

Chapter 10

Understanding the Effect of Social Media Use on Psychological Stress During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of the modern technology of social media on psychological stress during Irish COVID-19 quarantine restrictions. Literature indicates mixed findings regarding social media usage and psychological stress. Acknowledging its multifaceted nature, social media use in this study is examined through the category usage motivators of consuming, participating, and producing. Usage motivators significantly indicate variations in terms of impact on stress. Social media use for the purpose of consuming is moderately correlated with increased levels of psychological stress. Social media use for the purpose of participating exhibits a weak correlation with decreasing levels of psychological stress. Social media use for the purpose of producing exhibits no significant relationship with psychological stress during quarantine. Findings of this study are valuable for government and corporate policy makers and mental health and marketing professionals, with implications in psychological wellbeing practices and mindful social media use during quarantine.

INTRODUCTION

On December 31st 2019, Chinese officials reported the first case of a pneumonia of unknown cause to the World Health Organisation (WHO). One month later, WHO announced a Public Health Emergency

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of International Concern. Officially named COVID-19, the virus outbreak gained pandemic status on March 13th. 2020. The WHO released critical preparedness and response guidelines following major outbreaks in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Iran, and northern Italy (WHO, 2019, 2020a). The Republic of Ireland recorded its first case of COVID-19 on February 29th. 2020. By March 27th, in line with WHO guidelines, the country began enforcing temporary restrictions, including nationwide home quarantine and travel limitations (Department of Health, 2020). To contain the spread of the disease, gatherings from different households were forbidden. A two-kilometre limit (later revised to five kilometres) was allowed for exercise and essential travel. ‘Cocooning’ measures were introduced for over 70-year-olds and those in vulnerable health categories. All citizens who could work from home were to do so, and all non-essential businesses and services unable to comply with new guidelines were temporarily closed. International travel was heavily restricted.

Since its first known practice in the 14th century, a consensus in the literature finds quarantine, whether alone or in combination with other public health measures, an effective method of disease-outbreak control (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020). Its use is cited in every major disease outbreak of the last century, with the literature showing its effectiveness in limiting the spread of Ebola virus disease, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) (Tognotti, 2013; Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020). However, only since the turn of the last millennium have the adverse effects of imposed quarantine have become a topic of concern. Quarantine has been shown to carry a heavy psychological cost (Brooks et al., 2020). Post-traumatic stress (PTS), is just one of many resulting negative psychological responses. The success of quarantine relies on the efficient mitigation of such responses and the limiting of potential physical and mental harm.

The COVID-19 pandemic comes in an era of near complete physical and digital connectivity. As of 2019, global online penetration sits at 53.6%, with the average in the developed world rising to 86.9% (Clement, 2020a). Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as social media platforms, all free to use and widely available, have been cited as potentially revolutionary quarantine stress mitigators (Brooks et al., 2020; O’Brien et al., 2020). Digital technology may aid our ability to withdraw from primitive desires of togetherness, in favour of measures of caution and social distancing. While our physical connection has led to the rapid spread of disease, if utilised correctly, our digital connection may aid in mitigating the psychological cost. However, no direct empirical research has been conducted to determine theoretical validity. Furthermore, modern social media platforms are vast, their purpose, content and utility uniquely dependant on and influenced by the individual user (Pantic, 2014; O’Reilly et al., 2018).

An understanding of why and how we use technology is essential in determining the effect of social media on psychological and emotional quarantine responses. To fill the research gaps described above, this study examines the relationship between psychological stress and social media use, accounting for various usage motivators. The next section presents the theoretical background of the study. The following subsection presents the research methodology used in this study, in the form of research hypotheses, data collection, and analysis methods. This is followed by a discussion on the findings in relation to extant literature. The implications of findings are noted in the form of solutions and recommendations. The penultimate section notes the limitations of the study and outlines future research opportunities, followed by a conclusion.

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