The Influence of Social Media on Mental Health During COVID-19 Pandemic: Benefits and Risks

Qihang Ji[1,*]

[1]*School of Journalism and Communication, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 510006, China*
Corresponding author. Email: 20191303641@gdufs.edu.cn

ABSTRACT
Since the outbreak of COVID-19, people's lifestyle has changed, and much of people's work and learning has moved to online platforms in order to reduce direct physical contact, so people spend more time on the Internet than before. Based on searching for recent peer reviewed publications in data sources, this study summarizes some of the current research on the influence of social media on people's mental health during COVID-19. Through social media platforms, people can obtain corresponding peer support and alleviate the loneliness caused by staying at home. However, at the same time, people spend more time on social media may lead to the phenomenon of addiction to social media use, and it also may cause negative emotions.

Keywords: *Social media, Mental health, COVID-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of civilization, the human has experienced all sorts of epidemics and pandemics, causing panic, destruction, moral and psychological health problems.[1] Moreover, outbreaks of epidemics affect all regions, and their impact is global with negative consequences. COVID-19 is the disease that occurred when infected with a deadly coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2, and the WHO first learned about this new virus in Wuhan, People's Republic of China after issuing a cluster report on December 31, 2019. [2] Until 25 February 2022, there have been 430,257,564 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5,922,049 deaths, reported to WHO.[3] As a result of that, COVID-19 has dramatically changed people's lives, especially much of people's work and learning has moved to online platforms in order to reduce direct physical contact so people spend more time on the internet than before. In addition to the physical health, economic and political impact of the coronavirus, its impact on mental health cannot be underestimated. Under the lockdown policies instituted in response to COVID-19, prolonged social isolation has increased people's sense of loss of control over their bodies, as well as increased stress and anxiety, and even led to depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. [4] As a consequence, a growing number of voices, including the United Nations, have drawn attention to mental health issues related to COVID-19.[5]

Social media widely refers to the network and mobile platforms,which allow people to have a connection with others in a virtual space (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Wechat, or LinkedIn), in which they can co-create, or exchange multifarious forms of digital content, including information, messages, photographs and so on.[6] Before the COVID-19 outbreak, people already relied on social media to gather information and news. However, during COVID-19 pandemic, social media is playing an increasingly important role in people's lives. Most people try to meet their social needs through social media, which not only connects them with friends, but also provides entertainment in the boring time while being at home.[7] Meanwhile, social media is also the main way for people to get information related to the pandemic, which may have risks for people's mental health.

Accordingly, based on searching for recent peer reviewed publications in data sources using the search terms "social media","mental illness" and "COVID-19," and searching the reference lists of recent reviews and other relevant studies, this study summarizes some of the current research on the influence of social media on people's mental health during COVID-19. To be specific, this study aims to figure out the benefits and risks of social media for people's mental health during COVID-19, and seeks opportunities for improvement.

2. RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MENTAL HEALTH

The first study on social media in the period of a pandemic can date back to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, and it illustrates the potential of using social media to conduct "infodemiology" studies for public health[8], which is defined as the science of managing infodemics[9]. WHO has declared that it is now fighting not only an international pandemic, but also a social media infodemic, with a few media claiming that COVID-19 is the first real social media infodemic, as it accelerates information and misinformation and increases panic and anxiety across the globe.[10] In the following part, by summarizing previous investigations, this paper first considers the negative effect of social media on users' mental health during the epidemic, including :(1) Negative emotions; (2) Social media addiction; (3)Facing hostile interactions.

2.1 Negative emotions

ABC News has reported a poll which claims that in the era of social media, anxiety and tension about the pandemic spread faster than the virus itself, causing public panic all over the world.[11] Past researches have consistently highlighted that social media use, particularly prolonged time spent on the platform, may lead to an increased risk of various symptoms of psychology health and poor well-being, especially among young adults.[12] During the pandemic, groundless disinformation and untrue reports about COVID-19 have spread widely on social media,and as a result of that, it sparked fears among many online users, which can confuse people about the truth and damage their psychology health. In addition, a lot of people expressed their negative emotions such as tension, worry, fear, anxiety, etc. on social media with highly transmissible social networks. Therefore, social media plays a more mediating role between information and users.

Specifically, people's negative emotions, such as anxiety and panic, mainly come from the information released on social media related to the epidemic. The ease with which social media disseminates information has made it easy for people to receive negative information related to the epidemic, which can cause people to worry that what they see on the social media platforms will happen to them, causing anxiety.[13] At the same time, people who were inclined to have discussions about the COVID-19 on social media tended to have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of life satisfaction. [14]

2.2 Social media addiction

Because there were no any vaccine and effective medication at the initial stage of the pandemic, many governments and authorities enacted restrictive steps in order to get physical contact decreased among the population.[15] As a result of that, face-to-face activities showed a great downward trend and online services were quickly generalized, which unavoidably increased the frequency of social media use. A study from Indonesia[7] shows that as social media becomes more and more important to the daily lives of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, students may be at greater risk of social media addiction, which may damage the mental health of college students, shown by the research data that students with higher scores of social media addiction are at bigger risk of minor depression.

2.3 Facing hostile interactions

It has been reported that many COVID-19 patients and close contacts in China have been subjected to offensive comments from others on social media.[16] Their personal information was exposed to social media and they were forced to suffer abuse from strangers, which took a great toll on their physical and mental health. At the same time, Chinese students who are studying outside China have also become targets of concern, being stigmatized by local racists for being Chinese and attacked by nationalists in China for being Chinese abroad.[17]

3. BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MENTAL HEALTH

Despite the negative impact social media had on people during the pandemic, we should not ignore the positive role social media played during this period. In fact, social media has played a very important role in disseminating information during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it easy for people to get the right coping strategies and health advice, which can have positive influence on people's mental health.

3.1 Peer support

Peer support is a kind of system that people give and receive help in relationship with others who share similar experiences with each other.[18] Through social media, people can find people in the same predicament as themselves, such as home isolation, diagnosis and so on, and learn coping experience or communicate with each other, which is a great way to relieve their anxiety. Although COVID-19 has caused people to reduce physical contact with those around them，people are longing for seeking information and keep in touch with others, by doing which they share a perception of affiliation to the matching group.[19] Therefore, people getting peer support on social media and other online resources not only can enhance self-efficacy and self-esteem, but also reduce the risk of self-uncertainty

about themselves.[20]

3.2 Alleviating loneliness

Social media has provided an important space and platform for people to communicate with others during the pandemic, regardless of time of day or geographic location, especially for those who are staying at home. Meanwhile，social media use is considered an important means of recovery from pain and a coping strategy in the face of loneliness and negative emotions. Virtual communities in social media allow users to interact with others, disseminate content, share common interests, experiences, and emotions, and increase their engagement on digital platforms, which can alleviate the loneliness caused by prolonged solitude.[21]

3.3 Entertainment functions

Social media also provides people with important forms of entertainment. Many traditional recreational activities have been reduced due to the epidemic, as a result of that, people need to find new ways to enjoy themselves, and social media platforms like Tiktok and Instagram become more popular. It permeates almost all kinds of aspects of society and has brought a new trend of online entertainment. With the popularization of social media, new ways of consuming, engaging and distributing content have emerged, extending and redefining the recreation experience .[22]

4. DISCUSSION

It is believed that public health crises, pandemics and epidemics always bring severe stress, anxiety symptoms and confusion to worldwide communities, especially those facing viral threat. This paper discusses the positive and negative effects of social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it finds that people use social media more than before during the epidemic period, and they can get corresponding peer support and contact with family and friends through social media, which alleviates people's sense of loneliness to some extent. At the same time, the entertainment function of social media is also more significant in this period, nevertheless which may make people addicted to it. What is noteworthy is that it mentioned the phenomenon of online violence against confirmed cases and close contacts on social media during the pandemic, which has rarely been mentioned in previous studies. In fact, this should be a phenomenon of concern, and it also provides a direction for further future research.

Like other research studies, this research has indicated some limitations. This study just widely discusses the influence of social media use on people's mental health during pandemic, however, different groups and the circumstances are different. For example, the elderly and young people's social media use is not same in frequency and degree. So in the future research, it can be refined into different groups in order to obtain more accurate conclusions. Furthermore, future opportunities for improvement should focus on the speech environment of the community. The supervision mechanism corresponding to the public communication places provided by social media is not perfect, resulting in many malicious words will be received by other users, so it is necessary for researchers to conduct further research in the future and provide policy reference for practitioners.

5. CONCLUSION

As mentioned in this article, social media plays an important role in people's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has both benefits and risks. Through social media platforms, people can obtain corresponding peer support and alleviate the loneliness caused by staying at home. However, at the same time, people spend more time on social media may lead to the phenomenon of addiction to social media use, and it also may cause negative motions.

This study summarizes some of the current research on the influence of social media on people's mental health during COVID-19, and it provides a direction and reference for the further researchers and practitioners that in order to build a good public opinion environment on social media, they need to further study the phenomenon of online violence on social media during the epidemic so as to find more specific solutions.

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