

# **Framing social media and web-based communities within the COVID-19 pandemic: Enduring social isolation and subsequent deconfinement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As images circulate of people, all around the world, watching their cities from their windows and balconies, a sense of solemnity emerges. The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people to seclusion in an attempt to control contagion. The social isolation deriving from the adoption of containment strategies have displaced social interaction to online settings. Social media and web-based communities assume an increasingly central role in this scenario of pandemic, with an ever-growing number of people turning to these platforms to maintain social connection, to obtain information and to keep a sense of community. This paper aims to examine and frame the role of social media and web-based communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It reviews current literature to propose a framework based on five main purposes of social media use and web-based communities: preserving physical health, promoting mental health, tending to education/business, searching and sharing information and socializing.

**KEYWORDS:** Social media, COVID-19 pandemic, web-based communities, social distancing, deconfinement.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social media are not only an integral part of daily routine, but they are equally being deployed in scenarios of emergency and crisis. Early reports of such use date back to 2001 to the 9/11 attacks, where both individuals and organizations used social media for providing and gathering information (Reuter and Kaufhold, 2018). Social media serve many purposes, they can be used for entertainment, information and for establishing connection. The content on social media is a depiction of what is on the mind of its users and currently this means the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (Wiederhold, 2020). Social media and web-based communities have been at the heart of the current COVID-19 pandemic since its very beginning. As people everywhere in the world are remaining in their homes to minimize infection, social media and online communities become manifestly more important as networks of support at many levels and as tools for socialization.

The COVID-19 pandemic is requiring people to adopt a series of behaviors in order to prevent contagion. Besides the recommendations for hand and respiratory hygiene, people are being instructed to keep a safe distance from each other and remain at their homes (Markowitz, 2020). When quarantine and social distancing are the most effective tools, at the moment, to decelerate COVID-19's spread, social media can play an important role in assisting the required mobilization of people, respecting the quarantine procedures, minimizing alarm and insecurity, and improving the individuals' trust in the measures put forward by public health institutions. Social media can equally be used to inform people about the importance of quarantine, offer practical recommendations, support people's mental health, minimize the restraints of social distancing, and to express solidarity to those in isolation (Depoux et al., 2020). A remarkable peculiarity of this pandemic is "the coincidence of virology and virality: not only did the virus itself spread very rapidly, but so did the information – and misinformation – about the outbreak, and thus the panic that it created among the public." (Depoux et al., 2020).

Several sectors of society, such as education, business, entertainment and health have now been in part displaced to online settings as a consequence of the different strategies for social isolation that being put in practice around the world (Yan, 2020). This paper intends to examine the role of social media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It firstly explores the general use of social media during the mandatory periods of social seclusion imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the expected subsequent deconfinement, by reviewing pertinent literature. Secondly, it proposes a framework to provide a structure to abovementioned use. Finally, it describes each of the elements of the framework and provides examples of valuable resources that people can use to continue their daily routines on social media, providing the means to support a variety of needs.

## **2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEB-BASED COMMUNITIES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The adoption of social distancing as a strategy to control the spread of COVID-19 is causing according to Yan (2020) an "unprecedented shift". This shift to online settings is causing common individuals to swiftly adopt emerging digital technologies. This unprecedented shift refers to the fact that the day-to-day reality of human interaction is now happening predominantly online: "The enforced social isolation in the physical world significantly increase humans' social interaction in the cyber world" (p.110). (Yan, 2020). During crises, individuals are known to resort to several forms of communication for three main purposes: learning, reducing uncertainty, and to obtain a sense of control over the events. Social media offer a panoply of possibilities for engagement, providing information and encouraging people in a crisis scenario (Lin et al., 2016). There are some reports of the substantial increase of social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, that register a 50% increase of messaging in Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp and a 23% increase on Twitter's daily users (Holmes, 2020, Apr 24). Abd-Alrazaq et al. (2020) analyzed 167,073 tweets and identified four main themes: the origin of COVID-19, which highlighted China and the outbreak; its source, attributed to eating meat or the development of a bioweapon; the effect it is having on people and countries, the deaths, feelings of fear and stress, travel restrictions, economic losses, panic buying and rising racism; and the means to reduce the contagion, which highlighted wearing masks and quarantine.

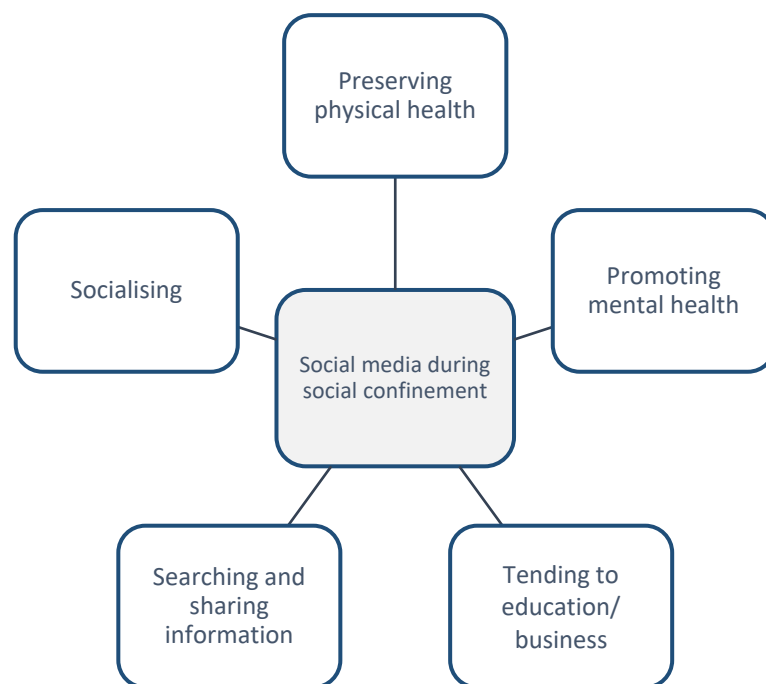
In their systematic review of social media in situations of emergencies highlighted four different usage patterns. The first pattern relates to communication among citizens for self-coordination and assistance. Secondly, the communication occurs from the authorities to the citizens mainly through crisis communication. Thirdly, it occurs from citizens to authorities via analytics (big data/social media) and crowdsourcing. Finally, the fourth

pattern concerns communication among authorities, such as inter-organizational social networks (Reuter and Kaufhold, 2018). Moreover, Lin et al. (2016) highlight best practices for the use of social media for crisis communication: complete integration of social media into the process of decision making and into the development of policies; engaging with online dialogue in an active manner; resorting to media features to offer reliable sources of information; decide with caution as to the update speed of the messages promoting an hashtag, collaborate with individuals and similar organizations.

The discourse around the imposition of distance as well as of isolation have become associated with such strict strategies that they may be regarded as unendurable and as a consequence be discarded (Long, 2020). Directives for social isolation are gradually paving the way for deconfinement in many countries around the world. The European Union, for instance, has planned for the resume of business to be phased in. Social distancing is to remain the norm and businesses are still encouraged to continue to promote teleworking. Restrictions on social contact are to remain, but social gatherings will be gradually allowed (2020). As deconfinement will happen with numerous restrictions, social media can continue to assume its central role in ensuring human connection. The preparations for terminating the mandatory lockdown include a series of impositions that will prevent life from attaining normality anytime soon.

### 3. FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Social isolation deriving from a scenario of pandemic can have a detrimental effect on people, who by protecting themselves against contagion by the virus, find themselves in confinement. After a thorough analysis of the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, this research frames the use of social media in times of social isolation and subsequent deconfinement, within five core purposes: preserving physical health, promoting mental health, tending to education/business, searching and sharing information and socializing (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Framework for social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic

### 3.1. Preserving physical health

Preserving physical health during a pandemic means firstly to stay safe from contagion and to avoid behaviors that might be conducive of transmission. In terms of health containing the virus is a primary concern. Social media can play an important role in identifying transmission chains. There are reports of the value of mapping pandemics using the social web (Lampos and Cristianini, 2010) and social networks combined with traditional data (Al-garadi et al., 2016). In addition, digital technologies, such as contact-tracing mobile applications, can assist countries' efforts to lift the COVID-19 lockdown. These applications have different methods of tracing contacts, such as registering the global positioning system (GPS) of mobile phones which become close (2 meters) of each other, or logging contact information through the use of Bluetooth. Regardless of their tracing strategy, these apps can assist health authorities to monitor infection and chains of transmission (McCall, 2020). Also in terms of health, wearable devices, such as Oura Rings, are being used to monitor different physical indicators to provide a timely identification of COVID-19 infection. (Yan, 2020).

Despite the unavoidable supremacy of preventing infection during a pandemic, it is important to continue an effective support for other unrelated health conditions. The measures for minimizing in-person contact due to COVID-19 have placed an emphasis on telemedicine and online consultations. Telemedicine is enabling health professionals to assist people with chronic diseases, provide timely diagnosis and to help the triage of people infected with the virus. The fact that only a few telemedicine systems exist is driving people to use social media tools to communicate with their medical practitioners to obtain help regarding their health concerns (Machado et al., 2020). Hence, medical professionals can use a variety of tools such as, video on Facebook Messenger or Google Hangouts, Skype and FaceTime (Calton et al.). There is also a wide variety of online health communities that individuals can resort to and benefit from the support of such as: PatientsLikeMe ([patientslikeme.com/](http://patientslikeme.com/)), HealthUnlocked ([healthunlocked.com/](http://healthunlocked.com/)), WebMD ([webmd.com/](http://webmd.com/)), MedHelp ([medhelp.org/](http://medhelp.org/)), HealthBoards ([healthboards.com/](http://healthboards.com/)),

While staying home is an important strategy for containing infection, there are unintended negative health effects due to confinement that derive from a decrease of physical activity and an increase of sedentary behaviors (Chen et al., 2020). Regular physical exercise presents several benefits in terms of health and it is even more relevant in a context of pandemic, to strengthen the immune system and minimize the detrimental impact that stress causes in immunity. In this context of social distancing and with the constrictions applied to gyms and parks, exercise can become a challenge. Nonetheless, during this period, people can resort to online exercise classes and "exergaming", which are especially valuable (Simpson and Katsanis, 2020). Social media provide users with information about exercise, they offer emotional support and appraisal and they be used for motivation to adopt exercise routines and maintain them over time (Zhou and Krishnan, 2019). In terms of specific resources, YouTube can be used to search for fitness channels, where exercise can be maintained by viewing a series of channels.<sup>1</sup>

Doctors can use social media to create videos, which is an appealing format for users and to connect with their patients. Social media also provide platforms that can be

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<sup>1</sup> Les Mills ([youtube.com/channel/UCJHUMT\\_EREEs4WV6jpmnBw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJHUMT_EREEs4WV6jpmnBw)), Roberta's Gym ([youtube.com/channel/UCDUIDJcPPOQK-3UrxEyhAQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDUIDJcPPOQK-3UrxEyhAQ)), Walk at Home by Leslie Sansone ([youtube.com/channel/UCVI6ZdslZz2Zj-34bMJFPbg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVI6ZdslZz2Zj-34bMJFPbg)), FitnessBlender ([youtube.com/user/FitnessBlender](https://www.youtube.com/user/FitnessBlender)), Yoga With Adriene ([youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene](https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene)) and Blogilates ([youtube.com/user/blogilates](https://www.youtube.com/user/blogilates))

used to create groups of patients with the same health conditions where they can exchange their experiences and support each other. Health information can equally be circulated via social media, with the necessary adaptations to be relevant for these communication channels. (Kotsenas et al., 2018). Since people are already frequently using social media, they are privileged means for communication and information dissemination that can be leveraged for healthcare. Forums, for example, are used by patients as a resource to develop online communities around health conditions, which they use to engage with other patients for debating and sharing health related experiences. These online communities help patients to gain knowledge and provide them with more control over their condition. In some cases, these online communities are a place for daily interaction (Housman, 2017).

### **3.2. Promoting mental health**

Mental health is an essential aspect of the overall health of individuals, with important effects on their welfare. In the current COVID-19 pandemic the promotion of mental health can benefit from the use of social media and web based communities. Mental health professionals underline the importance of having social support during this difficult period (Markowitz, 2020), and since significant constrictions are being applied to physical contact, people unsurprisingly resort to online environments to obtain that support. Social media can, hence, be used to foment mental health practices (Wiederhold, 2020).

In specific contexts of disasters, the mental wellbeing of people is negatively impacted. It is common for emotional issues to emerge and people can begin to adopt dysfunctional behaviors. In scenarios such as the H1N1 pandemic in 2009-2010, mental health needs to be incorporated into the wider public health approach and response (Pfefferbaum et al., 2012). In fact, many argue that, in times when people's lives are at risk and there is a threat to individuals' very survival, mental health should be placed on hold so that all energies should be concentrated on the preservation of life. What is important to remember with respect to the mental health of individuals, is that it is core to "surviving this latest pandemic and all that it entails in the short, medium, and long term, from the potential crisis in the provision of health services to helping preserve and reconstruct a post-pandemic society." (da Silva et al., 2020). The WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Use presented a series of advices that people can follow to enhance their mental welfare in a document they authored for this specific scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their recommendations highlighted the value of remaining connected with other people digitally, by means of social media, for example. (World Health Organization, 2020a).

The required social distancing and the closing of public spaces and places of leisure and business are causing social isolation (Markowitz, 2020). These necessary precautions allied with the natural fear stemming from a scenario of pandemic is exacerbating feelings of angst and insecurity and threatening people's mental health. The result of isolation and deprivation of human connection may be manifested in mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Abel and McQueen, 2020). Since the traditional practices of social interactions are a challenge in light of all the required behaviors to prevent contagion, people can use technology to keep social connection. Using the phone, FaceTime, Skype and social media are core strategies to strengthen social support and to keep a sense of connection (Markowitz, 2020).

Part of the anxiety that people are feeling about the Covid-19 pandemic relates to the volume of information that is available. Coping and minimizing anxiety is essential and social media can play an important role in this. People should continue to use their social

networks online, to communicate with their family and friends and to share valuable information to cope with feelings of anxiety. Social media platforms can also be used by individuals to remain current with the COVID-19 pandemic state of affairs, but information consumption should be moderate to prevent an alarmed frame of mind. These platforms can equally be used to unwind, to establish connections (Wiederhold, 2020).

Lwin et al. (2020) argue that governments need to address the growing concerns of society deriving from large scale confinement and the death toll. These concerns are illustrated by feelings of anger and sadness and require government agencies to combine crisis communication with public health strategies to promote public mental wellness. Neglecting the rising concern and negative feelings can cause people to distrust official authorities and believe misinformation that can pose a threat to the control of the virus. There is a wide variety of social media and online communities that can be used for mental health promotion and that adapt to the specific needs of each individual's condition.<sup>2</sup>

### **3.3. Tending to education/business**

As countries began to declare states of calamity and emergency the perspective of closing all educational institutions and all non-essential businesses people initiated a large-scale migratory movement to online settings. Educational institutions were forced to adopting e-learning practices and businesses turned to telework to safeguard their employee and to social media to connect with their customers.

The disruption of the 2019-2020 academic year has caused universities to offer their courses exclusively in online learning settings. Higher education institutions are using social media and several tools to ensure online education, such as Skype, Moodle, Facebook, Google Classroom, Zoom, YouTube (Crawford et al., 2020). Many renowned universities, such as Princeton and Harvard have transposed their courses to online settings. This shift is happening worldwide leading to what is probably the widest online education movement in history (Yan, 2020). In a scenario where universities are closed and students are learning from home, some challenges emerge especially for those courses that demand for practical classes. Medical education students face such challenges. Moszkowicz et al. (2020) advocates the use of videoconferencing via Google Hangouts, a free and easily accessible application, to provide clinical and anatomical lessons to students. The use of this application requires solely a webcam and microphone and it can be used to deliver the lessons at a defined schedule, as it happens with conventional classes.

From the perspective of teachers, the shift of teaching to online settings is forcing teachers to deploy technology to reach their students and continue to educate them. The basic technology of online teaching includes a webcam and a microphone, besides a computer with necessary software. These tools alone and an internet connection will enable a variety of possibilities. With regard to developing videos, two straightforward formats can be used, the self-explanatory voice-over-PowerPoint and talking head. Once the videos have been created they can be shared online via YouTube, for example. As an alternative to creating videos, Zoom can be used to host online live classes. With concern to promoting interaction between students and teachers and among students, discussion board can be used. The teacher and the students can post messages and respond to each other (Oranburg, 2020). Social media have been part of online education for a long time (Miranda et al., 2015, Miranda et al., 2016, Isaias et al., 2017, Isaias et al., 2019), but never at this scale. There is a comprehensive assortment of social media resources, across a variety of

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<sup>2</sup> Turn2me ([turn2me.ie/](http://turn2me.ie/)); 7Cups ([7cups.com/](http://7cups.com/)), Forums at Psych Central ([psychcentralforums.com/](http://psychcentralforums.com/)); Talkspace ([talkspace.com/](http://talkspace.com/)); Facebook Group Mental Health on The Mighty ([facebook.com/MentalHealthOnTheMighty/](https://facebook.com/MentalHealthOnTheMighty/)); Twitter account for Mental Health NIMH ([twitter.com/NIMHgov/media](https://twitter.com/NIMHgov/media)).

platforms, that both teachers and students at all education levels can use: Edublogs ([edublogs.org/](http://edublogs.org/)). Pinterest ([pinterest.com](http://pinterest.com)), Youth voices ([youthvoices.live/](http://youthvoices.live/)), Khan Academy ([youtube.com/user/khanacademy](http://youtube.com/user/khanacademy)), GroupTweet ([grouptweet.com/edu](http://grouptweet.com/edu)) and SlideShare ([slideshare.net/](http://slideshare.net/))

In face of COVID-19's threat to public health and as a consequence of governmental measures to prevent widespread infection, companies in all sectors were instructed to facilitate teleworking. Teleworking comes with many challenges, such as isolation and restricted social interaction, unlimited working hours, more work pressure and less work organization (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). School closures are putting an additional strain in telework for parents who have to work and simultaneously take care of their children, including participating in their home schooling. Moreover, this transition to working from home is happening in a context of anxiety deriving from the pandemic (Bouzirri et al., 2020). Hence, people working from home may find it difficult to be productive. Social media can assist teleworkers to become more organized and efficient with a panoply of platforms like DropBox Business ([dropbox.com/business](http://dropbox.com/business)), Trello ([trello.com/](http://trello.com/)), Planable ([planable.io/](http://planable.io/)), Slack ([slack.com/](http://slack.com/)) and Wrike ([wrike.com/](http://wrike.com/)).

Similarly, with most non-essential businesses having to close temporarily, social media are being used as tools to maintain customers engaged. Social media can be used by businesses to relate to their customers on a more personal fashion and to assure the provision of customer service in a more flexible manner (Isaías et al., 2012). A study by (Socialbakers, 2020) concerning the use of social media by brands during the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals that brands are using both Facebook and Instagram for keep their followers on these platforms updated. The posts with more interactions from users seem to be posts about strategies to fight COVID-19 or those referring to measure to support employees who have become affected. With an incommensurable number of businesses being affected by confinement, social media platforms constitute important instruments of support. Some of the resources that businesses can use include Facebook for business ([facebook.com/business](http://facebook.com/business)), YouTube advertising ([youtube.com/ads/](http://youtube.com/ads/)), Pinterest Shop ([pinterest.com/shop/boards/](http://pinterest.com/shop/boards/)) and Instagram adds stickers ([business.instagram.com/](http://business.instagram.com/)).

### **3.4. Searching and sharing information**

In times of uncertainty, searching and sharing information plays a reassuring purpose. The role of social media as instruments for news and information dissemination is more relevant for COVID-19 than it was for previous pandemics mainly because there are much more users resorting to social media and interacting online and the quality of the information circulating in these platforms raises more concern (Singh et al., 2020). Moreover, social media can be powerful instruments for disseminating information in an independent manner and without censor. A popular case of such use pertains to Dr Li Wenliang, a Chinese doctor currently deceased due to COVID-19, who became known globally for using social media to voice his concerns regarding the virus. After his statements on social media he was arrested by Chinese authorities (The Lancet, 2020).

In emergency scenarios, like a pandemic, people's response is greatly affected by the distribution of truthful information in a timely manner. Electronic communication channels in general and social media, in particular, are important tools for the publication and exchange of information in multiple formats. Social media are being use by governmental agencies and international organizations as a core element of their communication strategy. They are using Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to disseminate information, raise awareness, and clarify rumors. These platforms are equally valuable to promote dialogue among the scientific and medical communities and to engage these communities with the public. For instance, Facebook is host to a group

"PMG Covid-19 Subgroup" with circa 30,000 members where medics respond to concerns and doubts regarding the virus, via text, audio or video (O'Brien et al., 2020).

The downside of social media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is the fact that inaccurate information and conspiracies can be rapidly disseminated hindering the efforts to promote public health (The Lancet, 2020). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant dissemination of false information that has caused several myths to flourish. This false information, in the context of the current pandemic puts people's health at risk and hinders the adoption of prevention strategies. In light of this situation, Google and social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are implementing measures to minimize the dissemination of false information and guiding their users towards trustworthy sources (Pulido et al., 2020). The volume of information has been such that the World Health Organization (WHO) has classified it as an infodemic. This infodemic is characterized by an overwhelming volume of information, some of which is accurate and some of which is false, that hinders people's efforts to consult reliable sources and guidance. The WHO is responding to this exacerbated circulation of information by providing information, advice and myth busters concerning public health and COVID-19, on its website and social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest (World Health Organization, 2020b). In their analysis of nearly 3,000,000 tweets, Singh et al. (2020) concluded there were five main myths about COVID-19: comparing the virus with the flu in terms of symptoms and treatment; arguing that heat can kill the disease; home remedies such as garlic or sipping water; characterizing the virus as a bioweapon that is being purposefully spread; and defending that a vaccine already exists and it's being hidden.

While it is important to be up-to-date about COVID-19, people are advised to search for information in a moderate manner to avoid over-exposure and the consequent anxiety and stress that it can cause. Also some information is presented in a way that can cause panic and subsequent behaviors that are detrimental to the current pandemic situation, such as rushing to medical emergency services or the excessive purchase of some products such as hand sanitizer or toilet paper (O'Brien et al., 2020). Since remaining current is crucial, there are several social media that can be used for news consumption: Facebook, LinkedIn, Reddit, Twitter and Instagram. All news content on these platforms should be critically analyzed for veracity, in order to avoid perpetuating the current trend of misinformation that hinders the circulation of much needed truthful information on COVID-19 pandemic. In order to ensure reliable information, social media users can equally use these platforms to access reliable media sources such as newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The information reported by the WHO can equally be accessed via the organisation's social media presence in several platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn.

### **3.5. Socializing**

Anticipating the impact that social distancing can have is valuable for assisting people to address them. A central aspect of confinement is to maintain contact with others via social networks, telephone and social media. The use of social networks can be especially relevant for people who are living alone (Lunn et al., 2020). This pandemic is occurring in a world that is unprecedentedly connected and although "physical connectivity, by way of widespread travel, has accelerated the spread of the disease around the planet, electronic

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<sup>3</sup> The Times, ([linkedin.com/company/the-times/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-times/)), The Washington Post ([instagram.com/washington post/](https://www.instagram.com/washingtonpost/)) The Guardian ([instagram.com/guardian/](https://www.instagram.com/guardian/)) The New York Times ([facebook.com/nytimes/](https://www.facebook.com/nytimes/)); or television channels, CNN ([twitter.com/cnn](https://www.twitter.com/cnn)), CNBC ([facebook.com/cnbc](https://www.facebook.com/cnbc)), BBC ([twitter.com/bbcbreaking](https://www.twitter.com/bbcbreaking)), Fox News ([twitter.com/foxnews](https://www.twitter.com/foxnews)).



connectivity provides a tool that, if utilized responsibly, can mitigate its effects." (O'Brien et al., 2020). In this scenario of pandemic, connectivity happens by means of digital socialization, ensuring that contact is not lost and people remain bonded.

In a recent interview, a psychology expert emphasized the need to reframe the notion of social distancing and consider instead the physical aspect of it by preferring to use the term physical distancing. It is important to underline the fact that people can remain connected, despite being physically separated. The technologies that are often referred to as being responsible for fracturing social fabric, can now be seen as a solution for staying connected. Tools such as FaceTime, Zoom can be used to maintain social interaction. FaceTime can be used for cooking together or organizing a playdate between children where they can play games (Witte, 2020, March 19).

The physical distance that is required of people opposes their inborn need for social connection and the use of social media has contributed to maintaining a degree of social proximity. Social media platforms have been the stage for the exchange of photos, videos and experiences of those in quarantine and practicing social isolation. This extensive sharing is at the origin of a feeling of unity and at the same time it seems to bring some normality to the isolation and to motivate compliance. Support groups have also been created within social media websites to assist vulnerable users (O'Brien et al., 2020). Zoom, Viber, What's App, Skype, LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook are examples of communication tools with an important role in establishing connections with friends and family and to ensure a greater bond between people. The communication tools enable individuals to feel some degree of relief for the loss/limitations of physical contact. Also, social media, assist people to develop a sense of togetherness and the perception that this is a shared situation, common to whole world (Sheerman et al., 2020).

Although some of the activities that people practice in pairs or within a wider group are temporarily unavailable and are difficult to transpose to online settings, there is still a panoply of possibilities that social media offer. For instance, many museums and theatres are making their exhibitions and performances available online and in live streaming (Yan, 2020). The impossibility of physically going to a restaurant, attending a group workout class, visiting a museum, going to the theatre or attending a concert, doesn't necessarily mean that people need to refrain from benefiting from leisure collectively. People can attend the same events live and use social media to comment on their experience and thoughts as they would if they attended the event together. As an alternative to going to a restaurant, it is possible to see several chefs on Instagram sharing their cooking experiences. Similarly, in the impossibility to attend a group workout class, some studios are using social media to deliver their classes in live stream. Visiting a museum has been made possible through Google Arts and Culture, where it is possible to view collections from all over the world. In addition, several social media channels feature a variety of performances for those who prefer theatre/ballet/opera performances or to attend a concert, via livestream. The internet is abundant on choices for socialization.<sup>4</sup> As people resort to social media and web-based communities they acquire a sense of belonging. In a complex situation with grave consequences to the integrity of life, people find in these communities

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<sup>4</sup> [instagram.com/massimobottura/](https://www.instagram.com/massimobottura/); [instagram.com/food52/](https://www.instagram.com/food52/); [instagram.com/nytcooking/](https://www.instagram.com/nytcooking/); [instagram.com/rachaelray/](https://www.instagram.com/rachaelray/); [facebook.com/BlinkFitness/](https://www.facebook.com/BlinkFitness/); [instagram.com/modoyoganyc/](https://www.instagram.com/modoyoganyc/); [instagram.com/holmesplace/](https://www.instagram.com/holmesplace/); [facebook.com/planetfitness/](https://www.facebook.com/planetfitness/); [artsandculture.google.com/partner/moma-the-museum-of-modern-art/](https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/moma-the-museum-of-modern-art/); [artsandculture.google.com/partner/palace-of-versailles/](https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/palace-of-versailles/); [artsandculture.google.com/partner/solomon-r-guggenheim-museum/](https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/solomon-r-guggenheim-museum/); [artsandculture.google.com/partner/tate-britain/](https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/tate-britain/); [youtube.com/royaloperahouse/](https://www.youtube.com/royaloperahouse/); [twitter.com/MetOpera/](https://twitter.com/MetOpera/); [facebook.com/ntlive/](https://www.facebook.com/ntlive/); [twitter.com/lwtheatres/](https://twitter.com/lwtheatres/); [twitter.com/oneworldtogether/](https://twitter.com/oneworldtogether/); [instagram.com/rollingstone/](https://www.instagram.com/rollingstone/); [facebook.com/coldplay/](https://www.facebook.com/coldplay/); [youtube.com/theshowsmustgoon/](https://www.youtube.com/theshowsmustgoon/).

a sense of shared concern and a feeling that the world is connected, although physically apart, in this pandemic.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social distancing measures implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic are having an impact on all sectors of society all over the world. As people pivot towards online settings to continue their daily routines with some sense of normalcy, social media usage has risen substantially. Web-based communities are being used as a valuable resource to support social distancing. These communities not only have the potential to ensure a sense of much needed human connection among people on lockdown, but they are equally a source of vital information on the progression of the pandemic and the evolution of the safety measures being implemented. This paper proposed an elementary framework for the use of social media and web-based communities during the mandatory periods of confinement and during the expected progressive deconfinement, grounded on five main purposes: preserving physical health, promoting mental health, tending to education/business, searching and sharing information and socializing.

The preservation of physical health is especially important amidst a pandemic, and with isolation, people usually practice less exercise, become more sedentary and sometimes neglect the healthy behaviors that they would normally adopt. Social media and web-based communities provide a network of people, applications and platforms that assist people to remain healthy during lockdown. Health includes people's psychological wellbeing, which can be greatly and adversely affected during isolation scenarios. Therefore, the promotion of mental health is central and it can be significantly supported by existing online communities on social media. These communities offer people with similar conditions much needed information and social support. Social media equally provide resources for tending to education/business in a context of large-scale closure of schools and businesses, by maintaining teachers and students connected, enabling effective telework and keeping customers engaged with brands. Finally, social media have been playing a central role in searching and sharing information and for socializing, by linking people with different sources of information and entertainment and by providing the means to maintain communication among individuals anywhere in the world.

In the impossibility to participate in their communities physically, people are turning to web-based communities for connection, information and support to their new routine practices. The long established popularity of social media and web-based communities has become even more relevant as people are being forced, by the pandemic and its containment measures, to transpose their social practices to online environment. The fact that there is such a variety of platforms, applications and communities tending to the different needs of the users, translates into a widespread use. The uncertainty and distress resulting from a state of emergency is equally responsible for driving people towards web-based communities in search of some comfort and clarity. People have joined in different online groups to shed light on and make sense of this scenario of pandemic and all that it implies in terms of people's efforts towards life preservation.

The theoretical nature of this paper constitutes a limitation. Future research ventures should continue the development of this subject in an empirical manner. The development of both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments, such as questionnaires and interviews seem fundamental to obtain a deeper understanding of the usage that social media and web-based communities, in particular, can have in the context for pandemics

and large scale social isolation measures. In addition, they are a valuable method to assess if, in fact, social media and web-based communities did attain their expected potential. Finally, future research could focus on the contribution that specific web-based communities made in their corresponding sectors.

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