Original Paper

Social Media and Emotions Literature Review

How Does Social Media Affect Emotional Wellbeing?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the research on the influence of social media on wellbeing revealing both costs and benefits. Social media as a powerful new technology can promote connections between people, facilitate adolescents' development of relationships, and improve people's depressive symptoms. On the other hand, social media may also increase social comparison, which may lead to depression and anxiety; affect adolescents' identity formation; and induce feelings of loneliness. This paper explores the mechanisms behind these influences, concluding that most harms social media have on wellbeing is due to the lack of an accurate understanding of social media. This paper first explores the benefits of social media, then discusses its negative effects on wellbeing, and finally provides some suggests on ways to use social media to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs.

Keywords

social media, emotional wellbeing, social comparison, self-isolation, depressive symptoms

As a newly developed technology, social media has become increasingly dominant in people's lives. As of April 2024, 5.07 billion people, which is 62.6% of world's population, are social media users. Surveys show that 90% of teenagers have used social media, it is a prominent part among young generation's lives, and it drastically changes the traditional way of communication, relationship maintenance, entertainment etc. People's attitude toward social media usage has also gradually changed from being excited to more careful and concerned. It is important for us to understand its effects on people, especially the young generation, to help provide a safer and more positive growing environment.

One of the benefits of social media is that it makes self-disclosure easier to achieve (Walsh et al., 2020). Self disclosure is the act of sharing personal information, and it can facilitate the development of social

relationships (Yang et al., 2019). On social media, People can self-disclose to their entire friend group by posting updates, which is more convenient and immediate compared to offline disclosures. These online self-disclosures provides unique benefits for the fulfilment of adolescents' social needs (Towner et al., 2022). Koutamanis et al.'s 2013 study shows that adolescent's social behaviors on social media affects their ability to initiate offline relationships (Koutamanis et al., 2013). It is a longitudinal study based on 690 Dutch adolescents between 10-17 years old. Participants' online self-disclosure is measured using a scale developed by Schouten, asking participants to rate when they are using instant messaging how much they usually tell close friends about their personal feelings, secrets, and more. Participants' ability to initiate offline friendship is measured using a subscale of a social competence scale (asking participants to rank how difficult it was to start a conversation with someone who you did not know very well, introduce yourself for the first time to someone, and etc.) Results show that online self-disclosure was positively linked with participant's ability to initiate offline friendships. Moreover, Courtois and All's 2012 study on 352 adolescents demonstrated that social networking services are valuable sources of information for offline relationships. For people who scored high on social anxiety scale, looking at profiles and interacting with peers on social networking services can alleviate social anxiety (Courtois & All, 2012). Browsing other's profile and posts online can help people with social anxiety to gain a better understanding of other people's interests and personality, making them more comfortable to initiate a conversation (Dolan, 2024).

In addition, social media's effect on children should be examined more carefully as it is present throughout their developmental stages. According to Vaingankar, youth mainly develop positive mental wellbeing through three features on social media: connecting with friends and global community, engaging with social media content, and expressing themselves on social media. In his 2022 study, he interviewed 25 teenagers shows that these three pathways mentioned before contributed to 5 positive mental health components: (1) positive relationships and social capital, (2) self-concept, (3) coping, (4) happiness, and (5) other relevant aspects of mental health (positivity, personal growth, and psychological well-being) (Vaingankar et al., 2022) The enhanced interaction with friends and connecting with others promotes the development of close relationships with mutual trust, recognition, and a sense of belonging. The various features and virtual group functions of social media made it easier for them to seek a safe space to express their feelings and search for support. These interactions allow them to maintain and enhance positive relationship with people, develop self-concept, learn how to better cope with emotions, and just simply gain happiness.

Moreover, social media can also help improve depressive symptoms by creating online health communities (Rayland & Andrews, 2023). These groups give people the sense of community with others that share similar conditions and concerns. Together they can support each other and create a shared faith that is believed to be achieved. The sense of community involves two major aspects: the

sense of belonging and the sense of support. The sense of belonging is generated by shared identity, which allows people to categorize themselves into an in-group; and trust, which promotes their interaction with community members. "The sense of support is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group." According to studies of uses and gratification theory, people can yield three types of support from social media usage: informational, emotional, and socializing (Lu et al., 2021). Informational support refers to the knowledge and information that users can obtain easily on social media. Knowing more about their disease or symptoms can help them alleviate some negative feelings of fear and anxiety, making them more confident, improving depressive symptoms. Users can get emotional support through expressing their emotions with group members and receiving sympathy and encouragement from others. Social media also offers socializing support as it gives people additional opportunities to make new friends. People experiencing depressive symptoms view social media as an important channel for interpersonal communication. Having the opportunity to regularly connect with friends decreases people's feeling of isolation and gives them social companionship, which leads to higher levels of psychological wellbeing.

The effects discussed above are how social media may positively influence one's mental wellbeing. But on the contrary, social media exposes people to a lot of peer shared content, which encourages them to compare themselves with the information they see, performing social comparison. Social comparison is defined as people comparing themselves to others and evaluate their personal and social worth according to other's opinions, achievements, and abilities. Social comparison can be sorted into three main categories, upward (the target seeming superior), downward (the target being interpreted as inferior), and lateral (the target is perceived as equal to oneself) (Samra et al., 2022). It can feel good when others on the internet fall short than you such as taking longer to learn an instrument. It can also be stressful to look up to the attractive pictures that have been photoshopped to fit into standards of beauty that is hardly achievable in real life.

Most social comparison that social media generates are upward as the information that people share are mostly idealized: people tend to share the positive part of their life, called positivity bias, and sometimes it is exaggerated or even faked (Krause et al., 2020). Influencers post edited pictures and fake information to make their life seem good and make viewers look up to them to gain likes and attention. This deliberately chosen information posted can mislead the viewers into believing that what they see online is a true reflection of others and thus perceive them as having a better and happier life than they are. Upward social comparison is created during this comparison process and is likely to result in lower self-esteem and worsened mood (McComb et al., 2023). Continuous exposure to these negative emotions and opinions about oneself can possibly lead to depression. Studies (Lie et al., 2018) also show that there's a bidirectional relationship between problematic social media use and depression,

suggesting that people may become depressed through social comparison on social media and their depression symptoms drive more problematic social media use and social comparison behavior.

Social comparison from social media contents also plays a crucial role in adolescent's self-development as it is a part in identity formation. This comparison process helps adolescents figure out where they stand in terms of beliefs, preferences, and attitudes (Staff, 2023). In a traditional setting, social comparison among adolescents is between their peers of similar age, culture, and education level. Compared to idealized self-presentations on social media, traditional adolescent community triggers more lateral comparison, which is considered less harmful than upwards comparison. This healthy social comparison can inspire and motivate adolescents. For example, comparison with classmates in a school environment can create motivation to work harder, engage in sport activities, and help them develop an appropriate work life balance. However, the modified information on social media is an unreachable target for viewers, and since adolescents sometimes lack the ability to recognize fake information, they are more susceptible to the negative effects of upward social comparison. They may develop depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, and higher body dissatisfaction, all being indications of diminished well-being.

Nevertheless, problematic social media use can also lead to increase in loneliness and self-isolation. Bonsaksen's study shows that for people who use social media as a mean to maintain relationships, more time spent on social media is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Bonsaksen et al., 2023). However, this relationship is weaker for people who use social media primarily for other reasons such as to avoid difficult feelings. For people who go online to escape burdensome feelings such as boredom and simply entertain themselves, time spent on social media doesn't seem to affect their perception of loneliness and connection with other people. When people go online with the intention to maintain contact with friends, they anticipate meaningful and real interactions similar to those in real life. However, social media as a virtual platform often cannot meet those expectations, making it difficult for people to accomplish what they anticipated from a relationship. Therefore, for people with intentions of maintaining contacts, more time spent on social media striving for meaningful relationships may result in a deeper sense of loneliness.

So why is some social media beneficial and others are harmful? At the end of the day, social media is just a tool. The astonishing features and functions of social media brought by the development of internet technology creates many opportunities for people to utilize it for good. But at the same time, the lack of understanding on how to use this tool appropriately and manage our expectations can negatively affect one's wellbeing.

Conclusion

Social media is a revolutionary technology. It revolutionizes the traditional way of communication by eliminating the physical constraints of distance. It is a great platform for people to connect with others around the globe and enhance the communication between groups of different culture and beliefs. Ideas from different people clashes and reforms into something better (Bharati et al., 2020). Social media allows people to be linked to a greater population and can find more peers of the same interest. Moreover, people have more opportunities look out for help in a wider range, they can find resources that they didn't have access to before, receive care from a greater group, and perhaps find other people struggling on the same problem they are facing and support each other.

A lot of harm people experience from social media usage is due to the lack of self-awareness of their social media habits and how social media is affecting them (Kalinin & Edguer, 2023). Blindly believing information online creates unhealthy upward social comparison, and their self-satisfaction lowers every time they do that. Believing that social media can substitute in-person communications also make**s** people's expectations fall flat when they fail to maintain the same level of connection on social media as in real life. These negative effects can be avoided by acknowledging these features and develop a clear and adequate expectation of the use of social media. If one knows that the content on social media is biased and it only shows the best part of other's life, they are less likely to compare themselves to those idealized images as they understand that this social comparison is unfair. Also, if one understands that social media as a virtual platform is different from offline interactions as a lot of information such as eye contact and body language are not present, they will lower their expectation on the interactions on social media and therefore be less likely to be disappointed and avoid developing senses of loneliness.

Social media is still a relatively new tool. People are still in the stage of developing and exploring it. Even though there are some concerns on how social media may negatively affects emotional wellbeing, there're still a lot of potential and beneficiaries of utilizing it. To understand social media and understand how we can use it appropriately to avoid those damages is more important than simply staying away from it.

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