

## Social Media- The Not So Social Consequences

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### Abstract

Children have high levels of exposure to electronic media hence they have greater access and time to shape young people's attitudes and actions than do parents or teachers, replacing them as educators, role models, and the primary sources of information about the world and how one behaves in it.

Social scientists are just beginning to understand the interplay between social media use and individual mental health. Research has demonstrated both negative and positive effects of social media use on well being.

This paper aims to review the effects of social media on the young mind and emphasize the role of social media on the mental health and attitude.

**Keywords:** Adolescent; Mental Health; Social Media.

### Introduction

The *World Health Organization* defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

Mental health (MH) is increasingly recognized by the public health community as critical to good

health. An estimated 26% of Americans age 18 and older suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. The estimated lifetime prevalence of any mental disorder among the U.S. adult population is 46% [1].

Unfortunately, Indian statistics reveal even more horrifying figures.

Mental health has been hidden behind a curtain of stigma and discrimination for too long. It is time to bring it out into the open. The magnitude, suffering and burden in terms of disability and costs for individuals, families and societies are staggering. In the last few years, the world has become more aware of this enormous burden and the potential for mental health gains. We can make a difference using existing knowledge ready to be applied [2].

We need to enhance our investment in mental health substantially and we need to do it now [3].

Mental Health and Mental Illness can be influenced by multiple determinants, including genetics and biology and their interactions with social and environmental factors [1].

Social media has forever changed how we interact with the world. In many ways, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the like have become an integral part of our individual identities. This is particularly true in adolescent and young adult populations. Lenhart et al, in 2010 researched that 98% of US college students had facebook accounts.

The use of online social networking sites to communicate with family and friends and to meet people has had a significant effect on the ways in which people interact. For some people, who are avid users of social networking sites, friendships are sustained without face to face interaction. This has occurred in the past through having pen pals, where people developed life- long friendships with people

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they had never met. Online social networking has increased people's capacity for making and sustaining such friendships as well as having more regular communication with family and other friends. Research is just beginning to understand the challenges, benefits and negative consequences of this different way in which people communicate.

Early studies suggested that internet communication had a more negative impact on the individual by reducing face-to-face interactions and increasing the level of loneliness. More recent studies have revealed a more complex set of outcomes which we have emphasized in this article.

Social scientists are just beginning to understand the interplay between social media use and individual mental health.

The very foundation on which social media was developed- to enhance communication and strengthen human connection- has developed.

In the United States (US) over 80% of adolescents own at least one form of new media technology (e.g., cell phone, personal data assistant, computer for Internet access), and they are using this technology with increasing frequency to text and instant message, e-mail, blog, and access social networking websites. Although data from India is limited, a significant portion of our children also have considerable TV viewing per day i.e. >2 hours/day (3) [4, 5].

Griffiths, Calear, & Banfield, researched in 2009 that the social media interventions are online support groups, but these have often generated unfavorable outcomes. The seemingly more promising interventions have been integrated with existing social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), which significantly reduces the user-burden of having to adopt and become accustomed to a new platform (e.g., online support groups) [2].

Social Media has also been used to facilitate communication between healthcare professionals and policy makers. In Taiwan, Syed Abdul et al, reported a case where a Facebook group was created to protest about the inadequate staffing situation of medical doctors in emergency departments. Remarkably, the ministry of health joined the Facebook group and interacted with the doctors as part of his effort to reform the staffing situation in the healthcare system [6].

### **Negative Effects**

Much media attention has focused on the "dangers" of online social networking, particularly

for young people. This has led to fears about online social networking and calls for increased regulation and accountability of providers of these sites. Early studies suggested that internet communication had a negative impact on the individual by reducing face-to-face interactions and increasing level of loneliness [7].

Effects of the mass media have been found to be far reaching and potentially harmful even in influencing the health-related behaviors of children and adolescents, many of whom are not yet mature enough to distinguish fantasy from reality, particularly when it is presented as "real life". This is particularly important for very young children who developmentally think concretely and are unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Furthermore, time spent with media decreases the amount of time available for pursuing other more healthy activities such as sports, physical activity, community service, cultural pursuits, and family time [4].

Further, exposure to media violence has been positively related to subsequent aggressive behavior, ideas, arousal, and anger. Additionally, there is a significant negative effect of exposure to violence on subsequent helping behavior [4].

Ray, *et al.* from India reported that children having exposure to violence through media had poorer school performance and its impact on their psychosocial adjustments was detrimental [8].

Another study from India showed that vivid display of violence through media (9/11 terrorist attack) caused stress in adolescents [9]. Yama, *et al.* described that some of the fears, tensions, bad dreams and tendencies towards delinquencies of children are a result of frequent and a regular exposure to murder-mystery movies, and stories filled with violence and torture that children view on TV and movies [10].

Association between TV viewing and suicidal behavior has also been reported in our country [11]. Both content exposure and screen time of media had independent detrimental associations with school performance in children and adolescents [12]. Hopf, *et al.* showed that the more frequently children view horror and violent films during childhood, and the more frequently they play violent electronic games at the beginning of adolescence, the higher will these students' violence and delinquency be at the age of 14 [13].

While TV may isolate children, the reverse causal direction is also plausible – lonely children may turn to TV for entertainment and companionship. Children who are marginalized by their peers use TV to escape the stresses of their lives and meet their

social needs [14]. Conversely, children who are socially integrated spend less time watching TV [15]. Thus, it can be argued that it is social isolation that motivates excessive media use.

Overall, it is most likely that both effects occur – children who watch more TV become more socially isolated, which leads them to spend more time watching TV [4].

### **Harmful Health Material Targeted At Consumers**

#### *Media And Childhood Obesity*

Dietz and Gortmaker reported that each additional hour of TV viewing per week increased the risk of obesity by 2% [16]. The experimental study by Robinson found strong evidence of a causal link between TV viewing and children being overweight [17]. In India, this association has also been emphasized.

The mechanism of effect of TV exposure on overweight risk is undoubtedly multi-factorial. It appears to operate independently from reduced physical activity. Excessive TV exposure may instead operate through the extensive advertising messages for unhealthy foods targeted at very young children or from a tendency of children to snack while watching TV [4].

#### *Media And Eating Disorders*

The print media promotes an unrealistically thin body ideal that, in turn, is at least partially responsible for promoting eating disorders. One prospective study of thin ideal-promoting media use in young adolescent girls found that decreases in magazine reading over 16 months was associated with decrease in eating disordered symptoms [4].

Field, *et al*, observed that the majority of the preadolescent and adolescent girls in their school based study were unhappy with their body weight and shape. This discontentment was strongly related to the frequency of reading fashion magazines [18].

#### *Media And Smoking*

Research has demonstrated a strong association between exposure to certain mass media messages and smoking in adolescents. For instance, more than half of adolescent smoking initiation has been linked to watching smoking in movie. India faced a lot of

controversy with the ban on on-screen smoking in films and television programs [4].

#### *Media And Alcohol Drinking*

It has been shown that exposure to alcohol advertising and TV programming is associated with positive beliefs about alcohol consumption. Although such cross-sectional studies do not prove causation (only association), it is of interest that in a 1990 study, 56% of students in grades 5 to 12 said that alcohol advertising encourages them to drink [19].

Another example of inappropriate activity targeted at consumers in the social media world is the marketing of drugs. While direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical marketing is only legal in the US and New Zealand, Liang & Mackey 2011, all of the top 10 global pharmaceutical corporations and some illegal online drug sellers have presence in the social media world, such as Facebook, Twitter/Friendster, sponsored blogs [5].

#### *Public Display of Unhealthy Behaviours*

Other harmful and pernicious images can be seen on social video platforms, such as people displaying self injury behaviours, hurting others, or taking drugs voluntarily. Over the last decade, the presence of nonsuicidal self-injury on the Internet has grown considerably (Whitlock, Lader & Conterio 2007), especially among young people, with recent research suggesting that adolescents are avid consumers of these videos researched Duggan et al, in 2011 [5].

Lewis and colleagues analyzed the top 100 YouTube videos on 'self-injury' and 'self-harm' and found that these videos were viewed over two million times [21].

Viewers rated this explicit, self-harm imagery positively, and many of these videos had been selected as favourites over 12,000 times as reported by Lewis et al. in 2011.

In addition to these unhealthy behaviours, there are countless YouTube videos showing people using drugs: injecting themselves with heroin, sniffing cocaine or glue, and using other emerging drugs such as *salvia divinorum* documented Lange et al, in 2010 [5].

#### *Psychological Impact From Accessing Inappropriate Social Media Content*

Accessing social media content that is salient, with no warnings about disturbing or offensive material, can cause unintended psychological impact on its

viewers, especially when accessed by minors without adult supervision. An example of this was published in *The Lancet*, where a six-year old boy about to undergo surgery viewed the full surgical procedure on YouTube without editing or warning, with the result that his parents cancelled the operation the following day [5].

Overall, health professionals need to be aware that patients access social media sites for information about their health, and most of these sites are not regulated inquired O’Keeffe et al, in 2011. Clinicians need to anticipate the psychological impact and misconceptions patients may already have about their condition, prognosis, treatment plans, and procedures due to accessing inappropriate and incorrect content online. This is especially important with younger patients.

### *Cyber Bullying*

Use of social media also creates an opportunity for emotional distress from receiving threatening, harassing, or humiliating communication from another teen, called cyber bullying. In California, approximately 23% of teens report being threatened by a peer reported CHIS, in 2001. Lenhart had earlier in 2007 reported that Cyber bullying appears similar in prevalence to offline bullying. Further studies on Cyber bullying by Kowalski in 2000 have been shown to cause higher levels of depression and anxiety for victims than traditional bullying and has also been connected to cases of youth suicide with teens known to engage in reading hurtful comments days before their suicide attempts [7].

Those most at risk for cyber bullying include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and allied youth. “Allied youth” refers to young people who are openly supportive of LGBT youth. A 2010 study found that 54% of these youths report being cyber bullied within the last 30 days emphasized Blumenfeld in 2010. He also reported females are the next most likely group to be cyber bullied, with 21% of female teens reporting cyber bullying.

Another significant research in the same field was done by Ybarra in 2004 who concluded that those who were victims of online harassment were also more likely to be perpetrators. Teens were the most at risk for cyber bullying were also those at risk of offline harms, such as teens who had experienced sexual or physical abuse or those lived in poor home environments Berkman had studied in 2008.

### *Online Sexual Solicitation And Predation*

Unwanted online sexual solicitation is defined as “the act of encouraging someone to talk about sex, to do something sexual, or to share personal sexual information even when that person does not want to” Ybarra had earlier stated in 2007 [7].

Collins in 2011 researched on this sensitive issue and concluded that online sexual predation occurs when an adult makes contact with a minor with intent to engage in sexual activities that would result in statutory rape. Youth were much more likely to receive sexual solicitation between same-age youth than sexual predation and most of these solicitations come from same age peers who are known offline.

Shocking and disappointing facts by Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelor in 2006 stated the sexual solicitation rate for teens was estimated at between 13–19%. In addition, 16% of teens using the internet said they have considered meeting someone they have only talked to online and 8% have actually done so concluded Cox in 2007 [7].

Titillating violence in sexual contexts and comic violence are particularly dangerous, because they associate positive feelings with hurting others. Child initiated virtual violence may be even more profound than those of passive media[21].

### **India – A Long Way to Go**

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended guidelines, which has been revised recently, for use of media in children (50):

- (1) not allowing the bedroom to be a media center with TV, video games, and Internet access;
- (2) limiting media time to 1 to 2 hours of quality programming;
- (3) discouraging TV viewing for children younger than 2 years ;
- (4) viewing and discussing content together;
- (5) turning off the TV when no one is watching and during meals; and
- (6) being a good media role model.

Pediatricians must become cognizant of the pervasive influence that the wide and expanding variety of entertainment media has on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents. The AAP also makes recommendations to the entertainment industry to avoid violent content.

Pediatricians should advocate for a simplified, universal, content-based media-rating system to help

parents guide their children to make healthy media choices. Just as it is important that parents know the ingredients in food they may feed to their children, they should be fully informed about the content of the media their children may use.

No such guidelines exist in India. The Indian Academy of Pediatrics should take the lead in formulating and implementing the guidelines to help parents and children to develop healthy media using habits pervasive influence that the wide and expanding variety of entertainment media has on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents.

### Conclusion/Summary

All available evidence suggests that social media will have a growing and pervasive effect on human interaction across cultures. The effects on our collective mental health are mixed thus far; however, the potential for broad scale influence on positive social norms and improved coping efficacy is undeniable.

Researchers and practitioners are encouraged by the potential to reach even the most underserved subpopulations in a cost-effective manner. Social media interventions hold great promise in reinforcing both pro-social messages and serving as important adjuncts to other levels of care delivery [3].

We need to find ways to optimize the role of media in our society, taking advantage of their positive attributes and minimizing their negative ones. The ultimate goal is to reach youth with positive messaging.

Embracing media rather than trying to counteract it promises to be an effective tool in shaping the behavior of children and adolescents [4].

Social media is not just about designing and publishing content; it is also crucial to consider the way content is disseminated because it has the potential to 'become viral' in the online community [5].

This review presents a glimpse of the possible harm that social media can inflict on consumers when it is misused and has stated the harm it has already done to your children.

Social media has the potential to overcome many of the reading and writing barriers in health literacy. However, due to the salient nature of social media and the social influences surrounding its use, consumers and patients are

likely to be subjected to greater risks when unsafe content is consumed than in the pre-social media world.

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