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REVIEW PAPER

Digital well being: implications of social media on adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Social media and the internet have become a part of the daily life of children more so during the ongoing pandemic. Social media apart from being a platform for entertainment and communication has emerged as a mental health hazard. This paper reviews some published literature on the impact of social media on the health of children and young people. On the one hand, social media provides for cognitive and social development and on the other poses risk for potential problems like cyberbullying, Facebook depression, sexting, and exposure to inappropriate content. Here we discuss a few of the many problems that a child faces in incessant use of social media and provide a basic outline of what could be done to tackle this digital endemic.

Keywords: Child psychiatry; behavioral problems; general pediatrics; digital footprint; bullying; suicide.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet or the World Wide Web has become a part of today's world, even more so during the pandemic, leaving people indoors with social media as the source of communication. Late childhood and adolescence is a critical time for social and emotional development. This life stage has been hugely affected by the universal adoption of the internet as a source of information, communication and entertainment. With the introduction of the internet at a tender age, the new generation of children and adolescents became the first group to use it on a large scale and among the first to experience problems associated with excessive internet use.¹

Social media offers a collaborative space for social interaction between seemingly infinite numbers of people. Children and adolescents benefit by engaging in various forms of social

media, which enhances communication, social connection and technical skills. The internet is a research site for testing theories of technology diffusion and media effects capable of integrating modes of communication. Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram offer multiple daily opportunities for connecting with friends, classmates and people with shared interests. Several benefits have been identified about the routine use of social media platforms. "The six key overarching benefits were identified as (1) increased interactions with others (2) more readily available, and tailored information, (3) increased accessibility and widening access to health information, (4) peer, social, emotional support, (5) public health surveillance, and (6) potential to influence health policy."²

Social media can be used in several ways, like online profile, texting, walls and boards for posting content, online dating,

and blogging. John and MacArthur, in their article, concluded that 75% of teenagers own cell phones and 25 percent use them for social media, and 24 percent use them for instant messaging.³ The above submission shows that much of this generation's social and emotional development occurs on the internet and cell phones. Adolescence is a period of transition between childhood and adulthood. During this period, identity, peer relationship, sexuality, and self-esteem evolve. A novel transformation is noted in manners of communication and the establishment of relationships. Weiser conducted studies and concluded that that people's interaction online shaped their offline way of living.⁴ Other problems associated with social media awareness include internet addiction and sleep deprivation.⁵

Facebook depression

The term 'Facebook depression' was coined in 2011 in an article that examined the effect of social media on young people.⁶ A recent study concludes that 'daily overuse of various forms of media and technology harms the health of all children, preteens, and teenagers, which in turn, makes them more prone to psychological disorders like anxiety and depression.'⁷ Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram are based on the idea of sharing pictures. Children share photos that they deem perfect for the site. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an essential element of adolescents' life. If the response to such upload is not as per expectation, it leads to depression and self-doubt. These over a while may lead to full-blown depression and anxiety issues. An interview-based study conducted with high school students found a statistically significant correlation between time spent on social networking and participant scores on the Beck Depression Inventory. It concluded that depression and online social networking were related.⁸

As with offline depression, teens who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to questionable sites that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices or self-destructive behaviours. A study of risk-taking behaviour found that the key determinant was the person's nature, where Facebook enhanced feelings of connectedness for well-adjusted people. Still, those prone to depression were likely to feel more disconnected.⁹

Cyberbullying and online harassment

Cyberbullying is deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing or hostile information about another person. Online harassment is often used interchangeably with the term "cyberbullying". For some, the appeal of cyberbullying comes from the anonymity of the attack. It can lead to short- and long-term negative social, academic, and health issues for both the bully and the target. It causes profound psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and suicide.^{6,10} A survey by Kwan and Skoric examined cyberbullying among students aged 13–17 years in Singapore. They concluded that social

media is just another channel through which playground bullying now reaches the home.¹¹ The study 'Cyberbullying and the Digital Self' presents a case study of a cyberbully victim who, following her parent's insistence, deleted her Facebook account, went on to commit suicide 'as if the death of her online persona foreshadowed her death'. The case study provides an example where the 'digital or online self' is an extension of the actual self, implying that it is not as easy as not logging on or just turning off the computer for victims of cyberbullying.^{12,13}

Online risk-taking behaviour

Young people on social media sites are more prone to risk-taking behaviour that may place their health at risk. A study by MA Moreno of 500 publicly viewable MySpace profiles showed 54% of young people displayed risk behaviour.⁹ In some cases, online risk-taking behaviour can lead to cyberbullying, as in the tragic case of Amanda Todd that resulted in suicide. What started as a one-off incident in the year in an online chat room where a man convinced her to expose herself turned nasty when the man threatened a year later via Facebook to disclose her photos if she did not reveal more. Amanda was unable to escape from being victimized.¹⁴ Other notorious examples exist, such as Jessi Slaughter, the Internet alias of an 11-year-old girl who used YouTube to disparage others and subsequently fell victim to the abuse of those she had slandered.¹⁵ A poll showed that half of the cases, aged 13-18 years often communicate through the internet with someone they have not met in person. One third has talked about potentially meeting face to face. Some have endangered their lives, like the case of Cynthia Osokogo, where her Facebook friend raped and strangled her to death in a hotel room in Lagos, Nigeria, on the first face to face encounter for a business deal.¹⁶ The problems on social media are not only sexual but also includes deceptive marketing policies and identity thieves. They thrive on the digital footprint of the children and their posts daily.

Distorted sense of reality

Media sites are constantly using their digital footprint to manipulate children. Many social media sites display multiple advertisements such as banner ads, behaviour ads that target people based on their web-browsing habits and demographic-based ads that focus people based on a specific factor such as age, gender, education, marital status, etc. It influences not only the tendencies of adolescents but also their views on what is expected. The content portrayed on social media and the internet often isn't actual, leading kids to believe in false realities. Pictures that are edited to look flawless and influencers who always seem to be on vacations and always at best of themselves every time can be highly damaging to kids when they're growing up and figuring out their self-identity and detrimental to their psychological development.

Self-esteem and well-being

Social support is defined as the perception that someone is

being cared for. With the advent of the internet, this support system is lost in the fog of the online persona. Spending countless hours on the internet, children spend minimal time with family and friends. They miss out on real-life interaction, which results in distorted social skills leading to social isolation. They end up alone as they fail to develop any meaningful relationship. A randomized controlled trial of university students exposed to one of three conditions (their own Facebook profile, a mirror or a control group) found that self-esteem was highest when students viewed or updated their own Facebook profile. This result is attributed to the participant's ability to selectively self-present by choosing their best photo or personal information in creating their Facebook profile.¹⁷

When the children start to gain self-identity and psychosocial growth, any negative ideas and comments on their online persona can trigger depression and self-doubt. Tiggemann and Slater demonstrated a link between social media and body image concerns in a large study involving 1087 girls aged between 13 and 15 years. The study also showed a relationship between the number of online friends and worries about body image.¹⁸ Another study concluded as 'self-esteem was negatively related to the frequency of status updates, Facebook intensity and update intensity, suggesting that the more frequently people go on Facebook and update their status and the more meaning they attribute to having Facebook/status updates in their lives, the lower their self-esteem.'¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Technology is a privilege and must not be allowed to hamper life in any way. Nothing on the internet goes unnoticed, and even a tiny mistake of uploading a risqué photo to a distasteful "joke" can come back to haunt in terms of future job opportunities, relationships, and general well-being. Parents need to tell the children the consequence of posting such content online and understand why they must refrain from uploading questionable material. Children need to know that it's entirely unacceptable to cultivate relationships with strangers online, and even more dangerous is hiding an online connection from their parents. Parents need to tell their kids that they are essential to the parent if someone is important to them, no matter where the child meets them. Cultivating a sense of security at home and making it comfortable for children to open up to their parents about their actual events is of utmost necessity. Ensuring communication lines are always open and having children use their device in a public space where they can parent over their shoulders from time to time are potentially more effective strategies than "following" their social accounts.

We must always be on the lookout for changes in children's behaviour. Difficulty sleeping, nervousness, and an unwillingness to go to school may be signs of being cyberbullied or having some problems. Parents must talk with them and never turn a blind eye, hoping they will figure it out

themselves. It is the need of the hour to remind children that they are being loved and cared for at home and making sure that they can recognize inappropriate behaviour. Social media is a necessary evil and is here to stay. Although social media can positively impact the health and well-being of children, it can also pose risks for these vulnerable populations. These risks can be minimized by appropriate website design, identifying those most at risk, and developing strategies to help them manage these risks. There is insufficient research in this area, particularly regarding the impact of social media on younger children in India. From this review, we hope to formulate a proper study design to get a clearer picture of social media risks in children in India and formulate new strategies to tackle the existing problems related to it.

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