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Social Media and Its Impact on Adolescent Well-being

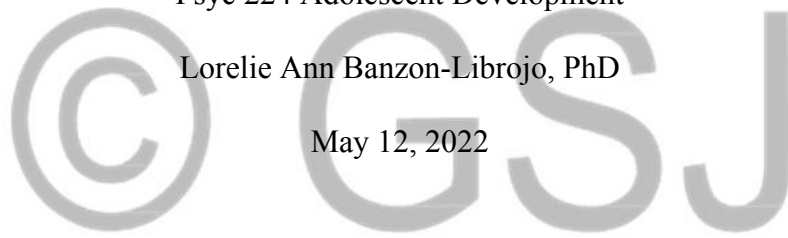
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Psyc 224 Adolescent Development

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Introduction

According to Merriam-Webster (2004), social media pertains to the “*forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)*”. These communities may comprise of friends whom we know offline as well as online, acquaintances known online only, or even those belonging to a special interest group (Course-Choi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the content displayed on social media platforms may include user profiles containing information about oneself (e.g. name and age), photos, videos, and activity updates, all of which can be viewed, commented, or simply ‘liked’ by other online profiles (Course-Choi, et al., 2020). And because of the continuing existence of an ‘online world’, social media has become an integrated part of daily life with an estimate of 3 billion users worldwide with Facebook, Youtube, and WhatsApp as the most used applications today (respectively) (Schønning, et al., 2020). In fact, Schønning, et al. (2020) reported that the most active among the users are adolescents and young adults. Due to the increasing popularity of social media among the youth, countless research papers have sought to identify the appeal of such platforms. According to Vogel et al. (2014), the appeal of social media to adolescents lies in the ability of such platforms to provide instant gratification, a sense of belonging, and a platform for self-expression, all of which leading to positive well-being.

Well-being is defined as the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity, which includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and the ability to manage stress (Davis, 2019). For adolescents, well-being is defined by 5 domains; (1) *good health and optimum nutrition*, (2) *connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society*, (3) *safety and a supportive environment*, (4) *Learning, competence, education, skills*,

and employability, (5) agency and resilience (Ross et al., 2020). Though engaging in social media platforms may positively contribute to adolescent well-being, it may also have detrimental effects. It has been reported that the excessive use of social media has been linked to negative effects on adolescent well-being including, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and social isolation (Primack et al., 2017). With that said, this review aims to identify both the positive and negative effects of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, on adolescent well-being. As well as protective factors that may mitigate these negative effects, in the hopes of encouraging future psychology practitioners to create strategies and/or interventions that may make the online world a safer and a more empowering place for developing teens.

Review of Related Literature

Positive Effects of Social Media on Adolescent Well-being

According to Baumeister & Leary (1995; Maslow, 1943; Allen et al., 2014), a sense of social connection forms the basis for creating strong, meaningful, and long-lasting interpersonal bonds, which in the case of adolescents enhances their motivations and capacity to relate themselves to others and internalize the values endorsed by others. Thus, social connectedness and the formation of new connections are particularly important during adolescent development. Based on the adolescent well-being framework, social connectedness can be achieved by the adolescent when he/she “*has access to opportunities to become part of positive social and cultural networks and to develop positive, meaningful relationships with others, including family, peers, teachers and employers*” (Ross et al., 2020). And as social media has become increasingly popular, especially to the younger generations, these individuals have adapted to the use of digital technology and have utilized such platforms to keep in-touch with former connections, make new ones, and even learn more about the environment surrounding them.

According to Davis (2012; Allen et al., 2014), social media platforms, such as texting, instant messaging, and social networking sites (such as Facebook), helped foster a sense of belonging among the 32 adolescents in his study and facilitated connections with peers regardless of physical location or time of day. It appears that social networking sites played an important role in broadening the connections of the adolescents in this study, which satisfied their need for connectedness, further contributing to their well-being. From these findings, Davis (2012; Allen et al., 2014) suggested that social media is valued by the youth today because it fosters a sense of belonging in them by allowing them to seek validation from their online communities regarding their thoughts and experiences. In a similar study, Bonetti et al. (2010; Allen et al., 2014) indicated that online communication may also encourage lonely and socially anxious adolescents to engage in self-disclosure with their peers, further enhancing their feelings of social connectedness. Through a sample of 626 Australian students, Bonetti et al. (2010; Allen et al., 2014) collected data relating to loneliness, social anxiety, and online communication. The results of the study showed that lonely adolescents are more likely than non-lonely peers to use online chat to discuss personal topics, such as emotions and problems, and to communicate in order to meet new people and feel a sense of belonging (Bonetti et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2014). The participants also reported feeling less shy and more comfortable when chatting online versus face-to-face (Bonetti et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2014). The social compensation hypothesis used in this study suggested that the reduction in social cues afforded by the internet allows socially anxious people to feel more comfortable when self-disclosing, which may lead to stronger relationships with peers, decreased loneliness, and enhanced well-being (Laghi et al., 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Allen et al., 2014). Riley et al. (2022) reported similar findings with Davis & Allen, stating that social connectedness was also the primary reason for social media

use by the adolescents in their study. According to Riley et al. (2022), social media was reported to be associated with greater empathic concern (feeling similar emotions to others) and perspective-taking (ability to understand others' emotions), which increased the appeal and use of such platforms to the adolescent in their study. However, Riley et al. (2022) also found that parent-child relationship moderated this association, with adolescents who have stronger parent-child relationships reporting no significance between the aforementioned association. In other words, although adolescents display great interest in social media for social connection, one's relationship with family is still an important context to consider.

Another domain in the adolescent well-being framework pertains to social support, which is defined as the emotionally sustaining qualities of relationships, which include the feeling of being loved, cared for, and listened to, positive relationships, encouragement, and emotional support, that is usually provided by a network of family, friends, colleagues, etc. both online and offline (Strickland, 2014). According to Ross et al. (2020), social support/a supportive environment is achieved by adolescents when they have access to a wide range of (safe) objective, factual information and stimulating opportunities for leisure or personal development.

The existing literature on the association between social media use and social support among adolescents is especially prominent in studies that focus on adolescents from minority groups. According to Selkie et al. (2020), the transgender youth community have been reported to be 3 times more likely to experience depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicidal tendencies. With that in mind, Selkie et al. (2020) conducted a 30-60 minute semi-structured interview among a group of 25 transgender adolescents (11 identified as transfeminine, 13 as transmasculine, and 1 as nonbinary) in order to explore their motive behind social media use. It was reported that social media indeed provided a platform for such participants to receive

emotional support they had connected with online (Selkie et al., 2020). The participants reported to have received affirmational support from seeing the narratives of other transgender individuals, which contributed to a sense of hope about the future (Selkie et al., 2020). Other than emotional support, the participants also shared that social media was also helpful in providing informational support regarding medical care logistics and expectations, which empowered participants to take next steps in their affirmation and treatment of gender dysphoria (Selkie et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, the stimulation and displacement hypothesis offered a new perspective on social media use and social support. According to the stimulation hypothesis, individuals who struggle with forming social relationships may increase their use of social networking sites, which can lead to improved well-being, decreased loneliness, and increased social connections (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Caba Machado et al., 2022). Whereas, the displacement hypothesis suggests that social media takes away time that would have been spent on face-to-face interactions, which can lead individuals to feel disconnected and unsatisfied for not meeting the need for social connection/support (Nie & Erbring, 2002; Caba Machado et al., 2022). Both hypotheses are supported by Caba Machado et al. (2022) who assessed the relationship between social media use, perceived social support from family, perceived social support from friends & significant others, and the mediating role of loneliness among a sample of 111 university students. Caba Machado et al. (2022) found the use of social networking sites (such as Instagram and WhatsApp) is not the same for the aforementioned source of social support. The participants reported increased use of social media when the levels of perceived support from friends-significant others were high as well (Caba Machado et al., 2022). One possible reason for this result is that individuals have less (frequent) online interactions with their family compared

to their friends or significant others (Caba Machado et al., 2022). Another reason offered by Caba Machado et al. (2022) is that individuals may feel a sense of belonging already within their family which is why they find no purpose in increasing their social media intake. Furthermore, the study also reported that loneliness acted as a significant mediator between social media use and social support from friends and significant others (Caba Machado et al., 2022). Similar to previous research, the results of this study indicated the importance of social media among adolescents, especially among lonely ones, as increasing the use would increase interpersonal connections and perceived social support and reduce feelings of loneliness.

As stated in the five domains of the adolescent well-being framework, an individual with a sense of agency is characterized by the ability to have “*a sense of being empowered to make meaningful choices and to influence their social, political, and material environment and has the capacity for self-expression and self-direction appropriate to their evolving capacities and stage of development* (Ross et al., 2020)”. And because of the increasing use of social media, it may be that agency as well as independence have been valued among the present youth. In fact, the CIRCLE 2020 Teen Survey conducted by Qualtrics revealed that American adolescents have utilized digital media creation for political expression and civic development (McGee et al., 2021). A total of 1,847 adolescents aged 14-17 (with parental consent) were able to complete the web survey which was conducted from September 21, 2020 to November 18, 2020 (McGee et al., 2021). The results showed that although 40% of the participants reported being afraid to post online due to feeling unqualified, and 39% were afraid because of the potential reaction from peers, almost half (45%) of the teens in this survey reported to have created a form (e.g. image, video, GIF, etc) of political media (on Youtube/Instagram/Snapchat/Tiktok) within the past 30 days of data collection (McGee et al., 2021). According to McGee et al. (2021), “more than four

in five teens (82%) who created some form of media in the last month said they felt more informed about politics as a result, and a similar proportion (80%) said they felt like their voice was more powerful". A similar study found that digital media played a crucial role in the understanding and practice of feminism of teenage girls in New Zealand (Jackson, 2018). Jackson (2018) chose to study members of high school feminist clubs in New Zealand in order to explore how digital media influenced their consumption and production of feminist content and their activism. It was reported that digital media helped the participants develop feminism through three discursive constructions: digital feminism as precarious, as knowledge sharing, and as "doing something" both online and offline (Jackson, 2018). Ultimately, Jackson (2018) concluded that the girls' invisible feminist politics in online spaces are political and involve activism through raising awareness, information sharing, challenging problematic representations, and learning about feminism.

The existing literature on the association between social media use and adolescent well-being shows that social media can provide adolescents with a sense of belonging and foster social connectedness, which is particularly important during this period of development. Online communication may encourage lonely and socially anxious adolescents to engage in self-disclosure, further enhancing their feelings of social connectedness. Social media can also provide emotional and informational support, especially among minority groups such as the transgender youth community. However, the association between social media use and well-being may be moderated by the strength of the parent-child relationship.

Negative Effects of Social Media on Adolescent Well-being

Although social media may bring about positive effects on well-being, it also has the tendency to distort the reality of its teen users, and possibly normalize and encourage negative

behaviors. One of which is cyberbullying, which has been reported to cause low self-esteem, higher levels of depression, academic concerns, and risk of suicide in teens (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Nixon, 2014). In fact, Gohal et al. (2023) found that internet use for more than 12 hours/day was significantly associated with cyberbullying. The participants of the study were avid internet users in the Jazan region aged 12-18yrs old, and more than 20% of those who were cyberbullied reported to have considered harming themselves in order to be free of their perpetrators (Gohan et al., 2023). Up to 20% of the victims even considered leaving their schools as a result of cyberbullying (Gohan et al., 2023). Similarly, Saladino et al. (2020) gathered 600 adolescents, from five lower secondary schools in Central South Italy, in order to investigate the youth's perception of cyberbullying. The study affirmed that cyberbullying can have a severe effect on adolescents' well-being, causing anxiety and depression, which are associated with the growing rate of suicide among adolescents in Europe and non-European countries (Saladino et al., 2023). Though the participants showed empathy towards cyber victims' emotions and reactions, they ultimately tended to blame the victim's personal characteristics and attitudes for the cyberbullying, and perceived men as more aggressive and violent than women in those scenarios (Saladino et al., 2023).

Since adolescence is a period of physical change, teens may use social media as a tool to learn about beauty and body standards and ideals, especially ones within a certain culture, but this knowledge can distort their perception of body image. When Romo et al. (2016; Bryant, 2018) interviewed 27 Latina adolescent girls regarding their perceptions and sources of body shapes & sizes, they found that these girls perceived body appearance standards in their culture to be different from those in European American culture, with some considering overweight women to be attractive. The results revealed the significant influence of the media on the beauty

standards of adolescent girls and how they derive their beauty standards from it (Romo et al., 2016; Bryant, 2018). Meanwhile, a local study suggested that Facebook usage is associated with an increase in depression levels among Filipino college students (Maglunog & Dy, 2019). The study gathered a total of 347 respondents and acquired their socio-demographic characteristics, Facebook usage, and their depression levels (Maglunog & Dy, 2019). Results showed that excessive Facebook use can result in sedentary behaviors, which can ultimately impact mental health and affect social support, increasing the chances of developing depression (Maglunog & Dy, 2019). More importantly, frequently engaging in Facebook activities such as checking on someone, commenting, and viewing videos are correlated with higher levels of psychological distress, particularly for those with low self-esteem (Maglunog & Dy, 2019).

It is no secret that social media has become a major source of distraction, especially in the youth. In fact a study of 300 female students at Prince Sattam bin Abdul Aziz University showed how social media is widely used among university students, and it often reduces their academic engagement (Kolhar et al., 2021). The study reported that only 1% of students use social media for academic purposes, while the majority use it for nonacademic purposes, such as chatting and browsing social networking sites to pass time (Kolhar, et al., 2021). The study also found that social media use has a negative impact on academic progress, with 57% and 52% of students reporting addiction to social media and 66% of students feeling more attracted to social media than to studies (Kolhar, et al., 2021). Siebers et al. (2022) also reported the impact of social media use as distraction in adolescents from a secondary school in the Netherlands. The participants of the study consisted of 383 students, from 7th and 8th grades, who were tasked to answer the 23-item ESM survey which included questions about social media use, distraction, and other topics not included in their study (Siebers et al., 2021). The results showed that

distraction levels varied among adolescents and were linked to their social media usage. However, most adolescents reported experiencing more distraction when they spent more time on social media, while some did not (Siebers et al., 2021). Lastly, the positive association between social media use and distraction was less strong for heavier social media users, suggesting that they may be more accustomed to switching attention (Siebers et al., 2021).

In summary, social media use among teens can have both positive and negative effects on their well-being. While it can provide access to knowledge and resources, it can also distort their perception of reality and lead to negative behaviors like cyberbullying. Moreover, excessive social media use can reduce academic engagement and progress, and even lead to addiction and distraction. This is why it is important for parents and educators to be aware of these potential effects and encourage responsible social media use among teens.

Protective Factors

Social media has become popular with all generations due to its many beneficial aspects, including the ability to stay in touch with friends and family, learn about recent developments in the news, and connect with people from all over the world. However, current research highlights the negative impacts of social media on adolescents, including mental health, cyberbullying, digital distraction, negative body-image and self-esteem, etc. With that in mind, it is important for parents and educators to understand adolescents' perceived impacts of social media and the importance of monitoring and education for all.

Akram & Kumar (2017) urged that fostering good relationships and having active communication with children can help parents handle the influence of social media on youth and teens. In fact, intimate parent-child relationships and open active communication were demonstrated to be related to lower experiences of cyberbullying and perpetration (Zhu et al.,

2021). So, in order to protect the physical, cognitive, and social well-being of teenagers from the negative effects of social media, Iqbal et al. (2021) recommended the use of parental mediation. Parental mediation involves the various ways in which parents interact with and regulate their children's use of media and the internet in order to mitigate negative effects on their health and sociability (Livingstone, 2008; Lin et al., 2019; Green et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2021). One theoretical framework that can help us understand the factors that influence parental internet mediation is the protection motivation theory (Iqbal et al., 2021). This theory suggests that parents' intention to engage in protective behavior is based on their perception of the threat (severity and susceptibility) and their coping appraisal (response-efficacy and self-efficacy) (Rogers, 1983; Norman et al., 2005; Plotnikoff and Trinh, 2010; Iqbal et al., 2021). Parents who perceive online risks as more severe and susceptible to their children tend to apply more diverse forms of mediation, while those who perceive their children as more capable of coping with risks tend to apply less mediation or remain unmediated. It is important to consider cultural variations in understanding the factors that motivate parents to engage in protective behaviors, such as parental mediation (Menard et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2021). Finally, Iqbal et al. (2021) mentioned that resilience is an effective measure to ensure online safety and enhance online opportunities for children and teenagers (Iqbal et al., 2021). According to Ungar (2011; Iqbal et al., 2021), the social ecology of resilience emphasizes the significance of resources and capacities to adopt resilient pathways and highlight the important role of family and friends in providing necessary support in the face of risks or challenges. Overall, it is important to consider these aspects in exploring the key factors of parental internet mediation, which may vary depending on diverse contexts and cultures.

Conclusion

Social media has become increasingly popular among adolescents as it provides a platform for them to form new connections and stay in touch with existing ones. Research shows that social media use fosters a sense of belonging and provides opportunities for social connection, particularly among those who experience loneliness/social anxiety, and generally among minority groups. However, while social media can foster positive well-being and provide access to knowledge and other resources that may help in personal growth, it may also have detrimental effects on the youth.

To mitigate these negative effects, it is crucial for parents and educators to monitor and educate teens about its use. Parental mediation can protect teenagers' physical, cognitive, and social well-being, and the protection motivation theory can help us understand factors that influence parental mediation. Cultural variations also play a role in motivating parents to engage in protective behaviors. Additionally, promoting resilience in adolescents can ensure online safety and enhance online opportunities. Future research should focus on understanding the key factors of parental internet mediation and effective strategies to promote resilience in diverse contexts and cultures.

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