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Research Essay

Cognitohazards: Mental Health and Social Media

A "cognitohazard" is similar to an information hazard, but it doesn't require that you learn or remember what you saw to affect you. This word comes from a public writing project called the SCP Wiki. It is a creepypasta website about anomalous objects and entities. In this website, a cognitohazard is the "ability" of one anomaly to affect, control, or otherwise manipulate a person's mind. I have included an excerpt from one of the SCP Wiki's articles for your enjoyment. This object, SCP-993, appears to be a kid's television show; as you will find out, it is not child-friendly. Caution: this quote includes extreme violence.

SCP-993

SCP-993's anomalous properties become obvious when the program is viewed.

Anyone watching aged ten years or older will immediately fall unconscious when the program begins and will remain incapacitated until the end of the program, later reporting a stabbing headache immediately before blacking out.

Children under the age of ten viewing SCP-993 later report that it teaches and advocates activities such as cannibalism, murder, torture, [DATA EXPUNGED]. These activities appear to become ingrained in the subject's mind; repeated exposure to SCP-993 can result in permanent psychotic and schizophrenic symptoms.

Episodes of SCP-993 are regularly broadcast from a currently unknown source, but since [REDACTED]/[REDACTED]/20[REDACTED], all broadcasts have been successfully intercepted using Protocol

Upsilon-Beta 3 and blocked from public viewing.

(Tanhony. SCP-993. SCP Wiki, <https://scpwiki.com/scp-993>)

This SCP Wiki article shows how a fictional cognitohazard can cause damage simply by being viewed. This essay will show that social media platforms are real-world cognitohazards, and we must protect ourselves from their negative effects.

The main threat these social media cognitohazards pose is the spread of sociogenic illnesses. This article, *Folie à Deux, Social Contagion, and Vulnerable Young Minds*, introduces what a sociogenic illness is and why they are dangerous. As the article states, in 2014, two 12-year-old girls stabbed a friend of theirs 19 times and left her in the woods to die. The girl thankfully survived, and the police captured the culprits. The attackers told police that they tried to kill their friend because Slender Man had told them to. A psychiatric evaluation revealed that one girl had schizophrenia, and the other had a case of *Folie à deux* (madness of two), the latter being a condition where two individuals share a psychotic delusion^[1]. This infectious belief is known clinically as a "sociogenic illness" or a "social contagion."

Social contagions also come in other forms, such as "TikTok Tourettes." Clinically referred to as Functional Tic-Like Behaviors (FTLBs), the symptoms of one 'infected' by TikTok tics are similar to what most people would say Tourettes look like. The proponents usually show a sudden twitch in their upper limbs, sometimes involving complex movements like sign language and possible vocalizations. However, multiple studies stated that the FTLBs demonstrated on social media are definitely not Tourettes syndrome^[2]. The differences are that FTLBs manifest within hours or days, whereas Tourettes usually take years, and FTLBs involve high-severity vocal & motor tic-like behavior^[3]. As the studies continue to say, TikTok Tourettes is an example of a mass sociogenic illness.

What causes these sociogenic illnesses, and how are they spread? One study that explored these FTLBs had this to say, "Many presenting to psychiatric clinics have also noted they have seen popular videos on Tourette's syndrome and have since started sharing the same tics" (Haltigan et al., 2023, p. 2). Another study focused on an outbreak

of these FTLBs in Germany explains that for a mass sociogenic illness to occur, an "index case" is required, which is essentially a patient zero. In this study, the index case was a YouTuber diagnosed with Tourettes syndrome and published videos about living with Tourettes. The people who were affected by the sociogenic illness would then mimic his tics and spread it to others^[4]. The article about the two girls lists nine underlying factors that could make a person vulnerable to social contagions. Of those nine, these five can be attributed to social media use:

1. Generally low self-esteem and low emotional intelligence
2. Tendencies toward dissociative states
3. Poor coping skills
4. Idiosyncratic or cult-like family dynamics
5. Severe and debilitating reactions to stress

Several studies have explored the relationship between Instagram usage and negative mental health indicators such as low self-esteem and depressive symptoms. These studies have consistently shown that increased time spent on Instagram correlates with heightened levels of depression and anxiety^[5]. Researchers suggest this phenomenon stems from subconscious comparisons users make between themselves and the images they see on the platform. Given the selective nature of social media sharing, where people tend to highlight only the best aspects of their lives, a distorted perception emerges. Comparing these findings with the previously mentioned symptoms suggests that social media may exacerbate an individual's risk of contracting social contagions.

Ryan McBeth's video, *Inferno of Influence*, shows the potential danger of a disease spreading through social media. As McBeth states, on February 24th, 2024, an airforce airman went to an Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, and set himself on fire in an act of self-immolation. His intent was a protest against the war between Israel and the terrorist groups in Gaza. In his video, McBeth states this airman is not the first person to burn themselves to death in protest of a perceived injustice. However, this is the first occurrence of this horrifically violent form of protest used on the opposite side of the world from the injustice. McBeth concludes the video by proposing that if people promoted the airman as a

hero, there could be a wave of people attempting to imitate him^[6]. Unfortunately, McBeth's claim already has some proof. On April 19th, a man went to a courthouse in New York and burned himself alive. Despite having no definitive political agenda, this most recent suicide does beg the question: was this man motivated by the airman's actions? There isn't a way to know for sure since this man passed away, but time will tell if this is a new sociogenic illness.

Now, we get to the critical part: protecting yourself against this real-life cognitohazard. The most effective solution is to get off all social media platforms. This method would protect you from the cognitohazard by removing the primary transmission method of sociogenic illnesses and the adverse mental health effects. However, you may have a reason that keeps you on the platform. Instead, you can leverage specific factors to make being on social media a less detrimental experience.

Let's focus on who you follow first. A study on Facebook showed that people who mainly followed others they were closely connected to boosted their self-esteem after using Facebook^[7]. The research suggested that Facebook's design encourages people to follow others they have strong connections to, and the byproduct was a less depressing user experience^[8]. Instagram, and especially TikTok, are designed without preexisting connections in mind, and the result is a greater number of depressed users^[5-1]. This pattern means that, in theory, you can have more positive experiences on social media if you follow people with whom you have a strong connection. Still, be cautious around platforms like TikTok because its design makes it incredibly easy to view strangers' content. You could also limit time spent on social media to reduce negative effects. One study in particular showed that up to 30 minutes of daily use had little to no effect on depressive symptoms, after which it steeply increased^[5-2]. If you start to see your activity spiking over an hour per day, it would be wise to cut back. You could use a feature like Screen Time on iOS to monitor or restrict your time spent on social media.

There is also a strong connection between quality of life measures and risk factors. The article that introduces *Folie à Deux* lists the factors unrelated to social media use as unstable support systems, history of abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, and intolerable socioeconomic conditions. Multiple studies also state that women are at higher risk than

men of contracting a sociogenic illness. It is essential to mention these details so that you can gauge your risk and how careful you should be. Another benefit to acknowledging these miscellaneous risk items is realizing that basic quality-of-life adjustments can nullify most of them.

Good posture has multiple psychological and physiological benefits. According to *12 Rules for Life*, maintaining good posture will subconsciously make you more confident^[9]. It also makes breathing easier, reducing carbon dioxide buildup and reducing stress. Dr. Andrew Huberman, a professor at Stanford School of Medicine, brings another point to the table. When discussing healthy sleep patterns, he presents light viewing as a vital part of setting one's circadian rhythm and how proper exposure to light has many benefits. The important part for now is that when you view screens close to when you usually go to sleep, you interrupt the rhythm and lose all of those benefits^[10]. Looking at your phone before bed severely damages your energy, focus, and many other things. The result is a greater risk of contracting sociogenic illnesses, and actual diseases, for that matter.

The 'era of AI' has come upon us rapidly, and we require much more time to discover the nuances of this new world. Cognitohazards will become more common as AI is integrated into numerous industries. Including its highly probable use in warfare if it isn't already^[11]. However, by discussing the possible factors that decide our risk of contracting a sociogenic illness, we can find protocols to help protect ourselves. Limiting viewing time, selecting who we follow, and taking care of ourselves physically and mentally are all factors in keeping ourselves safe when interacting with Cognitohazards.

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