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Review Article- 2024

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Abstract

The incredible rise of internet and smart technologies in the previous few decades has transformed communication and networking between people in most societies worldwide. Social media has emerged as one of the marvels of the internet age and millions of people regularly use a number of social media applications for various purposes. While it has many benefits in increasing social connectedness and easing communication, social media also has a number of negative consequences as evidenced by recent studies. Excessive social media use can be detrimental to younger age groups and also females according to a number of research studies. In this short review, the research evidence on the negative effects of social media use on women were examined and the most salient points were discussed in the context of the transforming digital landscape. There is sound evidence that social media use fosters social comparison among young girls/women and this can lead to issues in body image, depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. The gender differences are inherent in the nature of internet and social media use among the two sexes right since childhood, and the growing realization of the negative consequences of social media posits a reconsideration of the extent to which technologies are integrated into our daily lives. The review also discusses the implications of the research evidence for parents, school administrators, professionals and policy makers.

Keywords: *Social media use, internet use, mental health, mental disorders, gender/sex differences.*

Introduction

The growth of the internet is one of the most significant events in the previous several decades and it has completely transformed the way humans communicate and network with one another. The development of smart technologies, social media, video/audio streaming, video games, etc. have paralleled the rise of the internet and millions of people worldwide regularly use the various aspects of internet technology today. Social media is a big part of the internet and it broadly defines various web platforms or digital technologies which allow sharing of ideas and virtual communication

between individuals on the internet.[1] Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter (or X), Snapchat and LinkedIn are some of the most popular social media sites and a few major ones have more than a billion people who have signed up.[2]

Most social media sites operate as virtual networks of people and the apps' features allow users to share, exchange or co-work on various forms of digital content, through use of multimedia (audio, video), text and other internet-based technologies.[3,4] Social media has been immersed in most people's lives particularly in the past two decades due to the growth of cheap internet and smart devices in most parts of the world.[5] Social media grew so quickly because of its purported social utility of networking and communication; however, over the previous two decades, it has been gradually realized that social media also produces various negative effects on health and wellbeing.[6] There is a lot of scientific research being conducted on the effects of social media and these will eventually shape the policies and regulations regarding safe or healthy use of internet and social media. Until then, it is important to examine the evidences for and against social media and internet use and also assess the credibility of the various claims and facts regarding social media use that are prevalent today.

Social Media Use and Mental Health

The harms of social media have existed for as long as the social media applications themselves. At present, it is generally regarded that social media has both positive and negative effects on people.[7,8] The use of social media has generally been related to poorer mental health and higher risks for anxiety, depression, eating disorders, poorer sleep quality, social isolation, self-harm, suicidality, etc.[9-11] Using social media has also been found to be positively related to high psychological distress and fear of missing out, and low body and life satisfaction and self-esteem.[9] These effects are more pronounced among people who use social media for longer than average durations and/or among young people. When used at optimal levels, social media also has a range of positive effects such as increased access to information, emotional support and network building, self-expression, etc.[9,12] It depends on the individuals, whether they are able to derive harms or gains from social media, and there are millions of people every year who suffer through the negative consequences of social media use, and may or may not receive professional help.

The use of social media among youths has been highlighted across societies and countries as an issue of grave concern.[13] Most social media apps are known to promote social comparison and this can be detrimental during formative years of childhood or adolescence.[14] Use of social media like Facebook and Instagram by school age children can directly lead to poorer performances on academics as well. Apart from the direct mental health implications of social media use among youths, there are also higher risks for cyber bullying and propensity towards digital addiction.[15-17] Hence, social media is intricately related to various aspects of development, and problematic social

media use can be both an effect or cause of various mental disorders.[18] Thus, it is not surprising that most health assessment and diagnostic measures for youths now also include a dimension of internet or social media use.[19] However, the effects of social media are not the same across all demographic characteristics, and there are some groups more likely to be affected than others.

Women and Social Media

The difference in physical, psychological and social characterization produced by biological distinction of the sexes or gender is one of the foundations of research in social sciences.[20] It is commonly accepted that males and females differ in a range of variables related to dispositions, attitudes, skills, cognitions, affect, etc. and this can have a wide range of implications in personal, social and occupational lives.[21,22] In terms of social media as well, it is being increasingly reported that women or females are more likely to experience the negative effects of social media. The purported effects of social media on women and girls have been a topic of deliberation in recent years ever since social media giants of Facebook/ Instagram were embroiled in legal controversies for attempting to cover up internal research findings related to Instagram negatively harming young girls.[23] It highlighted a growing trend felt across most societies that women were far likelier to have negative experiences on social media compared to men.[24] As the number of young people accessing internet every year increases, this issue is more pronounced among young girls for a range of different reasons.

Research has consistently revealed that men and women fixate of different aspects of the internet. Women have been found to place higher emphasis on creating positive self-presentation online on social media compared to men who primarily used it to gain information.[25] This is also related to their propensity for positive self-presentation through selfies, and women have been found to indulge significantly more in taking and posting selfies and pictures online.[26] Among adolescents as well, it has been found that girls spend more time on social media compared to boys, and the consequences of heavy digital use on mental health is higher among teenage girls.[27,28] When using social media, women or girls are more likely to use it for social comparison rather than for simply networking or finding friends.[29.30] This tendency for social comparison along with unreachable standards portrayed online means that many girls who overuse social media have higher risks for depression, low self-esteem and self-harm.[31-33] The issues with self esteem are closely related to body image concerns and many young girls suffer from it which often leads to mood disorders, eating disorders or other forms of psychopathology.[34]

One prime example of the nature in which social media differently affect both genders is apparent in the study by Thompson and Lougheed (2012) on Facebook usage among young boys are girls.[35] They found that females spent more time overall on Facebook, were more likely to lose sleep over it or face body image concerns and also felt more closer to the friends they made on

Facebook.[35] Females are also more likely to seek approval of others around them of their posted images.[36] Often at young ages, social integration happens differently for the genders and this can have long term consequences.[37] The nature in which females socialize and bond is more amenable to digital means, and thus, it is likelier to affect their mental health as well. While for most women, social media can be beneficial in providing an outlet for expression and connection; it is only for a minor proportion who overuse social media or are victims of cyberbullying, for whom social media becomes problematic.[38] Females are also more likely to experience sex/gender based abuse in various forms on social media, which further affects their overall experiences on social media.[24]

Explanations for Gender Differences

The differences in use of internet and social media often starts out very young. At present, children grow up in environments inundated with various technologies and they start picking it up at very early ages.[39] By the age of 8 years, children are already spending an average of two hours a day with various screens. As they grow older, they spend increasingly more time with devices and venture into social media actively by adolescence or teenage years. Thus, internet and social media have become inevitable parts of the development and socialization processes, and children learn a great deal through these mediums.[40] For girls, it is not surprising that they learn a lot about gender roles through social media and it shapes their gender identity development as well.[39] This can turn problematic if social media present harmful gender roles and perpetuate ideas based in patriarchal structures and values. This can lead to feelings of disillusionment and disconnect among young girls as their role models are often portrayed in stereotypical unrealistic ways.[41] The various standards of beauty and femininity portrayed in social media is often distorted and this can be particularly problematic for girls who engage in social comparisons and develop unhealthy associations about body image, food, relationships, etc.[25, 42] This can turn to negative attitudes and become precursors to various mental health conditions.

Among adolescent and teenage girls, it has been found that their developing brains react more intensely to specific digital content, particularly images and videos, which in turn can lead to episodes of self-comparison and subsequent negative effects.[43,44] Pre-adolescent girls between ages of 11 and 13 years have been found to be most vulnerable.[45] Young girls often see picturesque ideals in images and videos which are often enhanced by filters and special effects. Nonetheless, viewing arrays of biased multimedia like this can influence their internal standards of comparison for which they often end up falling short.[46] It is even more crucial during teenage years when girls are actively looking to establish their individuality and represent themselves in society. Thus, image or video-based apps like Instagram and Snapchat are even riskier for girls.[44] It is even more problematic for girls who are already facing issues at those ages for academic, personal or other reasons. It has been found that among girls who already feel bad about their bodies, social media like

Instagram was only likely to make it worse.[36] Moreover, despite the negative feelings, girls are also more likely to continue using social media, which highlights its impulsive nature and propensity for addiction or dependence.[36]

Despite a huge amount of research evidence on negative effects of social media on women's mental health, there have also been many other studies which were not able to find such associations. There has also been a tendency to overemphasize the negative effects while downplaying the positive effects of social media. Some studies have found that social media usage was unrelated to mental health functioning.[10] Another longitudinal study found that social media usage did not influence in any remarkable way, changes in individuals' anxiety and depression levels.[47] In fact, social media seems to affect mental health only under certain circumstances and for specific groups only.[48] There have been a lot of similar studies which did not find significant associations between social media usage and mental health; however, it is often the positive results only that are sensationalized by the media and which tend to affect people's perceptions.[49] In fact, social media can also provide a range of advantages and uses, particularly for women in their social and occupational spheres.[49] It seems to depend more on the level or extent of use of social media, and like most things, overindulgence is only related to various negative effects and not responsible use.

Implications for Women's Mental Health

Social media is one of the marvels of modern technology and it has the potential to play more significant roles in our lives. However, there are inherent dangers associated with maladaptive or excessive use of social media and its effects are particularly pronounced among women and young girls as evidenced by research studies cited in this review. Although the results might be mixed, but most scientists, parents and teachers/ administrators support the notion that social media negatively impacts women's mental health. In fact, this relationship is often a complicated one with the dynamics of self-comparison, body image and mental health issues in the mix such that it is difficult to pinpoint only social media as the antecedent.[44] Nonetheless, it is logical to also come up with intervention and prevention strategies to mitigate the negative effects before they emerge.

In today's age, it is crucial for youths to be taught about digital literacy from a young age. For this, parents, teachers and caretakers have to be actively involved in supervising the early instances of smart phone or social media use by young children.[44] Since, social media use starts out very young, it makes sense for education regarding social media to be also conducted at very early age for best possible outcome. It is crucial for kids to understand the perils of social media use and also the various ways in which social media can lead to negative body image, psychological distress, etc.[43] At young ages, there might be various 'windows of vulnerabilities' when children are at the highest risk of social media's negative effects.[45] It is crucial for parents to be aware of the same and be able to provide education and active support during those sensitive periods. It is up to the parents and

guardians to encourage a healthy habit of social media use among youths and particularly girls. This includes encouraging moderation in use and also regularly checking on chances of cyberbullying or other online deviances.[48] Children have to be encouraged to take up other age-appropriate activities alongside social media or internet and it is up to the parents to provide the right opportunities for holistic growth.[48]

It is also the responsibility of policymakers and stakeholders of the various digital platforms to ensure that social media is not being mis utilized or negatively impacting youths or girls. In many countries, variations of Digital acts have been passed which have effectively vouched to improve the safety of women in internet and social media, and reduce instances of abuse, stalking or harassment.[24] App developers and stakeholders are also responsible for creating social media products after consideration of negative effects, and also putting various measures in place to prevent misuse or overuse. It is up to companies to moderate content and hand out sanctions in order to create safer space online for women.[24] Since a great deal of social comparison is caused by the hyper real content posted on social media, it us up to the companies to come up with appropriate policies to control their spread or provide relevant disclaimers. As digital tools, there is still huge scope to develop them to their best possible versions with lowest risks.

Conclusion

The use of social media applications on the internet has exploded in the previous decades and it has brought with it a range of both positive and negative outcomes. In terms of the negatives, social media has been implicated in causing negative mental health outcomes, particularly in women and which is manifested in psychological distress, diagnosis of disorders, low self-esteem, high suicidality and self-harm, etc. The scientific research studies that have been conducted on this issue generally point towards the positive association between social media use and negative mental health, although the findings are not unanimous or accepted by all. Generally, social media has both positive and negative effects, and the latter is more likely caused by overuse of social media or use under special circumstances or by specific groups like pre-adolescent girls. These findings have highlighted the need for better monitoring of social media use for young children and girls by parents, and also better education and awareness on digital literacy from young ages. The negative mental health effect of social media is often a complicated issue involving multiple players and multi-level processes and it can only be mitigated by logical and scientific steps aimed towards creating positive online environments and positive experiences for everyone.

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