

Social media addiction : a secret pandemic

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Abstract

Social networks over the time have evolved into a worldwide trend which is evident by the projections that estimate that there will be approximately 4.4 billion users of such platforms in 2025, an increase from 3.6 billion users in 2020. Even the average social network usage on a daily basis has reached 145 minutes per day for internet users globally. India has also a vast number of social media users. In recent times, researchers have described the overuse of social media as an addictive behaviour. Although, social media use was already increasing worldwide, but the current pandemic has made people to use it more frequently and in new ways to connect with others. Social media addiction has already been recognised as a major problem by many researchers but, this pandemic has worsened this problem amongst social media users across all age groups.

Keywords : *Social media, Social media addiction, COVID 19, pandemic*

Human beings are bounded by social attachments and interactions which in the contemporary era has been revolutionised by the social media applications.^{1,2} Social networks over the time have evolved into a worldwide trend which is evident by the projections that estimate that there will be approximately 4.4 billion users of such platforms in 2025, an increase from 3.6 billion users in 2020. Even the average social network usage on a daily basis has reached 145 minutes per day for internet users globally. This increase could be attributed to the affordability, accessibility and popularization of mobile technologies and mobile internet.³ India has also a vast number of social media users with about 300 million Facebook users in 2020 and the maximum number of mobile application (TikTok and WhatsApp) downloads worldwide in the same year. Moreover, an average Indian internet user expends more than three hours every day on social media.⁴ In recent times, researchers have described the overuse of social media as an addictive behaviour, i.e. when individuals expend considerable time duration on such networks which makes them overly dependent on them for their entertainment, interactivity and expression.^{5,6,7} The excessive social media use is detrimental for our mental wellbeing as it interferes with our sleep and leads to petulance, stress, unease, depression, lower levels of self-esteem and less attentiveness.⁵ Although, social media use was already increasing worldwide, but the current pandemic has made people to use it more frequently and in new ways to connect with others. Social media addiction has already been recognised as a major problem by many researchers,⁵ but, this pandemic has worsened this problem amongst social media users across all age groups.⁶

Despite the above facts, social media has been described as a life-saver in the pandemic as it allowed people to remain updated with information on health and also served as a source of entertainment. In contrast to the conventional media, social networks have played an optimistic role in information dissemination by providing health advice, psychological help and facilitating connectivity throughout Covid-19 pandemic.⁸ Social media has also allowed government to observe people's attitude, perceptions and emotions concerning the pandemic.⁹ Moreover, social networks are also being employed for work and academic purposes during the current predicament. Social media has also facilitated support for mental well being by providing resources to those needed.¹⁰ Healthcare personnel and scientists have also used social media to tackle this pandemic.¹⁰ However, the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have resulted in excess social media use that is quintessentially a contemplative of a community reaction worldwide¹⁰. Social distancing in this pandemic has resulted into over-involvement on social networks that has developed into a 'psychological necessity' thus, enabling individuals to address their needs for interaction and coping¹⁰. The continuous use of social media for checking the facts on this pandemic has worsened the social media addiction. Research data also shows that people have resorted to use of social networks that is not even necessary¹¹. In India, people who used social media more frequently during the Covid-19 were more susceptible to negative emotions⁵. 87% of Indians also reported an increase of 75% time spent on social networks like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook¹⁰.

Despite its positive role in the current crisis, some researchers have further revealed that social media exposure during the pandemic has also led to more stress amongst the users¹². Social media usage also creates a feeling of seclusion and a strange fear of missing out on some events or information, and it separates an individual from social life and real-world. During Covid-19, it has even more negative consequences in the form of over-dependence as people turn to it for information source. Covid-19 has also led to stress amongst people and stress is also believed to be a key predictor of social media addiction¹³. A recent study in China found out those individuals who frequently used social media during COVID-19 reported higher levels of depression and unease¹⁴. Similarly, others studies have also suggested that coronavirus anxiety was found to be associated with the social media addiction^{14,15}.

However, it is still debatable whether obsessive social media usage in this pandemic is only a phase indicating a coping strategy or a concern about addictive usage with health repercussions. Thus, in the prevailing pandemic it is important to discern between user's addiction and exceedingly implicated behaviour towards social networks¹⁶. Irrespective of the situation, it requires a lot of self-introspection on the part of social media users. If social media users are using such networks to evade their personal issues or its usage is ever increasing or impairs their efficiency or the unavailability of such networks makes them restive or aggravated, they need to think about reducing its usage. Because, it is quite possible to overcome social media addiction as indicated by some recent studies.

Social media use has been considered as addictive owing to its emotional, neurobiological

and collective origin. The ongoing crisis brought by COVID-19 is expected to further augment the possibility of social media addiction behaviour, given that citizens use such platforms for communications in the wake of restricted face-to-face contact (Zhao & Zhou, 2021). The increasingly irresponsible use of social media which has been on the rise during this pandemic has affected the people's thinking and behaviour. This situation has made it indispensable to address this phenomenon. This also requires answering some important questions concerning what does excess social media use mean for the foreseeable future and whether people will rely more on social media after lockdown brought by this pandemic.

To begin with, social media users need to become self-aware about the time they spend on social media platforms and they need to considerably reduce their time on such networks. It may become difficult in the beginning but, it can become a routine with time. One can focus more on physical activities during free time to reduce dependence on social networks. Social media users can also combat addiction by disabling notifications on some of the applications. They can also try to access social networks directly from the browser instead of relying on applications. One can also avoid using social media during the early part of the day and indulge in more productive things. One can also set limits about the time spent on such networks. At the same time another query which needs answering is whether relying on social media may help us to tackle the anxiety brought by this pandemic. But, our civilization needs to understand there are two alternate paths concerning this dependence on social media. Either, our society could further develop obsession for such platform. The other option could be the realization that this pandemic has brought. People have come to appreciate the significance of person-to-person contacts in the face of physical restrictions during this pandemic. Hopefully, when this lockdown is over, people would restrict their dependence on social media and focus on relations with people, kin and friends.

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