constrained content on traditional media, the crowd-sourced information is not regulated by standards and norms in social media, therefore, people may view very different content via different media forms (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Reyes, 2008). Examining the various contents in social media can affect a person's mental health. Thus, social media contents are associated with critical psychological outcomes during any outbreak (Schroeder, et al., 2013). Information transmission, connecting with other people and entertainment facilities are very important features of social media that helped individuals to gain positive psychological outcomes. On the other hand, poor comprehension, inaccurate or false information in the format of rumors or unreliable news can lead to misunderstanding in the community and affects the mental health of people negatively (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014). Studies on psychological outcome of social media usages during the COVID-19 pandemic have examined long-term psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, stress reactions and substance use. On the other hand, positive, inspiring and genuine news can help people to know about the actual facts which results in positive psychological outcomes (Zhai and Du, 2020). Thus, understanding how widespread use of social media during this life-threatening epidemic (COVID-19) may play a major role in people's psychological well-being is a critical issue.

Social Media Users (2019-2020 Statistics): According to the Digital 2020 Global Overview Report, more than 4.5 billion people now use the internet while social media users have passed the 3.8 billion mark. Nearly 60 percent of the world's population is already online and the latest trends suggest that more than half of the world's total population will use social media by the end of this year. The number of people around the world using the internet has grown to 4.54 billion, an increase of 7 percent (298 million new users) compared to January 2019. Worldwide, there are 3.80 billion social media users in January 2020, with this number increasing by more than 9 percent (321 million new users) since this time last year. The average internet user now spends 6 hours and 43 minutes online each day with more than one-third of that time spent using social media. However, the amount of time that people spend online varies from country to country. Of all the social media, the most popular social networking sites are YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook Messenger and TikTok are recently a few of the other famous social networking

COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

sites. Nowadays, almost every person is having internet in their cell phones and laptop, thus, everyone is capable of accessing social media anytime from anywhere (Digital 2020 global overview report).

Positive role of social media on psychological well-being during COVID-19 Pandemic: Information seeking behaviors reduce anxiety caused by uncertainty during a disease outbreak. At the pandemic situation, people have a great need for information from the media to make sense of the situation and to protect their health (Grajales FJ., Sheps S., et al., 2014). Social media is a crucial source of information nowadays. Such platform plays an important role in mobilizing the community, providing authoritative information and emotional support, helping isolated individuals feel connected and allocating resources (Park et al., 2020). During lockdown, people are using social media platforms to gain information about COVID-19. Social media have offered immediate disease related information to exchange among the people in real-time (Oh et al., 2020). These sites serve as a way for emergency response to easily communicate and access critical information collected by organizations like the WHO (Bastani P, Bahrami MA, 2020). It was found in a study that the outbreak of COVID-19 was also first accounted in social media (Jang and Baek, 2019). Consequently, government organizations also began using social media to notify people about the outbreak, its statistics and precautions (Oh et al., 2020). Social networking sites such as, Twitter has the potential to provide real-time content analysis acknowledging the public health authorities to answer the queries of the people quickly (Neubaum, et al., 2014). On social media, user-created and shared information regarding the COVID- 19 acts as an effective method for public health surveillance. These features of social media helped people to get proper knowledge about the disease, solved their queries as well as provided them with psychological support to manage extreme stress and anxiety during the unprecedented time of COVID-19 (Zhao et al., 2020).

The social media platform has been used to overcome mental strains during the mass quarantine and lockdown. This crisis highlights the strengths of social media in how they can be used for emotional support (Depoux et al., 2020). In social media platform, people shared many funny videos about how to creatively deal with the lockdown, created neighborhood Facebook groups that organize entertainment and practical support to help neighbors who need assistance with grocery shopping or childcare and the quick rise of apps and functionalities allowed live chat and video sessions with multiple people at a time (Ahmed et al., 2020). Moreover, motivational and heroic speech, expert advice and counselling videos on social media also provided people with the mental support they need at the pandemic situation. Social media also helped survivors of COVID-19 to manage their feelings and memories, sharing their experience of the disease as well as helping other people to be more concerned. These media platforms also facilitated collective coping, provided emotional relief and ensured community support (Park et al., 2020).

Negative role of social media on psychological well-being during COVID-19 Pandemic: Social media is one of the primary sources proliferating the information regarding the corona virus (Gao et al., 2020) but the major drawback of social media is that it has been conveniently used as an approach to convey misinformation and fake news (Park et al., 2020). False information on COVID-19 are spreading rapidly through social media altering public behavior during the epidemic (Kouzy et al., 2020). The rumors can significantly hamper the communication response and escalate panic amongst the people. Exposure to potentially distressing media content may negatively impact those who see it. It is associated

COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

with greater anxiety among people. Large volumes of information may amplify the perception of risk and fear-based messages by the media may have negative effects on general people who cannot discern real versus fake news (Peleg, & Solomon, 2015). These days, people are overwhelmed by the information they receive on their smartphones through channels such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. The biggest problem is in determining which news to trust (Bahrami MA, Nasiriani K, et al., 2019). Even a pandemic can be used as a political battle where some recommend social isolation while others recommend doing nothing. People are in dilemma on who is right, the ones who recommend chloroquine or those who tell to take antipyretic medicine. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of daily texts, videos and even scientific publications in social media groups defending each argument. This confusing news has the potential to affect the mental health of people (Chan AKM, Nickson CP, et al., 2020).

When inaccurate or false information passes on to the public, they tend to panic and respond in several ways which includes making a panic purchase and trying out excessive or even harmful drug regimens (Liu et al., 2020). Facebook was the most used social media network for spreading panic. Misinformation on Facebook about possible medications including hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 inspired many people to buy such medicines without medical approval resulting in the inadequacy of these medications for patients who required those (Abdelhaiz et al., 2020). Even before the detection of any case of COVID-19, the epidemic of social media panic people which led to stock out of masks and sanitizers from the market. Further, fake claims about transmission of virus through air and its survival on different surfaces created a panic. Besides, an unwarranted use of N95 masks by common people during travelling and daily activities resulted in the shortage for frontline healthcare workers who actually needed those (Larson HJ, 2020). Some messages containing fake claims about use of herbal and immunity-booster medicines, religious and spiritual ways for prevention and treatment were widely circulated which added to the confusion (Llewellyn S., 2020). The panic was escalated by fake news such as mass killing of patients in China and possibility of extending the lockdown which resulted in individuals fleeing from quarantine or isolation facilities and unnecessary travel prior to lockdown or even during lockdown for returning hometown. Chinese natives in different countries also experienced racism (Li YJ et al. 2019; Yang Y, et al. 2020).

Thus, social media contents are extensively responsible for spreading fear and panic related to the COVID-19 outbreak with a potential negative influence on people's mental health. Besides, anxiety is displayed by people prevalently on social media as a relevant negative emotion during the COVID-19 pandemic (Oh et al., 2020). Several studies have shown that incidental media exposure to mass trauma may intensify the initial symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Gao et al., 2020). The social media seems to have strong psychological impact on the younger population, health care workers, diagnosed individuals and their family and the people living in quarantine during the COVID-19 outbreak (Huang Y, Ning Z. 2020; Wang C, et al.2019).

Implications: At this time of COVID-19 pandemic, social media become a strong platform for spreading public health awareness as well as life-saving information (Li et al., 2020). Some nations do have Twitter and Facebook accounts for these purposes (Bastani P, Bahrami 2020). Since misinformation is spreading continuously on social media sites, awareness and appropriate preventive measures are of utter importance for public safety (Kouzy et al., 2020). These misinformation need attention for enhancing sentiment

COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

awareness and improving emergency responses. There must be caution for using these platforms to prevent the spread of misinformation and rumors (Abdelhafiz et al., 2020). The urgent requirement to alleviate the panic due to social media has become a priority (Depoux et al., 2020). Since the information increases rapidly through social media, it is necessary to monitor and manage rumor (Frost et al., 2019). At the same time evidence should also be provided and shown to the public about the authenticity of information (Stawicki SP, Firstenberg MS, et al., 2020). Policies such as complete banning of social media or suppressing messages related to COVID-19 can have serious implications as it may suppress life-saving information or may cause distrust in the motives of governing power (Shimizu K., 2019).

World Health Organization conveyed that determining the primary causes of fear, anxiety and anger igniting the misinformation via social media is of grave concern (Gao et al., 2020). Thus, social media should be used for wiser reasons since it provides an opportunity to acknowledge the measures to be undertaken and to advice to prevent misinformation and panic (Depoux et al., 2020). Governments and healthcare authorities should use social media to spread updates, news and scientific discoveries about COVID-19. Information to be spread can include who should be tested, when they should be tested and where they would go to get medical care (Merchant RM, Lurie N., 2020). Delivering fast and accurate information that addresses critical issues of infection control is significant (Chan et al., 2020). Social media platforms can also provide helpful direction during this crisis, Facebook, for example, redirects users to World Health Organization (WHO) websites where trustworthy information can be obtained. Furthermore, social media can be used for education. Physicians are hosting webinars not only to conduct discussions about COVID-19 but also to talk about their specialties. Another interesting use of social media during this pandemic is to gather data from people who are in lockdown. Information on symptoms, interactions and travel routes can all be used to fight the virus and better understand how it spreads. Thus, if used wisely and prudently, social media serves as a powerful tool for changing people's behavior and to promote the mental well-being (Merchant RM, Lurie N., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, social media has played a crucial role in spreading awareness and knowledge about public health. Thus, these media platforms are making a huge impact on disaster and emergency communications (Charles-Smith LE, Reynolds TL et al., 2015). Social media is extremely important during this COVID-19 pandemic not only to get information and be updated about it but also to understand how it spreads, how people interact and how they can respond to it (Khoros., 2020). Social media helps people to keep in touch with near ones during the outbreak and entertain themselves through interesting post, videos and creative arts. From this point of view, the contribution of social media is enormous in case of psychological well-being (Ha et al., 2020). However, during the outbreak of COVID-19, misinformation and misleading news raided on social media and fuelled baseless panic among many cybercitizens that can create confusion and is capable of threatening the psychological well-being (Khoros., 2020). During epidemic outbreaks individuals are likely to experience a variety of acute psychological reactions (Van Bortel et al., 2016). People's direct and indirect exposure to COVID-19 threats may increase the psychological unrest. Thus, access to reliable information about the outbreak is widely supported as a key resource to maintain psychological well-being (Depoux et al., 2020). The false rumor about COVID-19 is disseminated faster in social media and the key approach

COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

suggested in this review was to correct misconceptions by health institutions experts which involves timely expert advice, regular public health awareness and correction program with periodic communication among general people on formal media platforms (Llewellyn S., 2020). By considering the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the audiences during this phase of fear and anxiety, the Government of every country should effectively control and monitor the social media usage and ensure a careful balance of its use and misuse (Zhao et al., 2020). It is of urgent need to mitigate the negative impact of social media and ensuring effective use of such platforms as well as to understand peoples' perceptions and attitudes to detect early signals of misinformation to address them before they snowball. It will help to build public trust, cooperation and better adherence to epidemic control measures which in turn, will reduce anxiety, stress and depression as well as will help in improving the psychological well-being of people (Shimizu K., 2019).

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COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

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COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

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COVID-19 Pandemic: How does social media affect psychological well-being? - A synthesis of literature review

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Conflict of Interest

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