

## Exploring the Dark Side of Social Media During the Pandemic in India

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced the norm of social distancing which threatened the natural tendency of human beings to live life together. To stay connected to fellow humans, people started using social media to their advantage. The existing literature provides enough evidence that sheds light on the impact of social media usage on the mental health of users. Since the pandemic was a new situation that affected the wellbeing of people, the impact of the transformed use of the cyberspace on the mental health of people begged to be explored to understand the positive and negative role played by social media. Specially, in the Indian context, this exploration becomes a necessity when India records one of the highest users of social media users in the world. With a survey study in which 101 Indian residents participated, the negative role of social media use on their mental health during the pandemic was self-reported by 62.38% of them whereas 40.40% mentioned that social media usage positively contributed to their wellbeing.

**Keywords:** *Mental Health, COVID-19, Social Media, Pandemic, Wellbeing*

With the COVID-19 pandemic came the strict regulations around social distancing, the need to maintain distance, and no contact with fellow humans. Needless to say, man is a social animal. Human survival and civilization became possible due to collective efforts of the human species, and due to their social need of staying together. It is only natural for human beings to stay in a community, and stay in constant contact with other human beings. On the other side, the pandemic threatened this natural tendency of human beings. We were compelled to maintain and follow all social distancing norms and regulations. However, the question remains: Is it possible for human beings to thrive in such an environment of isolation and distancing?

One of the main protective factors against mental illness is social support (Coker et al., 2002; Ozbay et al., 2007; Scott & Haverkamp, 2014). Without social support, human beings become vulnerable to a variety of mental health issues. As the pandemic interfered with the natural desire of humans of staying together, it invited a host of mental health problems into people's lives. From exacerbation of existing mental health conditions to increase fear,

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panic, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation, the pandemic did not leave untouched any aspect of human life (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Grover et al., 2020).

In such difficult times, it is also important to notice that majority of the human beings survived this pandemic, and are still fighting against it. It goes without saying that social media did allow users to stay connected to their loved ones. People built safe spaces online and found solace and peace over video calls (Koeze & Popper, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). Tsao et al (2021) emphasized the positive role of social media during the pandemic and mentioned that it acted as a crucial tool in the generation, dissemination, and consumption of helpful information. At this juncture, the other side of the coin begs attention and that is the dark side of social media. The cyberspace is not free of despair and bleakness.

The existing literature records enough evidence about the negative impact of social media engagement on the mental health of users (Berryman et al., 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2018, Singh et al., 2017). For instance, time spent on social networking sites was found to be moderately associated with anxiety and depression (Coynne et al., 2020). Verduyn et al (2015) found that passive engagement with social media predicted a decline in affective wellbeing over time hence causing a negative impact on the mental health of users. Additionally, social media acts as a platform where stigmatization and trivialization of mental health issues are common (Robinson et al., 2017).

Now with the strict lockdown restrictions imposed during the pandemic when social media was the only way to stay connected to people, the negative role of social media usage on mental health needs to be explored further. The COVID-19 outbreak was first noticed in Wuhan. People of Wuhan were benefitted from the use of social media in the initial phase of the outbreak as it helped in gaining informational content and support from peers, however, it was later revealed that excessive social media usage was both related to depression and secondary trauma leading to mental health conditions among the users (Zhong et al, 2021). Similarly, in a student sample of China, it was found that a higher level of social media use was associated with worse mental health. Moreover, exposure to news of disaster through social media was found to be associated with greater depression in participants in case of high levels of the disaster stressor (Zhao & Zhou, 2020). Another study in China revealed that frequent social media exposure was positively associated with high levels of anxiety as well as combined depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak (Gao et al, 2020). Similar results were reported in other parts of the world as well (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Neil et al., 2021; Wheaton et al., 2021).

### *Rationale and Objective*

As evident from the review of the literature, the negative role of social media use on mental health during the pandemic was revealed across the world. Kemp (2021) reported that India had 448 million users of social media in January 2021; hence it becomes imperative for the scientific community to explore the issue of the effect of social media use on the mental health of Indians during the pandemic. We are also aware that India's mental health situation is worsening with the COVID-19 outbreak (Dalal et al., 2020; Lal, 2021). Hence, the objective of this study is to measure and understand the role of social media use on the mental health of the Indian population during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to fulfill the objective of this research study, the investigators conducted a survey research. A short online survey was designed to understand the impact of social media use

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on people's mental health during the pandemic. The survey which was opened from 02.04.2021 to 07.04.2021 was completed by a total of 112 participants of which 101 responses were found to be usable for the current study. All the participants were Indian residents with the age range being 15-58 years. Among the sample, 41.41% identified as males whereas 60.60% identified as females. The participants' responses were then analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

### RESULTS

Through the online survey, we collected 101 usable responses and the analysis revealed some interesting and unique findings.

- a. One of the most interesting findings of our survey was that a total of 90.90% of the participants agreed that they believed that social media does have an impact on our mental health whereas 11.11% disagreed.
- b. 32.32% of the participants reported that they used more than 1 social media platform on a daily basis during the pandemic whereas 23.23% admitted to using more than 2 social media platforms on a daily basis. It is worthy to mention that 8.08% of the participants acknowledged that they used more than 4 social media platforms on a daily basis during the COVID-19 outbreak whereas the percentage for using only 1 social media platform and more than 3 social media platforms – both stood at 19.19% of the participants each.
- c. Another significant finding reported the time duration for which people engaged in social media usage on a daily basis during the pandemic. 42.42% of the participants reported that time to be 1-2 hours, 32.32% said that they used social media daily during the pandemic for 2-4 hours, 12.12% of the participant mentioned that their usage was for 4-6 hours whereas 8.08% admitted to using social media daily for a time duration of 6-8 hours. Furthermore, 7.07% of the participants revealed that during the pandemic they engaged in social media for more than 8 hours on a daily basis.
- d. In the context of the pandemic, when enquired if social media usage affected the mental health of the participants by impacting their stress and/or anxiety levels, 48% agreed, 24.24% disagreed whereas 29.29% mentioned that it was difficult for them to decide if social media impacted their wellbeing.
- e. It is worth noting that a total of 50.50% of the participants acknowledged that social media usage during the pandemic triggered fear in them regarding the COVID-19 virus whereas 51.50% did not agree to this.
- f. Lastly, one of the most significant findings of our survey indicated the extent of disturbance in the wellbeing of the participants during the pandemic as a result of engaging on social media platforms. A total of 38.38% of the participants mentioned that they perceived an increase in stress and anxiety whereas a total of 24% of the participants reported that they perceived an increase in feelings of isolation after using social media during the pandemic. A total of 33.33% admitted that they noticed no change in their wellbeing whereas 26.26% perceived an increase in their overall wellbeing and 14.14% revealed that they perceived an increase of peace in their life as a result of using social media.

### DISCUSSION

Our survey brought to the forefront a variety of significant findings that rightly indicate both the bright and dark sides of social media usage. As the results have revealed around 62.38% of the participants collectively mentioned that they perceived a negative role of social media on their mental health through an increase in stress and anxiety (38.38%) as well as an increase in feelings of isolation (24%). On the other hand, the brighter side was embraced by a total of 40.40% of the participants as they reported an increase in overall wellbeing

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(26.26%) and an increase in peace in life (14.14%). This brings us to the understanding that the impact of social media usage on people's mental health is contingent upon how users engage with these platforms. Similar conclusions have been put forward by Seabrook et al. (2016) and Verduyn et al. (2021).

Additionally, it is important to note that in the context of the pandemic, a total of 50.50% of the participants did acknowledge that social media usage triggered fear in them regarding the COVID-19 virus. This finding can be further corroborated with the existing literature noted by Lin et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2021), and Mertens et al. (2020).

With the intention of understanding people's lived experience of using social media on a daily basis during the pandemic, in our survey, we included a section for participants' comments about their experiences to give them an opportunity to express and share their views with us. Through an analysis of their comments, we noted quite a few similar emerging themes in their experience of using social media during the pandemic. Some of these comments emphasized the role of social media in spreading misinformation, exaggerated information, as well as rumors about the virus which the participants mentioned instigated fear in them. A few of the comments to note in this context are:

“Social media usage has definitely increased with a high rate during the pandemic, leading to mentally affect its users in both positive and negative aspects. Quick dissemination of false information is one of the most important negative impacts which social media had on unaware users.”

“The only negative impact I perceived was unnecessary fear due to rumors and exaggerated information.”

“A lot of fake information instills fear.”

“Social media has been impacting people's mindset about the disease and making them more and more scared.”

“Social media increased everyone's fear in a negative way.”

Some of the comments mentioned below that were collected through the survey also indicated the tendency of getting addicted to social media usage. For instance, some of the noteworthy comments are being mentioned below:

“Social media has a very bad impact on anyone's mental health. It's ok to use it within a limit but overuse is the worst as it isolates you from everyone around, it disrupts the regular activity of a normal person as it indulges everyone and gets people addicted. So, it is necessary to use it in an apt limit.”

“One becomes dependent on it and it becomes a very addictive habit before you know it.”

“Limited social media use does not impact mental health. If you get addicted then anything can impact you negatively.”

To gain an understanding of how social media usage contributed to people's wellbeing, it is worthy to mention here some of the comments that we received from the participants.

“Well, social media gave me the resources to figure myself out over quarantine so it definitely helped and made my mental health increasingly better.”

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“Balanced usage is positive.”

“Helped me stay connected.”

In their paper, Cato et al (2021) highlighted both the bright and dark sides of social media during the pandemic. The results from the present study are also indicating towards similar results, however, it is important to mention here the current study is more skewed towards the negative role played by social media usage on people’s mental health during the pandemic as made evident by the responses gathered from 62.48% of the participants.

### **Suggestions**

As per the findings of the current study, it is suggested that in the future more controlled research be carried out with larger sample sizes in India to understand the impact of social media usage on mental health in the context of the pandemic. It is also suggested that people should be made more aware of the harmful effects of using social media excessively on their wellbeing through educative awareness programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

The current study reported the negative role of social media usage on the mental health of Indian residents during the pandemic. Additionally, it also threw light on the positive contribution of social media engagement on people’s wellbeing. In accordance with the findings of the study, it can be concluded that people’s mental health is impacted by social media usage, however, the direction and magnitude of the impact is largely dependent on the interaction between the users and the cyberspace.

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