

THE RISING SCOURGE OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND INFODEMIC: AN OUTCOME OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND COVID-19

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SUMMARY

COVID-19 was accompanied with the increasing broadcast of fake news, misinformation and excessive information via social media platforms. This phenomenon has been termed “infodemic”, to describe an overwhelming amount of mostly fake, false or inaccurate information which spreads rapidly and impacts negatively on achieving a solution. It would therefore be desirable to use a cautious approach which utilizes culturally sensitive and country specific measures to deal with this occurrence. We aim to raise awareness, likewise draw the attention of global scientific community on this topic of public and mental health concern and it calls for further comments on this issue.

Key words: COVID-19 – infodemic - mental health - social media - social network

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INTRODUCTION

Within a short period of its emergence, the COVID-19 virus had spread all over the globe. Being a novel virus with no prior information, it became necessary to disseminate available and evolving information to mitigate the spread of the virus. However, this was accompanied with the increasing broadcast of false news, misinformation and excessive information related to COVID-19 virus via social media platforms (Jakovljevic et al. 2020). This led to the phenomenon termed “infodemic” used to describe an overwhelming amount of mostly fake or inaccurate information usually with regards to a disease which spreads rapidly and impacts negatively on achieving a solution (World Health organization (WHO) 2020). The cyberspace and social media platforms have undeniably amplified the spread of such information to a wider proportion of people globally. Consequently, the devolution of the existent relationship between people and what is considered appropriate knowledge (Del Vicario et al. 2016). No gainsay, that there is a commensurate spread of information which accompanies events such as outbreaks, epidemics, or pandemics. Remarkable though, is the associated psychological toll these fake news, rumors, misinformation, and misleading guidelines have on individuals (Khan et al. 2020). Therefore, if success is to be achieved in combating the present and subsequent pandemics, then we must sufficiently understand and address infodemic and its

impact on mental health issues (Lazzari et al. 2020). Furthermore, there is the need to view these through public and global mental health perspective (Schuh Teixeira et al. 2020).

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING PANDEMIC

Providing information to the public on this relatively novel virus and control measures are recognized as essential tools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. However, infodemic can cause the public to act inappropriately and further jeopardize the efforts of local and international health systems and authorities at large. The World Health Organization (WHO) “Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020 stated that “we are not just fighting an epidemic, we are fighting an infodemic, associated infodemic not only causes panic among the people but prejudice against people from other countries also” (Cinelli et al. 2020). The WHO is currently working closely with social media giants like Facebook and Twitter to provide evidence-based information to their followers to curb the amount of misleading information spread on these platforms. The ability of social media to disseminate and amplify information whether true or otherwise, within a short time to nooks and corners of the globe has enabled infodemic. It appears that the

rate of spread of misleading information on social media is much faster than the coronavirus, taking into cognizance that rumors spread more swiftly and diffusely than the real information (Pulido et al. 2020). These rumors and misconceptions surrounding the current pandemic can adversely influence the public, however, mentally vulnerable individuals and those with subtle mental health issues are more susceptible to the risks of infodemic.

SPREAD OF INFODEMIC PANDEMIC

In the quest to allay fears or find answers to the uncertainties, people tend to peruse and disseminate information with no or minimal verification checks on social media platforms. At biologic levels, bombardment of neural connections in the brain with consumption of such repetitive information from many social media platforms/discussions and news channels may create and consolidate faulty memory and reversal of such memory circuits is usually difficult. False and incomplete information have been shown to create more panic and increase infodemic (Anwar et al. 2020). Existing evidence shows that infodemic especially those which spread through social media platforms and the internet increased the risk of public and global mental health issues during COVID-19 pandemic (Wu et al. 2019). Common mental health conditions observed were heightened anxiety, undue suspicions, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder and panic regarding health concerns and engaging in extreme behavior and maladaptive coping mechanisms such as increased substance use (Anjum et al. 2020). Infodemic can lead to increased fear of acquiring the infection and amplification of negative thoughts. However, the extent of these conditions may vary with the quality, monitoring, and effective communication to the public.

DEALING WITH DAILY REAL-TIME NEWS FLOW

Dealing with stress, the fears and anxiety from infodemic require appropriate management of emotions which involves regular breaks from watching, reading, and listening to news (traditional and on social media platforms), engaging in regular exercise, eating healthy and balanced foods, adequate sleep, and avoiding substance abuse (Lai et al. 2020). Timely and correct information will culminate in decreased consequences of infodemic on mental health.

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to tackle the infodemic resulting from COVID-19 and the associated mental health conditions. To counteract the emerging infodemic, the WHO launched a platform called WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN), an information tool which utilizes series of amplifiers to share tailored information with specific target groups.

The main objective of this platform is to ensure that people have access to the right information, engage in actions which enhance appropriate containment and mitigation efforts. Infodemic can be tackled by having an efficient national communication strategy. This means that the citizenry should be adequately informed of the official source of information, platforms where they can assess authentic and helpful information. For a disease like COVID-19, the public should receive daily updates through one official source, which will provide them with the latest information on the trends of the disease. Risk communication on preventive measures like proper handwashing, effective wearing of facemask, respiratory etiquette, in addition to isolation, and the current enforcement procedures are provided to the target population. Appropriate collaboration between stakeholders, especially public health experts, clinicians, academicians, and lawmakers is necessary to regain public trust and eventually to reduce the extent of infodemic.

CONCLUSIONS

In a nutshell, the COVID-19 pandemic and social media have resulted in an infodemic which places extra burden on the mental health system globally. A cautious approach which utilizes culturally sensitive, and country specific measures should be considered. This paper aims to raise awareness, likewise, draw the attention of the global scientific community to this phenomenon of public and mental health concern and it calls for further comments on this issue.

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Sheikh Shoib: study design, data collection, first draft.

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