TASK 3

Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

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Abstract –

Despite growing evidence of the effects of social media on the mental health of adolescents, there is still a dearth of empirical research into how adolescents themselves perceive social media, especially as knowledge resource or how they draw upon the wider social and media discourses to express a viewpoint.

Thematic analysis suggested that adolescents perceived social media as a threat to mental wellbeing and three themes were identified -

(1) it was believed to cause mood and anxiety disorders for some adolescents,

(2) it was viewed as a platform for cyberbullying, and

(3) the use of social media itself was often framed as a kind of 'addiction'. Future research should focus on targeting and utilizing social media for promoting mental wellbeing among adolescents and educating youth to manage the possible deleterious effects.

Introduction –

Adolescence is a significant period of psychological, biological and social change for young people as they adjust to their emergent needs and develop new skills, responsibilities and intimate relationships. It is during adolescence they develop a sense of identity and greater autonomy.

This is a complex period of the lifespan and one arguably more challenging in contemporary environments as adolescents deal with various personal and educational pressures, different from those experienced by previous generations. Notably, this period is often made more challenging due to the high prevalence of mental health difficulties as it is during adolescence that many mental disorders are detected for the first time.

Social media is a relatively new medium through which adolescents can manage their mental wellbeing. Indeed, young people frequently report turning to sites such as Facebook and Twitter to escape from the external pressures threatening their mental health. Adolescents living in many countries (including low, middle and high income) have seen information and communication technologies such as social media become integral to their education, culture and social life.

Most adolescents now use social media, with figures suggesting that as many as 97% do so regularly (Woods & Scott, 2016). A recent study found that 57% of 3 US teens had begun relationships online, with 50% of respondents having 'friended' someone on Facebook (or similar) to let them know that they were interested romantically. Evidently, social media are coming to play an increasingly significant role in the social and emotional development of adolescents.

Methods –

A qualitative design was utilized to facilitate the exploratory character of the study. The purpose of the project was to build the limited data on the perspectives of adolescents on the potential impact of social media upon mental health and wellbeing. We used a macro social constructionist perspective because this promotes a broader and interpretive layer to analysis. This was considered appropriate because this perspective has formed a basis for many studies exploring young people's experiences and views and reflects the position that children and childhood are constructed phenomena, subject to change. Specifically, this underpinning theoretical foundation allows for an exploration of the how societal and media discourses of social media are reified through the adolescent accounts.

Findings and Understandings –

Participants expressed generally consistent negative views about the potential impact of social media on mental health. While there was some recognition of possible positive effects, the overwhelming consensus amongst participants was that social media was dangerous for adolescent mental health in a broad sense, mostly referring to the mental health of others rather than their own. However, this needs to also be contextualized against their perspectives on mental health as participants had varying understandings of this.

Many of the adolescents were unable to define mental health clearly, often confusing it with mental ill health. Others simply stated that they did not understand the term. This was particularly the case for younger participants who generally framed it as 'things that are happening in your brain' or in terms of specific conditions 'like schizophrenia' or simply not knowing 'I don't understand what mental health is'. For example, some participants said that they did not believe that mental health could be positive, and others asked the moderators for clarification.

There were some contradictions as well between the participants –

1. "Can mental health be positive as well?
   No, it's mental."
2. "it's a dangerous place social media and I think some people don't actually know how dangerous it is. Basically, we don't study it."
3. "Because there's like a ton of very damaging websites, especially like on Tumblr"
4. "And it's dangerous, it's dangerous, people can take advantage on social media"
5. "And then people being shot or stabbed and then they say what happens after. I think that's very traumatizing for someone to see."

Theme one: Social media can cause stress, depression, low self-esteem and suicidal ideation

6. "But then there's other people that just like rant and rant and it's just like, those negative things that even if it's not got any like relation to you, just brings you down"
7. "As well I think that like nowadays, you're taught to have low self-esteem you know like with photo-shopped images and things like that."
8. "I think it [social media] sets a lot of expectations and standards for young people who like at that age, like you're really impressionable."
9. "In the past that's also caused deaths of people being like targeted on social media, they end up committing suicide."

Theme two: Social media opens people to bullying and trolling

10. "I feel like cyberbullying plays a huge part in everyday life. And that comes mainly from social media."
11. "Another downside with social media is, um, say if you think that a picture is good, or other people think it's funny you might get bullied, and you might not tell like your friends or you might not tell like an adult, um, that you're getting bullied on social media."
12. "Um, yeah, it's just bullies like say on the internet, um, if you ask for help and they'll say something then you think that no-one ever will help you, and there's no way out of it."

Theme three: Social media is addictive

13. "Some people can get addicted and feel like they have to stay on that website or social media."
14. "Some people can't survive without a phone. And they don't like take time to talk to their families most of the time"
15. "Social media is like an online drug you can, it has good side effects and bad side effects."

Conclusion –

Social media is now an integral part of adolescent life, with possible benefits and risks to mental wellbeing, and yet these are poorly understood. There has been a significant focus on the negative elements of the internet, which has created a culture of fear around social media, despite some of the possible positive impact on social capital.

However, the view that social media is linked to sleep problems and addiction is recognized by clinical professionals and 21 research. Studies have demonstrated that people can and do suffer from internet addiction and sleep deprivation, as 90% of adolescents will use social media during the day and at night, with 37% losing sleep because of it.

In conclusion therefore, rather than demonizing the process, the way forward may be for adolescents to be actively involved in the development of programs that identify the way to successfully navigate social media and the internet without a deleterious impact on mental health including sleep. Indeed, digital technology is unlikely to go away, and it increasingly becomes integral to adolescents' lives*.*

"There's also no reason to think that digital celibacy will help them be healthier, happier, and more capable adults", and therefore we need to find ways to utilize social media in a more positive way, and in ways that promote positive wellbeing in this group, while better equipping young people to manage the possible dangerous effects. Furthermore, it seems that adolescents need educating about the meanings of mental health and wellbeing, as well as about mental illness and the ways of preventing this or managing it if they are diagnosed with a condition.

Submitted by

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