


How do social media influence mental health?

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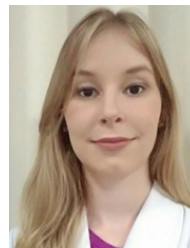
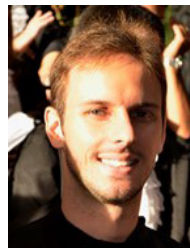
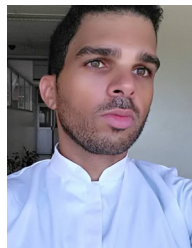
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Mental and behavioral health problems are characterized by changes in thinking, behavior or mood associated with distress or deterioration in overall psychic functioning. These problems are due to biological aspects associated with cultural factors and greatly influenced by society, and may be intensified by an individual's predisposition⁽¹⁾. Mental disorders—especially anxiety and depression—are one of the main causes of morbidity in today's society, compromising the individual's daily activities, especially social relationships. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), at least 350 million people worldwide live with depression⁽²⁾. The Brazilian National Health Survey 2013 showed a prevalence of depression in 7.6% (95%CI 1.2–8.1) of the Brazilian adult population⁽³⁾. Such numbers have made mental health a public health priority.

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The use of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is a relatively recent habit, so the effects of this new form of social interaction on different populations is still unknown. The increase in time spent using social networks is related to the feeling of isolation from the real world, which may contribute to the development of mental disorders⁽⁴⁾. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 70% of the Brazilian population has access to the internet⁽⁵⁾. In addition, Brazil is the second country where people spend most of their daily time on the network, being online for an average of 9 hours and 29 minutes per day, with 40% of this time (3 hours and 34 minutes) used in social media⁽⁶⁾.

The type of content published and consumed by users is even more impactful on mental health. Many publications are known to reinforce narcissism, living standards, consumption and status, so they have been contributing to the increased prevalence of various psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾.

In addition, the user also comes across the *fake news*, defined as fabricated information that mimics the shape of real news media but not its process or organizational intent⁽⁹⁾. *Fake news* impacts the mental health of social network user, as it is designed to elicit a strong emotional response from the reader that enhances the possibility of sharing information, causing anger, fear, anxiety and sadness. Recognizing news as *fake* can also provoke anger and frustration, especially when the user begins to feel helpless when noticing frequent attempts to manipulate public opinion through fake news⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾.

It is also worth mentioning the exposure of individuals to *cyberbullying*, a practice that has multiplied in social media. Anonymity and lack of privacy and security contribute to the spread of violence, which affects individual's mental health⁽¹²⁾.

In an attempt to minimize potential impacts on their users' mental health, some of the largest social media platform maintainers have struggled to create barriers and strategies to prevent mental health problems. An example is Instagram, which removed the preview of the number of likes in photos to reduce "competition" and to value the publication of materials with positive content. Additionally, when a user searches for the anxiety or depression *hashtags*, the app displays a message offering help and directing this user to a network that provides free and confidential emotional support. Facebook has been leveraging efforts to stop and raise awareness about sharing *fake news*.

Companies and influencers also need to contribute to reducing this issue by using social media as tools for producing content that truly adds value, disseminates quality information and brings people closer together. Similarly, social media users should be concerned with the topic and—in a self-care strategy—filter the content to which they are exposed, prioritizing those that add something to them and not trigger harmful feelings. Thus, it is noteworthy that both the consumption and the production of materials must be done with caution.

When we talk about the dissemination of reliable and quality content and the fight against *fake news*, we highlight the contribution of research groups from scientific institutions. The use of social media by researchers spreads the communication about science and current affairs to the digital universe in an appropriate language, which facilitates the access and understanding of news by society as a whole⁽¹³⁾. In 2017, the Research Center for Pharmaceutical Assistance and Clinical Pharmacy of the University of São Paulo (CPAFF-USP – *Centro de Pesquisa em Assistência Farmacêutica e Farmácia Clínica*) created an information network that complements the use of different social media (Instagram, Facebook and YouTube) to publicize and popularize the science beyond the borders of the academic world⁽¹⁴⁾.

Mental health problems are increasingly common concerns in society, in part because of the misuse of the internet and social media (in terms of frequency and content consumed). Thus, many strategies can be adopted to improve this situation, one of them being the intensive participation of institutions and research groups in social media through the dissemination of quality content that promotes social welfare.

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