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Misinformation Society

Now more than ever, our society is addicted to social media after being thrust into isolation with devices as a portal to the rest of the world. Even prior to the pandemic, social media was a source of provocative research, according to Kelly Spanier, Nebraska Medicine Psychology Department. Researchers are asking how social media consumption and addiction play a role in mental and physical health.

What have they learned? First, Spanier reports that social media is rife with misinformation. Misinformation includes unverifiable or false information, conspiracy theories, and rumors. In a study of 87 countries, United States ranked 2nd highest in the rate of social media misinformation incidents by a significant margin. This misinformation can lead to drastic individual and public health implications as it is likely to be shared, liked, and disseminated as factual.

Second, the frequency and duration of time Americans spend consuming media have implications for mental health. Individuals who spend an excess of 2.5 hours a day or check into social media 7+ times a day are far more likely to express negative mental health symptoms than people who mainly follow mass media. It is no coincidence that this is tied to the significantly larger occurrence of misinformation on social media sites.

Spanier offers advice to consider along with the warning of misinformation:

- Think critically about where information is heard or seen – physical and mental health may depend on it. Mental health researchers suggest using “psychological inoculation”, just as one uses a vaccine. This involves “pre-bunking”, or preemptively warning and exposing ourselves to weakened doses of conspiracy and misinformation before we even come across it. We can start to prepare ourselves to recognize common themes that are not verifiable.
- Check against reputable sources and know where information originates. For instance, utilize the World Health Organization and CDC websites for information about health.
- Limit the time spent consuming news online. Even when reading the most accurate information possible, it still contributes to anxiety and depression. Go on a media diet!
- Use social media for its original purpose – social connection.

Regarding that last tip, meaningful engagement and life satisfaction are related to positive mental health outcomes, so Spanier suggests that we do video chats with loved ones, play virtual games, look at pictures of cute babies or animals, and do something every day that brings joy and meaning.

Source: “Social Media Consumption and Inoculation Against Misinformation”. *Overview*. Olson Center for Women’s Health. Volume 26, Issue 1, January 2021.

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