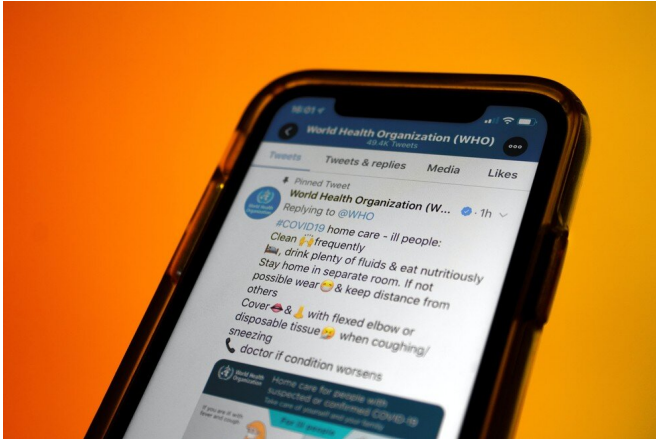


Social media use linked with depression, secondary trauma during COVID-19

29 September 2020, by Sara Lajeunesse



Researchers found that social media usage was related to both depression and secondary trauma during the early part of the COVID-19 outbreak. Credit: Aronpw, Unsplash

Can't stop checking social media for the latest COVID-19 health information? You might want to take a break, according to researchers at Penn State and Jinan University who discovered that excessive use of social media for COVID-19 health information is related to both depression and secondary trauma.

"We found that [social media](#) use was rewarding up to a point, as it provided informational, emotional and [peer support](#) related to COVID-19 health topics," said Bu Zhong, associate professor of journalism, Penn State. "However, excessive use of social media led to [mental health issues](#). The results imply that taking a social media break may promote well-being during the pandemic, which is crucial to mitigating mental health harm inflicted by the pandemic."

The study, which published online on Aug. 15 in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, included 320 participants living in urban districts of

Wuhan, China. In February 2020, the team gave the participants an [online survey](#) that investigated how they accessed and shared health information with family members, friends and colleagues on social media, specifically WeChat, China's most popular social media mobile app.

The team used an instrument created to measure Facebook addiction to assess participants' use of WeChat. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, the survey assessed participants' views of WeChat in providing them with informational, emotional and peer support. The survey also assessed participants' health behavior changes as a result of using social media.

Statements related to informational support included, "I use WeChat to gain information about how to manage the coronavirus epidemic," and "If I have a question or need help related to the coronavirus epidemic, I can usually find the answers on WeChat." Statements related to emotional support included, "My [stress levels](#) go down while I'm engaging with others on WeChat," and "The health information on WeChat helps me alleviate feelings of loneliness." Statements related to peer support included, "I use WeChat to share practical advice and suggestions about managing the coronavirus epidemic," and "I have used some of the information I learned from WeChat friends as part of my management strategies for coping with the coronavirus epidemic."

The survey also investigated participants' health behavior changes related to the use of WeChat, asking them to rate statements such as, "The health information on WeChat has changed many of my health behaviors, such as but not limited to wearing face masks, using sanitizer, or washing hands."

To assess depression, the researchers used a 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scale in which

participants rated statements such as, "I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all," and "I felt that life was meaningless."

According to Zhong, secondary trauma refers to the behaviors and emotions resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. Using the Secondary Trauma Stress Scale, the researchers asked respondents to rate statements such as, "My heart started pounding when I thought about the coronavirus epidemic," and "I had disturbing dreams about the coronavirus epidemic."

"We found that the Wuhan residents obtained tremendous informational and peer support but slightly less [emotional support](#) when they accessed and shared health information about COVID-on WeChat," said Zhong. "The participants also reported a series of [health](#) behavior changes, such as increased hand washing and use of face masks.

More than half of the respondents reported some level of depression, with nearly 20% of them suffering moderate or severe depression. Among the respondents who reported secondary trauma, the majority reported a low (80%) level of trauma, while fewer reported moderate (13%) and high (7%) levels of trauma. None of the participants reported having any depressive or traumatic disorders before the survey was conducted.

"Our results show that social media usage was related to both depression and secondary trauma during the early part of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan," said Zhong. "The findings suggest that taking a social [media](#) break from time to time may help to improve people's mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic."

More information: Bu Zhong et al, Mental health toll from the coronavirus: Social media usage reveals Wuhan residents' depression and secondary trauma in the COVID-19 outbreak, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106524](#)

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