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Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría

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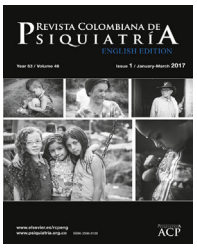

Letter to the Editor

Trends in Spanish-language Google searches on mental health issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic☆

Tendencias de las búsquedas en Google en habla hispana sobre temas de salud mental en el contexto de la pandemia por COVID-19

Several countries have implemented social distancing measures to control the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). These measures, while necessary, can increase the prevalence of mental health problems.[1] It is to be expected that a group of people suffering from these mental health problems will seek advice or help on the internet, mainly on Google. The statistics of these searches can be consulted in *Google Trends*, a tool that has already been used previously for mental health issues.[2,3]

In order to evaluate the search trends of Spanish-speaking users, we used *Google Trends* to search terms referring to three psychological processes (änxiety, d̈epressionänd s̈tress) and two symptoms of these processes (ḧeadacheänd ïnsomnia). The terms were compared over the last two years, from 10 June 2018 to 10 June 2020, with a weekly interval.

Anxiety and headache were found to be the terms with the highest search interest. In recent months, there has been an increase in searches for anxiety, headache and insomnia, with search peaks for these terms occurring after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and after the start of confinement in Spain, which was the first Spanish-speaking country to adopt this measure (Fig. 1).

The increase in the search for änxietyïndicates that the current context of the pandemic and quarantine is causing a greater number of people to experience this psychological process and seek help or information online.[4] Since anxiety arises from perceiving possible future events as threats, it is necessary to carry out educational interventions regarding the emotions that may arise during this pandemic and to provide emotional regulation strategies.[5] Although we did not find an increase in searches for the terms s̈tressänd d̈epression, this does not necessarily mean that these are not increasing, as it is possible that some people do not search these terms due to stigma or for other reasons.

In the current context, access to mental health services is limited during the quarantine, and it is observed that searches for certain mental health problems (and symptoms such as headache or insomnia) are increasing. This can lead people to unreliable *websites* that promote self-medication or the practice of unhelpful or even harmful actions.[6,7] Therefore, an effort is required to provide reliable information on these issues through official *websites* of health institutions.

In conclusion, Google search trends show an increase in searches on certain mental health topics. This presents an opportunity to provide information and help by this or other means, although it also warns about the danger that a great number of people are accessing *websites* of dubious quality in this regard.

☆ Please cite this article as: Paredes-Ángeles R, Taype-Rondan Á. Tendencias de las búsquedas en Google en habla hispana sobre temas de salud mental en el contexto de la pandemia por COVID-19. Rev Colomb Psiquiat. 2020;49:225–226.

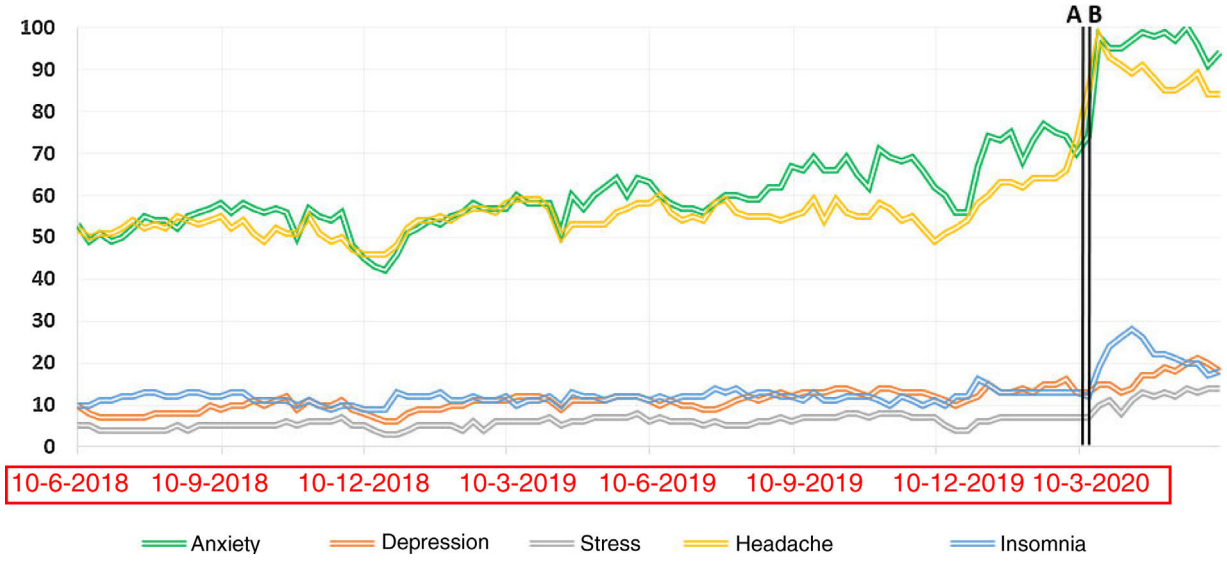

Fig. 1 – Trends in searches for the terms änxiety; ̈depression; ̈stress; ̈headacheänd ̈insomnia: A: The WHO declares coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic on 11 March 2020. B: Start of lockdown in Spain on 15 March 2020.

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2530-3120/
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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcpeng.2020.07.002