

Too much social media?

A new study links excessive social media use to depression during pandemic.

By BETHANY AO

EXCESSIVE social media use during the pandemic is a predictor of symptoms of depression and secondary trauma, a new study by researchers at Pennsylvania State University and Jinan University in Guangzhou, China, suggests.

The study, published last month in *Computers In Human Behavior*, surveyed 320 participants living in Wuhan about how they accessed and shared health

information with friends, family members, and colleagues over WeChat, China's most popular social media app. They also used a stress scale to measure anxiety and

depression by asking participants to rate statements such as "I felt that life was meaningless" and "I had disturbing dreams about the coronavirus epidemic".

Bu Zhong, a journalism professor at Penn State and a coauthor of the study, said that the team began looking into the effects of social media use on people's mental health right after Wuhan was locked down to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

"We didn't expect that this would become a global pandemic," he said. "We were just thinking that we could reveal some invisible harms caused by the outbreak. In China's situation, local media was not reporting on Covid-19. If you just read the local newspaper and watched television, you didn't get information about the virus. This made people extremely stressed, and they began relying overwhelmingly on social media."

Previous research has shown that more people are relying on social media to find and share health information during times of crisis. The Harris Poll found that between late March and early May, 46% to 51% of American adults reported using social media more often than before the pandemic.

The new study found that more than half of participants, none of whom reported any traumatic or depressive disorders before the pandemic, experienced some level of depression. Nearly 20% of participants reported experiencing a moderate to

severe level of depression, and slightly more than 20% reported moderate to severe levels of secondary trauma, which can occur when people hear about the traumatic experiences of others. Based on the researchers' model, excessive use of social media was linked with more severe levels of depression and secondary trauma.

At the same time, Zhong said that it's important to understand how all types of social media, including platforms like Facebook and Twitter, can help people during a health crisis.

"I think when disasters find us, we tend to go to our social networks more to get help and reach out," he said. "It's human nature. We don't want people to think social media is bad. We just want them to know there is a balance, and when you go over the threshold, like checking every five or 10 minutes, it can bring even more stress to yourself."

Researchers said that it was possible that people who consumed more health information on WeChat attached excessive importance to the content, experiencing more depression and secondary trauma than those who used the platform less. In response, they recommend social media breaks during a stressful health crisis like the pandemic.

"We should not blame social media," Zhong said. "We should just pay attention to how we are using it." — The Philadelphia Inquirer/Tribune News Service

