

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND DEPRESSION AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract: Social networking sites have become quite popular among people, especially among young adults. Social media, including sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, has evolved into a virtual community, where users can interact with each other beyond their geographical boundaries. Researches in the past argue about the social aspects of internet use, but not much is known about how social media use is associated with psychological impact on youth¹. The aim of this systematic review is to find out if social networking sites, which have become a pervasive part of modern world, can lead to depression in youngsters. This research paper is a theoretical paper based on secondary data that includes the analysis of related content available on the internet, social media and researches published in journals. A multidatabase search was conducted to review papers published in last one decade.

Key Words: Social media, Depression, Psychological distress, Youngsters, Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Most of us today are familiar with the term social media. It is a common sight to see people talking about and using social media, be it to maintain their connections or to be at pace with the world. The advancement of technology and invention of the internet and social networking sites has apparently resulted in shrinking of the world. It has become easy to connect with one another by means of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Be it youngsters, elderly or oldies, most of the people these days are available on the online social groups that help connect and reconnect with friends and family members. Several researches in the past have shown that teens and youth, who use online mediums to connect, are the most vulnerable groups that suffer from social isolation, depression and anxiety because of excess use of internet (Fleming & Rickwood, Sept 2004).

Youth today is so lost in the unrealistic virtual world of internet that it possibly misses out on critical social skills development like verbal communication, face-to-face interaction etc. They prefer spending majority of their free time interacting with their peers, family members and sometimes even unknown people through an online screen. It is a common sight to see, for example, four people sitting in a room and constantly busy on their phones rather than talking to each other. This scenario is in contradiction to how it used to be in olden days when evening talks with friends and family was a routine activity. College students often use internet for accessing social networking sites, most commonly Facebook and Twitter. It won't be wrong here to say that even Youtube and Instagram are frequently used by the internet active population. However, their contextual motives behind using these sites may be different. Some may use it to strengthen different facet of their offline connections (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, November-December 2008).

¹ Youth: every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years of age (source: unesco.org)

While it is a well known fact that face-to-face communication is important for healthy living, it won't be wrong here to say that not doing so and constant engagement in the offline world might lead to isolation, depression, anxiety, irritation and emotional distress.

While some studies suggest that lot of social media involvement of youth results in their online harassment, some anecdotal case studies suggest that addiction to online social networks may even put some users on potential mental health risk. Some researches even indicated that social networks can be used to achieve health behaviour change. Meanwhile, there is a possibility that people using different social media platforms end up multitasking. Like for example they may frequently switch between different social networking sites or engage in social media on multiple devices. Studies in the past have shown that online multitasking is associated with poor attention, cognition and mood (Primack, Shensa, Escobar-Viera, Barrett, & Sidani, December, 2016).

Though there have been researches in the past on the usage of internet, hours spent and its impact of youngsters in India, the studies addressing the psychological impact of online social networks on youth in the Indian context is scarce. Therefore, this systematic review of literature, available on both online and offline mediums, intend to provide conceptual insight into the emerging phenomenon of addiction to social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The study tries to explore the relation between youth's use of social networking sites for communication and psychological distress which includes depression and anxiety.

Psychological Distress, Depression and Anxiety Defined

The term psychological distress can be described as the unpleasant feeling or emotions often characterized by symptoms of depression like lost interest, sadness etc.; and anxiety like restlessness (J. & Ross., 2002). Researchers usually describe Psychological distress as a non-specific mental health problem (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1982). However, according to Wheaton's study, psychological distress is clearly characterized by depression and anxiety symptoms (Wheaton, 2007). Drapeau et al., in their research provided a critical review of prevalence of psychological distress among general population and found that risk and protective factor are split in three categories: (1) socio-demographic factors; (2) stress-related factors; and (3) personal resources (Drapeau, Marchand, & Beaulieu-Prevost, 2012).

According to American Psychological Association (APA), *Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. It is said that people suffering from anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns* (Association, 2018).

Meanwhile, World Health Organisation explains depression as *a common mental disorder, characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness and poor concentration* (World Health Organisation, 2012).

METHODS

The study is based on secondary data sources. A thorough search for published literature available in various databases that included journals, e-journals and web articles was conducted. Articles and researches related to Media, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences. Google and Google scholar were searched. Recent researches published in the last one decade i.e between years 2008 to 2018 were reviewed. Out of hundreds of researches reviewed only those were taken into consideration, which were related to media as well as psychology and behaviour sciences. They were limited to primarily peer-reviewed journals that included recent scholarly work to provide background and support information about the topic. The keywords that

were searched included: social media, Facebook, Twitter, youth, depression, anxiety, social networking sites and psychological distress. Several articles detailing the increase in time spent on social media by youth, association of social networking sites and depression among youth were taken into consideration. Most of researches (conducted both in India and abroad) reviewed, were conducted on older adolescents (age 18-24 years of age), which falls in the age category of youth. During the process of systematic review, it was found that there are not many researches linked to social media and psychological distress in India, therefore most of the research articles considered were based on foreign studies. Meanwhile, since the use of social media is prevalent world-wide, it is assumed that its impact under the similar situation would be same in India as well.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Radovic et al. conducted a qualitative study on 23 adolescents (18 females and 5 males), who were diagnosed with depression to explore how social media may influence or be influenced by psychological distress. It was found that respondents with depression use internet more frequently for online interaction especially with strangers. Also, it was found that many have used the internet for positive use that included entertainment, humour, creating social connection etc. however, they also experienced negative consequences of social media use similar to other adolescents such as cyberbullying and feeling distressed over social comparisons (Radovic, Gmelin, Stein, & Miller, 2017).

A study conducted to find the association between social media use and depression among U.S. young adults revealed a positive relation between the two. It was found that social media was significantly associated with increased depression (Lin, et al., 2016).

A study found that depression sufferers typically belong to high connectivity close-knit networks. This means that a depressed individual tend to take advantage of social media to build a close network of trusted friends. They seek social support and feel comfortable sharing their psychological experiences with this group (Choudhury, Gamon, Counts, & Horvitz, 2013). This means that social media may be responsible for the onset of depression for its users which may have negative effect on the individuals.

A survey study of 401 undergraduate Facebook users found that no. of Facebook friends is associated with stronger perceptions of social support. This is in turn related to less stress and less physical illness, thereby greater well-being. The study revealed that number of Facebook friends emerged as the stronger predictor of perceived social support (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013).

Jelenchich et al. in their research found no evidence supporting the association between 'use of social networking sites' and depression in an older adolescent sample. Using Experience Sample Method (ESM) approach, the researchers conducted an online survey on 190 older adolescent university students. (Undergraduate university students between the ages of 18 and 23 years were categorized as older adolescents). The study that used a real-time assessment of internet use and a collaborative clinical screening instrument for depression, didn't find any link between social networking sites and depression among its sample (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013).

Choudhury et al. examined the potential use of social media (Twitter) to detect and diagnose major depressive disorder in individuals. Researchers used 'crowdsourcing' to collect gold standard labels on a cohort's depression and proposed a variety of social media measures such as language, emotion, style, ego network and user engagement to characterize depressive behaviour. It was found that individuals with depression showed lower social activity, greater negative emotion etc. The study found that such individuals

in depressive state of mind belonged to highly clustered close-knit networks (Choudhury, Gamon, Counts, & Horvitz, 2013).

Becker et al. in their research, which was conducted to find the association between media multitasking and symptoms of depression and social anxiety, found that growing trend of multitasking with various media options might be responsible for mental health problems related to mood, anxiety and depression. The researchers investigated 318 participants to measure their personality characteristics, media use, depression and social anxiety (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013).

Pantic et al. conducted a study to explore the relationship between social networking and depression indicators in adolescent population. The researchers interviewed 160 anonymous high school students and used structured questionnaire to know about the average daily time spent on social networking sites. They found that online social networking is related to depression (Pantic et al., 2012).

A study by Moreno et al. suggested that college students commonly display symptoms of depression on social networking sites like Facebook. The study found that students who receive online support from their pals are more likely to discuss their depressive symptoms publicly on Facebook. The researchers asserted that social networking sites can be an avenue for identifying students at risk for depression or fighting stigma related to mental health conditions (Moreno, et al., 2011).

A study by Kim et al. conducted to explore the relationship between Internet use and psychological well-being showed that people feeling lonely or those who did not have good social skills could develop strong compulsive Internet use behaviours, which could lead to negative life outcomes like harming other daily activities such as work or relationships. The study that started from the assumption that one of the major motives behind individuals' internet use is to relieve psychological problems like loneliness and depression, suggested that internet use might isolate individuals from healthy social activities and lead them to more loneliness instead of relieving their original problems (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009).

In another study that tried to examine the relationship between social internet use and loneliness, it was found that the level of mood loneliness after online chat was higher than that in face-to-face interaction. It was suggested that the level of mood loneliness among the respondents elevated during the computer-mediated communication (Mu, 2009).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A social networking service is an online platform that helps people build and extend their social networks. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the latest online communication tools that enable the users to build a public or even sometimes semi-public profile, while viewing others' online social networks. Be it young or adult, all are active participants of social networking sites these days. It also lets its users interact with people of common interests all around the world virtually. Researches on social media and its use by the adolescents typically focus on its positive attributes, considerably less is known about its negative side, typically psychological aspects. Furthermore, since the potential to interact with known as well as the unknown is high on the social media networks, it becomes important to study the usage of social media by its users and how it impacts their development, particularly psychological functions.

The review of different qualitative studies suggest that youth that uses social media more frequently is more prone to symptoms of depression and anxiety. It was found that adolescents with symptoms of depression

tend to engage in more of online interaction especially with strangers. They belonged to highly clustered close-knit networks. While many of users use the social media for positive engagement like entertainment, humour, creating social networks etc, there are users who indulge in negative consequences like cyberbullying and feeling distressed over social comparisons. It was found that youth sometimes even use social media platforms to reveal their depressive state of mind. While using the social networking sites boosts up an individual's self esteem, there are evidences that computer-mediated communication elevates the level of mood of loneliness among youth. Users of social media, who use these sites regularly, exhibit significant psychosocial challenge, including problems in behaviour and depression. The result of the research clearly indicates that use of social networking sites is directly related to psychological distress among youth. Which means more an individual uses sites like Facebook or Twitter higher are the chances that he would suffer from psychological distress that included anxiety and depression.

The systematic review of past researches, related to social media and psychological distress among youngsters, suggests that frequent use of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter often make its users, especially the youth, vulnerable to depression and anxiety. The study may be useful for framing policies and strategies regarding the use of social media by the youth. The result is an output from a theoretical and conceptual perspective, therefore it is suggested that empirical research will be beneficial in this regard. Also, since, there are not many such studies in Indian context, it is suggested that more researches are conducted in this regard while adopting our problems; and socio-culture and socio-economic parameters.

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