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Mental Health Issues in Relation to Social Media

World Health Assembly (WHA)

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Introduction

Mental health has emerged as one of the most common areas of discourse over the last few years- especially as people seek to understand the extent to which their daily behaviors and environments impact overall wellbeing. In parallel, social media has emerged as an integral part of the daily lives of millions of people around the globe. Social media platforms that were once conceptualized as spaces for socially-engaged communication and entertainment have transformed into vehicles, or spaces, that impact people's thought processes, behaviors and interpersonal relations. With mental health concerns and social media shaping such pivotal aspects of daily living, scholars have begun to inquire about the connections between the two.

Mental health conversations related to social media often center around issues like stress, self-esteem, and anxiety. Individuals, especially younger users, are often found scrolling, posting and comparing themselves with others over the course of hours each day. This has led to discussions around whether social media use constitutes a potential liability for emotional distress vs a vehicle that some individuals use to engage in emotional support and expression.

Definition of key terms

Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotional state characterised by a feeling of fear, tension, dread and uneasiness. It is characterized as a psychological illness that entails too much worrying disproportionately to the circumstance, ambivalence with everyday living and presents deep anguish.

Attention Span

The duration of time which is focused on an activity and after which one is not able to concentrate on the activity is known as attention span. Distractibility is a situation where attention is diverted to something or some other activity.

Depression

Depression is a severe mental health condition that has adverse impacts on how an individual views his/her life, his/her mood and the surrounding world. Depression may be triggered by a wide range of factors including genetic factors, brain chemistry, stressful life experiences or even medical disorders.

Digital Wellbeing

Digital wellbeing is the mindful management of one's relationship with technology to promote mental, emotional, and physical health, rather than letting it undermine them. It is about being aware of the impact of digital tools on you and setting boundaries to have a healthy relationship. It is using the capabilities of your phone or tablet to monitor and limit the time spent on certain applications and to manage notifications.

Mental Health

Mental health refers to your emotional, psychological and social health that defines how you think, feel and behave and how you respond to stress. It is a multifaceted scale that has both positive sides such as well-being and happiness and negative ones such as anxiety or mental disorders such as depression. Mental health is not predetermined and may be impacted by many factors including life experiences and biological factors.

Self Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the general perception of self-worth, value, and capability of an individual including the beliefs about oneself and the mood such as confidence and pride. Healthy self-esteem is defined by self-image of feeling able and positive whereas low self-esteem is one that is characterized by self-doubt, negative attitude and inability to face challenges. Self esteem can be affected by such factors as childhood experiences, stress, social messages and high personal standards.

Social Media

Social media are web-based, application-based, and platform-based sites in which users share information with virtual communities by creating content and interaction among themselves, creating conversations and relationships. These social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok enable individuals to post texts, pictures, and videos, maintain communication with friends and loved ones, and be part of the virtual community. Social media is a tool that businesses use in creating brand awareness and reaching out to their target audience, whilst social media is also used by individuals to have some entertainment, to get information and feel like they belong to a community.

Stress

Stress is an emotion of emotional or physical tension. It may be caused by any circumstance or idea that causes you to be frustrated, angry, or nervous. Stress is the response of your body to a demand or a challenge. Stress can be good in short bursts like in situations where it saves your life or when it enables you to meet a deadline. However, this can be detrimental to your health when the stress continues over an extended period of time.

General Overview

The use of social media has become a part of the present day society especially among teenagers and young adults. Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat are platforms that provide access to opportunities to connect, express oneself, and share information. But the growing amount of evidence indicates that there can be considerable consequences of overuse of these platforms to mental health.

Psychological Effects

Studies have shown that there is a high relationship between mental health issues and excessive use of social media. Systematic review has revealed that there is a correlation between the use of social networking sites and the risk of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Keles et al., 2020). Moreover, another research study that was published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence reported that adolescents who spend over three hours a day on social media were two times more likely to experience the symptoms of anxiety and depression than those spending lower levels of screen time.

Social Comparison and Self Esteem

Social media tend to be idealistic in terms of their representations of their lifestyles and images, and consequently cause comparison within social context. This may adversely affect self esteem and body image especially on the young users. In the advisory to youth about the importance of mental health, the U.S. Surgeon General notes that the frequent use of social media can be linked to alterations in the developing brain, which could lead to the disruption of emotional learning and behavior, impulse control, and emotional regulation.

Effect on Sleep and Cognitive Performance

Overuse of social media has been attributed to sleep disturbances and mental impairments. In a study with more than 45,000 young adults, each hour spent in front of the screen before bed resulted in 24 minutes of sleep and 59% higher risk of insomnia. Moreover, studies have shown that the adolescents who prefer the evening chronotype and have less sleep are more likely to have prolonged social media use, which further worsens sleeping disorders.

It has also been identified that social media use is linked to shorter attention span and cognitive abilities. Critical literature review indicated that too much social media use has adverse effects on sustained attention, working memory, and cognitive control. The discontinuous character of social media information, that is, the quick alternating and continuous notification, is a contributor to cognitive overload, as people struggle to concentrate on activities that demand continuous attention.

In addition to personal habits and comparisons, social media may also subject its users to bad information and internet bullying. Cyberbullying, criticisms, and posting unsuitable and disheartening content can have a substantial impact on emotional health. It has been found out that adolescents exposed to cyberbullying are likely to report anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal symptoms. Online interactions are anonymous and immediate and tend to magnify the effects of these negative experiences, reducing their coping ability by the user.

Global Response

The correlation between mental health and social media has become a very worrying issue across the whole world. A survey among almost 280,000 youth aged 11, 13, and 15 in 44 countries revealed that the proportion of adolescents with problematic use of social media increased to 11% in 2022 (it was 7% in 2018) and that the prevalence of problematic use was marginally higher among girls (13% vs. 9% of boys). This has also been found to be similar to other national research including in the United Kingdom and the United States, whereby intense usage of social sites has since been linked to increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression. The systematic review of 32 studies also gave a report that showed over half (≈56.3%) of the studies were able to find positive correlation that exists between the use of social media and anxiety, indicating that the trend is not limited in one area of the world, but it is a general trend across the world.

Regulatory measures have been fragmented even though the problem is large. Age verification tools have been tested in some European states or there has been discussion of increasing the age limit to social media and other governments like in some Asian nations which have experimented with screen time restriction on children. The general population seems to advocate such actions, for example, in 30 countries, on average 71 percent of the population believes that children below 14 should not be permitted to use social media, 74 percent of parents even think the same. Nevertheless, this is not enforced equally and younger children tend to neglect the minimum age requirements by falsifying their information. These gaps show how difficult it is to handle an international problem with interventions like these in local settings.

Meanwhile, the general effects of the issue on the wellbeing of adolescents are becoming more evident. Studies show that that 1 in every 7 teenagers across the world has some symptoms of depression, and the World Health Organization states that there are 280 million patients with depression in the world, and this is equivalent to 3.8 percent of the world population. The absence of concerted worldwide actions has enabled toxic forces to operate freely, thereby perpetuating malevolent structuralities, cyberbullying, and the dissemination of unhealthy content at an extremely fast pace, with tools like addictive design, cyberbullying, and the uncontrollable proliferation of toxic content allowing the responsible social media companies to continue generally unrestricted operations across borders and with global impact. This disproportion speaks of the pressing necessity of more robust global collaboration and more holistic solutions to protect mental health in this digital age.

Major parties involved

China

China has one of the most restrictive strategies in dealing with possible negatives of social media. The government has always been keen on regulating digital platforms, both politically and socially, but over the past few years this has also been explicitly extended to the preservation of the mental state of young people. There are restrictions on the duration that minors can spend on the Internet and video games, and time constraints are strict daily with the use of parental supervision features in companies like Tencent and ByteDance. The social media organizations must also foster content that is considered healthy, and eliminate the content that is regarded as harmful. China is not only interested in the preservation of the social stability and control over the flow of information but also in the preservation of the state of the health of their population. Although these measures have achieved certain results in decreasing the screen time among young people, it has also been claimed that it is too conservative and questions personal liberties. Overall, China is an image of a powerful state intervention in contrast to the more free or decentralized actions in other countries.

European Union (EU)

The European Union has been among the most active participants in regard to tackling the implications of social media to the mental health of people. The EU historically sought positive digital governance, beginning with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which transformed the world trends of privacy and online data usage. Later the Digital Services Act (DSA) has focused on harmful content, transparency in algorithms, and addictive design. The EU has its stand on consumer protection and saving the democratic values whereas its interest is minimizing the risks caused by the unregulated platforms on the mental health of young people. Nonetheless, they can be rather difficult to enforce and sometimes it is critical to keep in mind that big businesses have a tendency to fight or evolve gradually, and adherence may not be uniform in all EU member states.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF has always been focused on the protection of children and their development, but now in the digital world, the focus has shifted to the psychological consequences of the online space. The organization has come up with research, reports, and guidelines that are geared towards advancing safe and healthy digital use among the children. Its stance highlights the fact that, as much as digital platforms have potential to provide valuable educational and social advantages, they also have dangers like cyberbullying, harmful content and overuse, which could all damage mental health. UNICEF is more interested in the promotion of the children in all the parts of the world and mostly in the less endowed areas in terms of resources to support the mentally challenged. UNICEF would be able to protect the rights and well-being of children in the changing online environment by creating awareness, assisting in the development of policies, and disseminating digital literacy initiatives.

United States of America (USA)

The government of the United States is now more vocal when it comes to the dangers of social media, particularly in relation to teenagers. The historically hesitance of regulating big tech is explained by a significant protection of freedom of speech and the market-oriented ethos, but the growing number of facts has propelled the problem into the political limelight. There is pressure on such companies as Tik Tok and Instagram due to congressional hearings; Congressmen also question the role of these platforms in the increasing cases of youth depression and anxiety. On the state level, efforts like parental consent laws that minors would need on the social media platform in the state of Utah indicate that some laws are being established to control social media usage, but these laws have been subject to legal controversy. The American interest is to reconcile constitutional rights with the

increasing demand in the population for protection, but the situation with a complex regulatory environment emphasizes the problem of creating a unified national response.

World Health Organisation (WHO)

The World Health Organization has repeatedly presented mental health as a health concern, and during recent years it has extended it to the digital medium. According to WHO reports, the prevalence of mental disorders which include depression and anxiety already affects hundreds of millions of people across the globe with social media becoming one of the possible factors which can make such problems even more challenging especially in adolescents. Its stance gives prominence to the fact that evidence-based guidelines should be used to facilitate the responsible use of it instead of absolute prohibition. The WHO is interested in influencing the policy-making process in health around the world, assisting the member countries in designing safe online environments, and drawing attention to psychological effects of screen time overconsumption. Through publication research and collaborating with governments, schools and non-governmental organisations, WHO attempts to tackle the problem of mental health on a coordinated, international basis.

Timeline of events

2004 February 4th	Facebook is introduced, and the era of massive social networking begins in the world. This gives birth to platforms that will define online communication in the globe.
2007 June 29th	The first iPhone was launched, and now, it allows individuals to have access to social media at all times. This turn makes platforms a regular part of the life of people.
2012 April 9th	Facebook buys Instagram, gaining control over the younger audience. The issue of screen time and juvenile mental health starts to raise concerns.
2018 March 17th	Cambridge Analytica scandal reveals the abuse of data to profile. It singles out dangers of manipulation and psychological targeting over the internet.
2019 September	The World Health Organization releases such guidelines restricting screen time. Healthy development among children below five years of age is emphasized.
2021 September 14th	There is research that leaks information regarding the association of Instagram with teenage body image problems. The results enhance the questioning of the mental health effect of social media.
2022 November	The Digital Services Act (DSA) on online safety is passed by the EU. It focuses on preventing destructive content and safeguarding online well-being.
2023 May	Utah proposes a bill on parental consent among minors on the Internet. It became the first American state to control the use of social media by the youth.
2024 September 25th	According to WHO, there is an increase in problematic use of social media between 7-11%. The results cover 44 countries which indicates the international nature of the problem.

Possible solutions

To solve the problem of mental health issues related to the use of social media, it is necessary to use multi-faceted strategies that will include regulation, education, and accountability of the platforms. Although there is no single intervention that will completely reduce the risks, international studies and policy experiments indicate that there are a number of measures that may be used to reduce the damage and create online space that is safer to young people.

The creation of global regulatory standards under the control of international organizations like the World Health Organization is one of the possible solutions. This framework would establish the minimum standards of platform safety, algorithms transparency, and minors protection. Through the alignment of standards among borders, regulators would be able to curb the imbalances that enable harmful content and addictive features to propagate across countries. The strategy is a way of striking a balance between priorities in terms of public health and the reality of the cross-border social media platforms, but it needs to be negotiated carefully not to violate the sovereignty of countries and cultural variations.

The second solution is centered on age-related access controls and privacy-saving verification systems. A set of policies regulating the minimum ages of using social media, along with a parental consent system or a system of age attestation through safe digital signatures, may assist in restricting access to psychologically damaging information at a young age. There is evidence of widespread popular agreement with this kind of action where surveys in 30 countries reveal that 71% of adults would like to limit children younger than 14 years of age. The application of these systems in practice is a matter of balance between privacy and enforcement where high protection of young people against violating the security of personal data is achieved without the risk of their violation.

The third solution is platform design reform and algorithmic accountability. The companies working in social media can be obliged to perform an independent algorithm audit, transparency reports, and default safety settings among younger users. Some of the design decisions associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents are research-related to engagement-optimized feeds. The requirement to use safer defaults and make frequent risk evaluations makes platforms more focused on user well-being, rather than engagement metrics, and lets them remain creative. One of them is how to establish suitable measures of harm and to avoid compliance without stifling digital innovation.