

Digital Dependency in Youth: Social Media's Role in Shaping Mental Health and Behaviour

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Introduction

The last few years saw the social media become a key component of the life of adolescents, distinctly defining their way of communication, means of expressing themselves, access to entertainment and information. Well-established social media like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook are becoming increasingly popular as the means of maintaining social ties as well as performing their self-presentation and appealing to broader audiences. Such platforms present an avenue where the teens are able to post their ideas, pictures, and videos as well as consuming contents posted by others. Nevertheless, although the injection of social media into the daily routine and the scope of creative expression and the world at large, there bring up severe issues concerning the overall implications of the concept on the well-being of adolescent populations.

According to recent surveys, it has been observed that teenagers spend several hours of their day using social media platforms and some have even chosen to engage on social media more than their real-life connection or academics and physical fitness. This increased exposure to the screens can replace such necessary behaviours as studying, physical activity, and personal contacts with colleagues and relatives. The excessive use of social media has, therefore, aroused a concern by the researchers, educators and the mental health professionals who are increasingly trying to establish the connection between prolonged digital use and the psychological distress in young adolescents. An increasing number of youths report dealing with mental pressures, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and isolation feelings, which seem to be associated with trends of overusing social media.

Another contributing positive to this distress is the addictive quality of social media platforms, programmed to draw and keep the attention of users with the use of algorithms focused on ensuring that the user is constantly using the platform. Young people who are still at critical phases of emotional and cognitive maturity are the ones that are most vulnerable to these psychological impacts of these sorts of digital spaces. They have developed the phenomenon of digital dependency, and there are indeed teens who are unable to manage their time connected to the Internet or to not connect to their gadgets. Healthy social development and academic success may also be negatively affected by such behavioural addictions since the excessive use of social media has been proved to lead to sleep deprivation, lack of focus, and loss of social interaction in the real world.

Though these problems are becoming more understood, there also needs to be more empirical studies done to better establish the complexities that exist between the use of social media and adolescent mental health. The research evidence indicates a relation, which clearly needs to be researched further to get at the causal level and more so, protective measures. Digital

technology is rapidly improving and getting more and more integrated into everyday life of young individuals and should, by all means and effort, be supported and encouraged to foster healthy digital practices and improve the mental and emotional conditions of adolescents living in increasingly connected world.

Objectives

1. To investigate the association between adolescent social media use and their mental health outcomes.
2. To analyse how digital dependency influences adolescents' social behaviors, including communication patterns, peer interactions, and emotional regulation.

The Study Significance

There are a number of stakeholders to whom this study is relevant. In the case of teachers and school administrators, the implications of digital dependency can be used in shaping more balanced digital lives in students. Parents would be able to know how the online behavior of their children can affect their minds and would be able to grow socially. Evidence-based results may also be beneficial to mental health professionals because they aid in informing the interventions. Finally, the research can enable the policymakers and technology developers to promote accountable digital spaces and Age-appropriate platform design.

Literature Review

There are two leading theories supporting an explanation of the association between the use of social media and adolescent social-psychological consequences: The Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Social Comparison Theory.

The theory of social comparison that was initially developed by Festinger (1954) argues that people are able to identify their social and personal value through their ability to match up with others. With regard to social media, teens are often subjected to idealistic depictions of peers, celebrities, and influencers. The resulting upward social comparisons that occur due to this constant exposure to curated content have been found to result in depressed self-esteem and more depressive symptoms (Vogel et al., 2014; Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). Teenagers, who are at the most decisive age in terms of identifying themselves and shaping their own concept, might be especially prone to these comparisons.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) argues that people are very selective in availing themselves to media which satisfies their psychological needs i.e. entertainment, social interaction or self-expression reasons. When introduced to social media, this theory can be used to identify the reason why teenagers use digital media, either to communicate with their peers, gain a sense of validation, or to overcome boredom. Nonetheless, although the usage can satisfy short-term emotional demands, the emotions may also lead to compulsive behaviours, especially when the gratification can be directly connected to the external reinforcement such as likes, comments, or shares (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

A growing mass of studies emphasizes the more visible adverse psychological impact with respect to excessive use of social media among the teens. Several researches have attracted

several concerns of how young people are becoming more susceptible to mental health problems the more they advance online. Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) conducted an extensive systematic review and confirmed a high and steady correlation between the prevalence of the use of social media and the increase in the anxiety, depression, and general psychological distress levels among adolescents. Their results highlight that social networking active use does not only represent a passive activity but it can entail important emotional and cognitive outcomes.

As an example, adverse mental health outcomes were closely associated with such experiences as cyberbullying, the fear of missing out (FoMO) and interruption of normal sleeping patterns (Woods and Scott, 2016). These aspects are also extended by the always-on and social comparison of social media platforms, where they can result in constant emotional burden, drop in self-esteem, and negative well-being in adolescents. These observations speak in favor of the highly multidimensional connection between the use of social media and mental health that requires much more attention in prevention education and in clinical practice, as well.

Moreover, another type of consumption, the passive one, can be labelled as particularly detrimental due to its affinity towards envy, loneliness, and reductions in life satisfaction (Verduyn et al., 2017). In contrast, other scientists mention that the effects of social media on mental issues are complex and balanced or active and supportive communication can provide emotional advantages, particularly in the case of marginalized groups that need a feeling of community (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014).

Adolescents also seem to be influenced in their interpersonal behaviours by the social media. Some sources indicate that excessive use of social media correlates with a drop in communication skills in a personal encounter as well as loss of empathy. As an example, it can be stated that as Uhls et al. (2014) revealed, after five days deprived of a screen students demonstrated considerably better results when asked to react to nonverbal expression of emotions, meaning that the process of constant contact with digital world may hamper the process of acquiring necessary social skills.

In addition, there is prevailing encouragement of curated interactions through social media that may bring about simulacra instead of genuine interaction (Chou & Edge, 2012). Such change in behavior can lead to social withdrawal or peer pressure to have an ideal online profile or inability to develop meaningful offline relationships.

Digital dependency is not listed as a clinical disorder, but its compulsive use and usability to control online interaction, represent it as a behavioural disorder increasingly studied and investigated. They usually experience irritation upon going offline, ignoring offline duties, as well as abandoning offline relationships (Andreassen, 2015). The issue of digital dependency may be especially challenging among adolescents since the development of self-regulation and the ability to control their impulses is still a work in progress (Rideout & Robb, 2018).

It is also indicated that there is a bidirectional association where anxious or depressed teenagers' resort to social media to relieve their mood or to distract themselves, thus, strengthening compulsive patterns and, possibly, increasing their symptoms (Marino et al.,

2018). This feedback loop shows to what a complex issue the problem is, and makes the necessity of such distinction between high use and problematic dependency obvious.

Findings and Results

Comprehensive data, based on the interview of 200 adolescents, aged between 13 and 18 years, showed that the use of social media has become virtually universal among the study participants, as 98.0 percent of them said that they use social media every day. The mean time of social media usage was 3.8 hours per day, among female participants, the average was 4.2 hours, which is a little bit more than men, 3.4 hours. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube were the most used platforms (87, 81, 72, and 68 percent accordingly).

The three main reasons identified by the participants in social media use efforts are as follows:

1. Social tie (chatting, sharing photos/stories) 76%
2. Watching videos, memes, listening to music, watching movies, video games, listening to podcasts, videos (entertainment, consuming content) (30-50 pound) 65%
3. Self-expression and validation (posting, checking the likes or comments) - 59%

It is interesting to note because the prevalence of passive-type users (those who predominantly scroll or just observe) was manifestly lower in terms of satisfaction levels than the prevalence of active users (those who post and interact much), despite both categories being at risk of experiencing adverse mental states.

Mental Health Indicators

The results of the survey were analysed with the aid of DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale), which allowed finding a positive correlation between the amount of time spent on social networks and mental disorders. Others who used social media intensive, amounting to over 4 hours, had high anxiety ($p < 0.01$) and depressive symptoms ($p < 0.05$) more than the respondents using them less than three hours (2 hours).

- Heavy users were found to have 35 percent level of moderate to severe anxiety.
- Twenty-eight percent displayed depressive symptoms comprising of mainly social comparison and even cyber bullying.
- Teens that regularly checked for notifications or were anxious when they missed the opportunity to check their accounts had more chances to have high scores on stress scales.

Qualitative responses highlighted that many teens felt pressured to maintain an ideal online persona, often comparing themselves to others' seemingly "perfect" lives. Some of the students complained that the use of social media interfered with their sleep schedule and this worsened their fatigue and irritability.

Trends in Social Behaviour Social behaviour refers to the way people act towards each other and within their own societies. Behaviour towards others can be described by what people do to survive and thrive in the world today. Behaviour within societies is how people treat one

another in their community. All this social behaviour is influenced by various factors which include; Social behaviour is also a behaviour that is dependent on several factors which include;

The results also indicated a significant change that happened in social interaction patterns of the adolescents. Those students who showed high rates of using social media were less inclined to face-to-face interaction, as 47 percent preferred communicating online rather than talking face-to-face. Based on responses to the scenarios of peer interaction, persons with values spending over 4 hours on a daily basis on the social media obtained lower scores on empathy statistics. Social isolation was noted in 39 percent of the high-frequency users, and many of them indicated getting left out or feeling disconnected even though they spent all the time online. Some students stated that they felt emotionally exhausted by pretending to be somebody different on such platforms and thus stopped maintaining relations offline.

Interestingly, a limited sample of respondents who ventured into positive crowds on the Internet (e.g. support groups, creative forums) have found greater self-expression and less loneliness, suggesting that again it is the quality rather than the number of social media interactions.

Discussion

The results of this research are consistent and supplement previous studies related to evaluation of social media consumption on adolescent psychology and social behaviour. The positive correlation between high rates of social media exposure and heightened cases of anxiety and depression obtained is consistent with the previous investigations, including the one by Woods & Scott (2016) and Keles et al. (2020). Also, the decrease in face-to-face communication skills and the rise in social isolation in heavy users are predetermined by findings of Uhls et al. (2014) who noted that nonverbal emotional understanding requires screen-free time.

Nevertheless, there are findings that indicate a more complicated scenario. As an example, a minor group of respondents described feeling socially supported and expressed themselves using some online communities, which similarly to Best et al. (2014) results indicated that moderate and deliberate uses of social media can be protective or even beneficial. Such contradictions stress that the nature of social media usage and setting are equally important to the time spent on the Internet.

Although this study establishes high levels of correlation, it does not implicate that causation had been established. Yet, it is possible to draw certain speculative conclusions on the possible mechanism of appearance of the relationships observed:

- Screen time and impaired sleep: Adolescents with more hours of social media usage reported having poor sleep hygiene, and this was well established to affect mood and intellectual functioning.
- Interaction on the internet and emotional control: Repeated placement with perfected images and comparison to others seems to accentuate the low self-esteem and promote more emotional distress.

- Cyberbullying and peer pressure: The participants, who participated in negative interactions, including exclusion or online harassment, were also more likely to report the signs of anxiety and abdication of online and offline social lives.

Such interactions could develop into the feedback loop, in which distressed adolescents find comfort in social media, which in turn exacerbates the problems that they attempt to avoid (and previous studies confirm this ability with references to negative mental health outcomes aged between 10 and 21) (Marino et al., 2018).

The research does not lack limitations. To begin with, the sample size, despite being rather diverse, was geographically confined to suburban and urban schools within one region which means the results might not be generalizable. Second, the data is collected based on self-reporting, which would have the risk of having a bias, i.e. exaggeration, underreporting, especially on more sufficient topics like mental health or screen time. And third, the cross sectional status only reproduces a snapshot-in-time and does not provide any record of time events and causal relationships.

In spite of such limitation, the results are significant in implications:

- At schools: Teacher's ought to include the subjects of digital competence and psychological well-being in curricula. Healthy social media usage awareness programs may enable students to develop critical thinking of the contents of social media.
- To parents: This evidence shows the importance of engaging parents in the process, such as screen-time limits, open dialogue about the experiences online, and establishing healthy digital media models.
- To mental health professionals: Mental health practitioners that treat adolescents need to keep social media patterns in mind when doing assessments and interventions, especially anxiety, depression, or social withdrawal cases.

Age-appropriate moderation of contents, transparency in algorithms, and digital well-being features (such as the reminders of usage or screen-free messages) can be implemented into platforms to counter any negative impact for policymakers and tech developers.

Conclusion

This paper examined the trends of using social media among teenager and how this is associated with their social behaviour and mental health. The results documented that teenagers are a lot of time using social media, with an average of almost four hours per day. The most commonly used platforms were Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat, with the main reasons of the use being social connection, entertainment, and validation. There was a meaningful relationship between the high use of social media and anxiety, depression, and stress. Such symptoms of mental health were especially observed in passive users and individuals who experienced cyberbullying or became involved in the overuse of social comparison. It also affected social behaviour where users who used it frequently showed decreased face to face communication abilities, empathy, and a sense of social isolation.

The evidence indicates that though there are some positive effects of social media, namely the association and community, there is significant risk to teenage mental and social health when use is chronic or addictive. Digital addiction seems to be an emerging behaviour problem, characterized by traumatic affect, impaired real life interpersonal relationships, and reduced psychosocial academic functioning. But that is not all engagement that is bad. The teenagers that engaged in social media in meaningful, active, and community-oriented manners had fewer adverse effects. Therefore, what counts in determining the effect of digital interaction is its nature and the context in which it is used over and above screen time.

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