

**Mini review***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Elliot Benjamin*

Social Media Addiction, Cult Indoctrination, and the Coronavirus Pandemic; All in Relation to the Trump Presidency

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In this article the author discusses the interconnections between social media addiction, cult indoctrination, and the coronavirus pandemic, all in relation to the United States presidency of Donald Trump. The relationship of the Trump presidency to each of these three phenomena: social media addiction, cult indoctrination, and the coronavirus pandemic, is initially examined separately. Subsequently the author ties things together by exploring the interconnections of these three different phenomena with each other, in the context of the Trump presidency. The author concludes with his own belief about how we can avoid the most detrimental consequences of all these interconnections.

Keywords: Social media addiction; Cult indoctrination; Coronavirus pandemic; Trump presidency

Introduction

As of June, 2020, the United States is nowhere near being in control of the coronavirus pandemic, as the number of coronavirus cases and deaths have been sharply increasing in a number of states in the country since they have opened up their economies [1-3]. Every state in the country has at least partially reopened their economy in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic continuing to be a deadly threat [4]. Together with the mass demonstrations over the racial murder of George Floyd, the Trump MAGA (Make America Great Again) rallies that have now started to happen, with most people attending the rallies not practicing social distancing and modeling President Trump in not wearing masks, and the consequential very real possibility of an even worse second coronavirus surge in the fall, this is all likely to result in a significantly greater increase in both coronavirus cases and deaths compared to what we are currently living through [2,5-7].

In this article I will explore some possible interconnections between the coronavirus pandemic, social media addiction, and

cult indoctrination, all in relation to the United States presidency of Donald Trump. To examine these interconnections and relationships I will first briefly discuss the possible relationships between social media addiction and the Trump presidency, cult indoctrination and the Trump presidency, and the Coronavirus pandemic and the Trump presidency. I will then follow this up with an overall synthesis of these possible relationships to arrive at a plausible picture to at least partially explain the occurrence of much of the United States proceeding to go back to "business as normal," in spite of the facts that the United States is still in the midst of a deadly pandemic and that the opening up of the country's economy is likely to significantly increase the number of coronavirus cases and deaths.

Social Media Addiction and the Trump Presidency

In recent years a number of research studies and reports have raised serious concerns about internet addiction, and more specifically about social media addiction [8-18]. In regard to

the relationship of social media addiction to the United States presidency of Donald Trump, I initially conveyed my concerns about this relationship during Trump's first presidential campaign in 2016 [19], and this relationship has now been described as a key ingredient and tactic that Trump constantly makes use of to keep his base in his control and increase his chances of obtaining a second presidential term [20]. George Skelton, a reporter for Capitol Journal, explained the impactful effect of social media addiction on the phenomenon of Trump becoming the United States Republican presidential nominee in 2016, as follows:

It [social media] nurtures short attention spans, the craving for instant gratification and impersonal barbaric behavior. No time for serious thinking or boning up on substance. A quick stimulating hit of social recognition will suffice. . . . And no need for civility when you're not looking someone in the eye. 50% of teens "feel addicted" to mobile devices and 59% of parents agree that their kids, indeed, are addicted. They can't put [a smartphone] down. . . . What's the harm? A lack of empathy, lack of quality human relationships, an inability to pay attention. . . . Trump understands reality TV. This election is a reality TV show. Trump is addicted to tweeting. . . . In a world where everyone is addicted to cellphones, there's less reflection. This provides the ability for people like Donald Trump to bully everyone on Twitter. . . . so many voters no longer consider obnoxious behavior shameful [21].

In regard to social media addiction during the first 2 years of Trump's presidency, Steve Hassan (2019) [20] conveyed the following:

Through his barrage of daily tweets, Trump sows confusion and distorts reality, and has ultimately called into question the foundations of national institutions. . . . "Repeat your message over and over and over again. Repetition makes the heart grow fonder and fiction, if heard frequently enough, can come to sound like fact." Trump appears to have taken this advice to heart, not just in the way he states and restates fabrications and falsehoods, but also in the way he tells, over and over again, self-serving, often inaccurate versions of his own life story-stories that blur the line between myth and reality. . . . The 24/7 digital age has made us wired for manipulation-literally. . . . With the internet and 24/7 streaming of images and messages from anonymous, often ill-meaning sources, the opportunity for harm has greatly increased. The Russians who manipulated social media during the 2016 presidential elections clearly knew how to use hypnotic techniques and other methods of persuasion. Almost all politicians use persuasion techniques but, Trump has used them in a way that is both brazen and insidious. Clearly, they have been effective—he was elected president.

President Trump has apparently made masterful use of social media addiction to help him win the 2016 presidential election, and he is making every effort to utilize social media addiction to obtain a second presidential term in the 2020 election. Furthermore, Trump's tactic of bombarding millions of people with his daily tweets, utilizing extensive repetition and catchy nicknames to denigrate anyone who opposes him or who he sees as a threat, is directly related to his use of cult indoctrination techniques (see below) and is an important part of his game plan for winning the presidential election in November, 2020. It is likely that the phenomenon of social media addiction in Trump's service is significantly amplified by his skillfully employing cult indoctrination techniques to his benefit, as discussed in the next section.

Cult Indoctrination and the Trump Presidency

The phenomenon of cult indoctrination has been investigated over the past few decades by a number of authors, with an emphasis upon religious cults though also inclusive of political and philosophical cults, psychotherapy/education cults, commercial cults, and personality cults [20,22-26]. However, in regard to the association of cult indoctrination with the United States presidency of Donald Trump, this has been a recent area of investigation and concern as the mass influence of Trump appears to be taking on increasing levels of danger and destruction [11,20,27-32]. The following descriptions illustrate some of the reasons why various authors believe that the association of cult indoctrination to the Trump presidency is warranted.

Followers report that they were taught the world is a dangerous place much more strenuously than most people are taught. . . .Accordingly, Donald Trump was well-placed to gain the support of authoritarian followers as he was a large and seemingly fearless, powerful man. All he had to do was say he saw the dangers the followers felt and he would fight to protect them. . . . Their brains shut down rather than accept anything that challenges what they have internalized. . . . Trump tells them what they want to hear—that they're right—and in return they accept everything that he and those who repeat his messaging tell them [32].

Like other authoritarian cultural movements Trumpism promises a national-cultural transformation, psychological uplift, group superiority, personal salvation, and a sense of membership and belonging in an exclusive community for its members and other supporters. . . . Like any cult leader, Trump demands complete loyalty and creates an alternate reality for his followers. His followers exhibit a deep, mindless, uncritical, loyal, emotional attachment to him. His pronouncements generate hostility toward anyone Trump brands "the enemy," and he consistently provokes his supporters toward violence [30].

It is not unusual to hear that the base of Trump supporters displays cult-like activity in their adoring dedication to

Trump, as they continue to ignore the enormous and continuous amount of ethically and legally disturbing accounts of Trump's behavior. This includes Trump's alleged numerous sexual affairs punctuated by his paying off a porn star and Playboy centerfold to keep them silent, ripping immigrant children from their parents and using teargas against immigrant babies, believing Putin over the United States Intelligence reports in regard to Russia tampering with our election, and the list goes on and on [27].

He used all the influence techniques in his arsenal—inflaming resentments and anger, drumming up fear, exaggerating his accomplishments, insulting and demonizing the “other”.... White supremacist and nationalistic thinking has existed for centuries in the United States but Trump's words and deeds—his America First sloganeering; his apparent excusing of, or failure to acknowledge, the violence; his racist remarks; his own bullying—have given it a legitimacy that hadn't existed before. . . . Trump would both soothe and incite his audience's fears with his repetition of the word “siege”—it's all part of his influence formula: repetition, us versus them, and fearmongering [20].

The relationship of the Trump presidency to cult indoctrination is indeed alarming, even more so as it is coupled with the phenomenon of social media addiction. However, it is especially important to also address the relationship of the Trump presidency to what is destroying the lives of numerous people all over the world, which is the coronavirus pandemic.

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Trump Presidency

Over the past few months many authors have conveyed very disturbing reports regarding the relationship of the Trump presidency to the coronavirus pandemic, related to the various actions and non-actions of President Trump that have apparently resulted in thousands of coronavirus cases and deaths that could have been prevented [5,33-42]. The following excerpts from two of my own articles illustrate the crux of these concerns:

Trump was not prepared for the Coronavirus crisis, due to his shutting down crucial disease research activities, not taking the advice of medical experts, minimizing the expected growth of the pandemic, and rejecting the offer of World Health Organization coronavirus tests. . . . Trump is now promoting his success as measured by hopefully “only” between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans dead [at the time of this writing there have been over 130,000 United States coronavirus deaths], as opposed to 2 million, whereas the reality is that many Americans have died and many more will die because of Trump's negligence in dealing with the pandemic to begin with [19].

It is likely that there will be a second big wave of coronavirus infections this coming fall or winter, and that the virus will keep spreading at least for another 18 months to 2 years, until herd immunity develops to a sufficient extent by infecting 60 to 70 percent of the world's population. . . . Now put this together with a number of the states in the United States currently starting their process of “opening up for business” while their number of coronavirus cases and deaths have not been decreasing. . . . Donald Trump. . . encouraged civilians insurrections by Americans against their governor's stay-at-home orders. . . . The devastation that I am afraid is going to accelerate from Trump's actions and non-actions is very palpable, as the Trump administration recently rejected the Center for Disease Control guidance on reopening the United States amidst the coronavirus crisis. . . . And after Trump's infamous “disinfectant” ingestion suggestion to treat the coronavirus, a number of states reported an increase in calls to poison control centers [28].

At the time of this writing, June 2020, a number of states in the United States are seeing a recent surge of new coronavirus cases:

Inside the U.S, states that were quick to shrug off social distancing guidelines—and those that never really implemented them in the first place—are seeing a surge of new cases. More than a dozen states have reported their peak number of cases, not in March or April, but in the last week. And in some states, like Arizona and Texas, the growing number of cases is leading to a surge in hospitalizations that is threatening to crack apart health care systems just when many people were beginning to relax [3].

However, President Trump has resumed his MAGA rallies to campaign for his second presidential term, which is likely to result in a devastating further increase in coronavirus cases and deaths:

The rallies are returning before COVID-19 has left the building. . . . He's planning to use the events to drive home what is expected to be a major theme of his campaign: that he is the leader of the country's reopening and economic rebound. . . . Of course, this is a bad idea for a lot of reasons—not least of which is the continued prevalence and virulence of the novel coronavirus. . . . The MAGA crowd almost certainly won't be social distancing or wearing masks. . . . Trump thinks masks are for losers and nerds, and Trump's fans think whatever Trump thinks. . . . The coronavirus hasn't disappeared, after all. The only thing that's really changed is our focus on it. And again, Trump is showing that his desperate need to be acknowledged and to win reelection supersedes the health and very lives of his own followers [7].

The relationship of the Trump presidency to the coronavirus pandemic is deeply disturbing, to say the least. And in the following section I will tie the threads of social media addiction, cult indoctrination, and the coronavirus pandemic together in the context of the Trump presidency, to gain a wider perspective on what we are currently witnessing regarding the United States opening up for business in spite of the continued deadly threat of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Interconnections between Social Media Addiction, Cult Indoctrination, and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Relation to the Presidency of Donald Trump

Social media addiction, cult indoctrination, and the coronavirus pandemic have interconnections with each other in relation to the Trump presidency, as I will now describe utilizing the work of Steve Hassan (2019) [20].

Social Media Addiction and Cult Indoctrination in Relation to the Trump Presidency

To begin with, people who are addicted to social media may be particularly susceptible to unethical manipulation by cult leaders:

They [cult leaders] understand that human beings are social creatures who, at some level, are wired to follow leaders and powerful members of their group. They know that they can confuse people with false information and lies, and then sow doubt by claiming that they never said what they said in the first place. . . . People can also be recruited and indoctrinated online [20].

Hassan is describing the phenomenon of “gaslighting” here, and gaslighting is likely to be particularly effective when people are addicted to social media, as it makes it easier for cult leaders to exert enormous damaging influence on multitudes of people. Hassan (2019) [20] has also described some of the particular ways that cults utilize social media to promote their agenda and indoctrinate people into their group, and he includes in his description what he views as the “cult of Trump”:

Cults flood their members with cult-generated information and propaganda—videos and podcasts distributed by YouTube and social media. They take “outsider” statements out of context or misquote them. Of course, Trump could not have done this without the propaganda machine of right-wing TV shows like Fox and Breitbart News, as well as right-wing talk radio.

Hassan utilized the work of Pratkanis and Aronson (1991) in regard to “how to become a cult leader” that illustrates the following cult leader tactic, which I believe is particularly susceptible to social media addiction and is flagrantly representative of the continuous tactics of Donald Trump: “Prevent members from thinking undesirable thoughts by continually distracting them (with outrageous tweets or by manufacturing your own fake news)” [20].

Using social media to persuade people is effectively and systematically practiced by Trump:

Changing consists of creating a new personal identity—a new set of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions—often through the use of role models. Indoctrination of this new identity takes place both formally—through meetings, seminars, and rituals (or at Trump rallies)—and informally—by spending time with members, recruiting, studying, and self-indoctrination through the internet (watching Trump videos, communicating on social media with Trump supporters) [20].

This kind of cult influence is especially effective in our current technological age, as critical thinking is being seriously undermined:

With TV shows streaming at all hours and with internet access at our fingertips; with our smartphones practically an extension of our arms, we are being bombarded and manipulated, often wittingly, by people and organizations who want to influence how we think, feel—and buy. . . . Consider the ease with which Facebook, Google, Apple, Amazon, and other technology companies are affecting our behaviors not just as a society but at a very personal level: people are addicted to their devices. . . . The average American spends eleven hours a day looking at screens. . . . Facebook addiction is a well-studied phenomenon. . . . “the knowledge economy is systematically undervaluing uninterrupted concentration and overvaluing the convenience and flexibility offered by new technologies. . . [If people are bombarded] with email and meeting invitations, their cognitive capacity will be significantly impeded.” [20].

Hassan (2019) [20] summed up the very powerful and alarming way that social media is being used by cults, as follows:

I cannot overstate the impact of the digital world on the whole area of undue influence and mind control. People no longer need to be physically isolated to be indoctrinated by destructive cults. Digital technology has provided access and a powerful set of tools for destructive groups and individuals to indoctrinate, control, and monitor believer’s day and night. When cult members go home for family visits, they are often receiving multiple texts every hour to keep them connected and faithful.

Social Media Addiction and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Relation to the Trump Presidency

In regard to the coronavirus pandemic, an important question to ask is the following: Why is it that people are choosing to act in ways that are threatening their very existence? As stated in the Introduction, the number of coronavirus cases and deaths have been sharply increasing in several states in the United

States since they have opened up their economies, and together with the mass demonstrations over the racial murder of George Floyd, the Trump MAGA presidential rallies that have now begun, and the consequential very real possibility of an even worse second coronavirus surge in the fall, this is all likely to result in a significantly greater increase in both coronavirus cases and deaths compared to what we are currently living through. Of course one primary answer to this question involves the reality of the stringent economic conditions in which many people are forced to choose between their safety as well as the safety of others they come into contact with, vs. their economic survival needs in terms of deciding to go back to work [43]. However, explore an additional answer to this question, it may be instructive to examine how social media addiction interfaced with the anti-lockdown protests that were instrumental in the occurrence of every state in the United States partially reopening their economy in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic continuing to be a deadly threat [4,34,35]. In this regard, it appears that the impact of the anti-lockdown protesters was significantly increased by external hostile forces in terms of “bots” in a similar way to the undermining by Russian bots of the 2016 United States presidential election [44,45].

There were targeted ads that leveraged online tools to plant false stories directly into critical districts, and direct intrusion into voter databases that did. . . who knows what. But one key component of the 2016 campaign was a vast army of “bot” accounts, managed by a team of Russian military hackers. That effort filled Twitter, Facebook, and other sites—and in the process became some of the most influential accounts in social media. Now it appears that it’s happened again. A new study shows that when it comes to forcing workers to go back into offices, stores, and factories, almost half the online voices shouting for the “reopening of America” were, and are, bot accounts. Of the accounts that have tweeted most on this topic, more than half are bots. Of the most influential, almost all are bots. And behind the bots. . . is someone still unknown . . . The bots are both originating and repeating more than 100 different categories of false stories about COVID-19, the pandemic, and the steps needed to fight the disease. These conspiracy theories are designed to both increase anger and generate distrust of medical authorities. They’ve also played a role in driving in-person protests in cities across the country. . . The scale of this effort is huge, the messages. . . are coordinated, and the impact has already been felt nationwide. . . “It looks like it’s a propaganda machine, and it definitely matches the Russian and Chinese playbooks.” . . . It is a plot; one that has been eagerly supported by a network of conservative organizations who definitely learned a lesson from 2016. What they learned is that America is hugely vulnerable to

a coordinated propaganda campaign, that a small number [of] gun-waving protesters can be made to seem like a mass movement, and that they can get their way even if a majority of Americans disagree [45].

This very disturbing scenario of external hostile forces using social media to significantly increase the impact of anti-lockdown protestations goes hand-in-hand with the very real susceptibility of multitudes of people to social media addiction, as discussed above. However, in addition to the primary economic survival answer, this is just a glimpse into one additional partial answer to the question of how people could have been persuaded to take actions in the midst of the coronavirus deadly destruction that were antithetical to their very survival. For another glimpse into an additional partial answer to this question, it is also instructive to examine the relationship of the coronavirus pandemic to cult indoctrination, once again in relation to the presidency of Donald Trump.

Cult Indoctrination and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Relation to the Trump Presidency

Before embarking on a preliminary exploration of the relationship of cult indoctrination to the coronavirus pandemic in relation to the Trump presidency, it is important to acknowledge the enormous challenge and difficulty for people to maintain safety precautions as the coronavirus continues to be a dangerous threat after 3 months, which has been described in the context of “caution fatigue”:

You were likely vigilant at the pandemic’s outset, consistently keeping up with ways to ensure you didn’t get infected with the coronavirus or infect others. The threat was new and urgent to your brain. And driven by the human instinct for self-preservation, fresh fear motivated you to eagerly adhere to recommended safety precautions. Fast-forward three months, and that sense of immediacy may have faded. Caution fatigue “occurs when people show low motivation or energy to comply with safety guidelines. . . It’s reflected when we become impatient with warnings, or we don’t believe the warnings to be real or relevant, or we de-emphasize the actual risk. . . . And doing that, we then bend rules or stop safety behavior like washing hands, wearing masks and social [46].

However, I believe that the very real and understandable human phenomenon of caution fatigue has been tremendously amplified by President Trump’s use of cult indoctrination techniques in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic devastation. As described by many of the authors cited above, President Trump continuously bombards the American public with daily tweets containing false information and downright lies in regard to the severity of the coronavirus pandemic, as his priority is getting reelected, no matter what the consequences. With this goal in mind, he utilizes

a vast array of techniques straight out of the cult indoctrination playbook, inclusive of extensive gaslighting and denigrating anyone who disagrees with him, in particular governors who did not think that it was justified to open up their states based upon the number of coronavirus cases and deaths they were seeing in their states [47,48]. However, as described above, all states have now opened up their economies at least partially, spurred on by the anti-lockdown demonstrations, the effective cult indoctrination techniques that Trump has utilized, and also by the very real and understandable phenomenon of caution fatigue. Nevertheless, the reality of multitudes of people getting sick and dying from the coronavirus is going against Trump, as his Democratic contender in the November, 2020 election, former Vice President Joe Biden, is significantly ahead of Trump in virtually all polls, including the battleground states polls [49,50]. I think that this is much of the reason why Trump is moving forward with his presidential rallies in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic surging in many states, being willing to jeopardize the lives of numerous Americans for his goal of getting reelected.

Conclusion

As I have offered a glimpse into in this article, there are a number of very challenging obstacles that must be overcome in order to avoid the worst of the possible devastating future scenarios that can arise from the current coronavirus pandemic. I have described these obstacles in terms of the interplay of social media addiction, cult indoctrination, and the coronavirus pandemic, all in relation to the presidency of Donald Trump. I am choosing to remain optimistic that the United States will be able to overcome these obstacles and gain control of the coronavirus, once the deadly interplay of President Trump's use of social media addiction and cult indoctrination in regard to the coronavirus pandemic is eliminated. However, this absolutely necessary elimination is very much dependent upon defeating Trump in the upcoming United States 2020 presidential election.

Notes

1. Trump's first two presidential campaign rallies since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic took place in June, 2020 in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Phoenix, Arizona. Although as expected, most people did not practice social distancing or wear masks, the crowd size was much smaller than anticipated in the Tulsa, Oklahoma rally [51-54].
2. The website links for the internet articles in the following references are available by contacting the author at ben496@prexar.com

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Conflict of Interest

Author declare no conflict of interest.

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