

Stream: Communities and Social Media

Anti-social media: how the rise in social media could be the cause of social isolation among younger generations

The advent of social media has revolutionised the way individuals interact, and has arguably made it possible to connect with more people, and opened up a new world of discoverability and communication beyond what was possible with other traditional mass media platforms such as radio, newspapers, and television (Elmquist et al., 2017) prior to social media. The intention of social media, after all, was to bring people together as one giant online community. Though, now these ideas seem to be far from what social media has turned into. In recent years, this sense of community has shifted from an in-person notion, to predominantly online, as the rise of social media has seen more people interacting with each other online. In fact, as the online community is rapidly growing with social media, the idea of “community” is replicated online, and the real feeling of community outside of smartphones is slowly being forgotten (Twenge, 2013). The rise of social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram has consequently caused a rise in the level of social media addiction among its’ users, as well as a rise in the level of shyness experienced by millennials. Additionally, social media has created further concern about mental health issues among millennials due to its addictive nature and the social isolation it causes. With 73% of adolescents in the USA in 2015 having smartphones (Elmquist et al., 2017), it is interesting to think about the addictive nature of social media, and how it seems to isolate people from the outside world more than bring people together. Moreover, the potential link between social media and the mental health issues that millennials in early teens to late twenties seem to be experiencing in contemporary society than millennials of previous generations (Wongkoblapp et al., 2017), thus leading to the question; is social media really “social”?.

The nature of social media and the internet is allegedly addictive for a range of people (Leung et al., 2020), and is a growing issue for millennials that can result in serious physical, social, and psychological harm (Ponnusamy et al., 2020). As Cain suggest, “While trends in drug and alcohol use among the millennial generation has decreased, the amount of time spent attending to smartphone activity is rapidly increasing, leading to some suggestions that those susceptible to addiction have simply shifted to a new drug: smartphones” (Cain et al., 2018). A study of social media addiction among adolescents in Urban China resulted in 15.6% of individuals in the test being classified as “addicted” to social media, which is concerning in itself. More alarmingly, the test then estimated that at least 20 million adolescents around China may have a social media addiction (Huang, 2013). Take a look at Instagram, for example, where over 500 million users are active daily (Ponnusamy et al., 2020). Instagram has been found addictive for young users due to obligation felt to meet recognition and social needs, consequently causing extended use of social media; addiction (Ponnusamy et al., 2020). Furthermore, similar social networking platform; Facebook, has been linked to higher level of shyness among active users, therefore users are more likely to interact over social media than in-person (Ponnusamy et al., 2020). Social media users may feel as though they are addicted to social media for a number of reasons, but this addiction could be largely due to the idea that individuals are never offline, rather they just have their phones locked sitting next to them, but will answer messages as soon as the notifications appear. Pew Research Centre propose that at least 24% of U.S. individuals in 2015 are online “almost constantly” (Pew Research Center, 2015), by having their smartphones on and constantly logged into social networking apps. Additionally, some video games including Fortnite and Minecraft have the option to link a chat room through PlayStation, which regards them as a type of social media. These games, in particular Fortnite, have been

consistently considered addictive for individuals, leading parents to be concerned about their children (Haller, 2018). Along with the addiction among individuals comes isolation, whereby individuals can find themselves spending more time on their phones using social media and less time communicating with people outside of their phones; less social support or human connection (Flaskerud, 2020). Concerningly, as suggested by Sriwilai and Charoensukmongkol, it is not an unusual occurrence in current society to see people facing down towards their mobile devices, instead of up towards the world around them, to check their social media while walking or doing other activities (Sriwilai et al., 2015). It is not uncommon to see friends out at cafes or similar social environments not talking, but instead staring into their phones engaging with others through social media. Rather than physically connecting with people, individuals are beginning to prefer interacting through their devices, therefore losing touch with their community (Sriwilai et al., 2015). The community on social networking sites including Facebook and Instagram is creating addiction among millennials, giving them the opportunity to hide behind smartphones, and increasing the difficulty in connecting with others.

Mental health is rapidly becoming one of the most common public health issues in contemporary society (Wongkoblak et al., 2017), and with social networking sites, social isolation and poor mental health are mediating each other. With growing concern about social media use and abuse, some links have been found between social media use and mental illness such as depression, sleep problems, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Cleary et al., 2020). Additionally, a study of adolescents showed a higher rate of depression than other age groups, particularly individuals with less social integration (Flaskerud, 2020). When people are faced with mental health issues, for example depressive symptoms, they often tend to lack social connection or isolate themselves (Quach, 2020), which could explain the link between

poor mental health and social disconnectedness. Millennials are the social group with the most concern, as they are more likely to suffer from social media-related mental health issues (Flaskerud, 2020), and their generation has been growing with smartphones and social media, whereby they find this type of “social” interaction more natural compared to those of older generations who already established in-person connection without social media through most of their life (Cleary et al., 2020). For many, social networking sites including Facebook and Instagram are commonly known to show the “highlights reel” of others’ lives due to the formatting of the sites as image and text-based, and can leave users feeling left out, dissatisfied, and unworthy (Watson et al., 2017). In fact, excessive use of Facebook may result in other disorders such as narcissism and anti-social behaviour (Watson et al., 2017). Furthermore, lack of in-person social integration from heavy social media use can be linked to depression and other mental health concerns (Flaskerud, 2020). Mental health issues, particularly in younger generations, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem could be the consequence of heavy social media use, thus further isolating individuals from one another and their community.

Moreover, social media has the potential to cause social anxiety and identity confusion or crisis for adolescents in their prime ages of social and cultural formation, making social connection awkward and difficult (Elsayed, 2021). Social media platforms, in particular Instagram, gives users the opportunity to present themselves on specially curated profiles, along with giving users the opportunity to view others’ lives and social identities. In some ways, this can be seen as a form of positive self-expression, though can cause confusion and insecurity for the viewing adolescents in critical stages of their growth, who are still finding their identities and contemplating their future (Elsayed, 2021). A study conducted on 200 male and female students, aged 15 to 18, interestingly found that 68.67% said “they are still

thinking about their future because they wish to resemble the lifestyle of their friends on social media” (Elsayed, 2021). This may suggest a link between adolescents with high engagement in social media and identity confusion, resulting in potential to find social and cultural formation awkward, as well as finding difficulty in creating relationships and connections outside of these platforms. Furthermore, adolescents who engage highly in social media activity are found to have lower self-esteem than others with less engagement or emotional investment (“Use of social media associated with poorer sleep quality and low self-esteem in teenagers.”, 2015), and with the suggested importance of self-esteem in engagement in social settings, lack of it could result in decreased interaction with communities outside of social media (Bang, 2021). Lack of self-esteem and personal growth driven by negative effects of social media networks may result in increased difficulty for younger generations to build relationships with people in their community.

The introduction of social media into society has been responsible for a false idea of community and social revolution, and has detrimental effects on younger generations who engage highly with it. Social media is marketed as the best way to communicate and be social with family, friends, and discover new communities online. Though, networks such as Instagram and Facebook have created a society that doesn’t support community building, but rather an antisocial society of users addicted to the feeling of social recognition over social media, subsequently causing increased shyness (Ponnusamy et al., 2020). Through social media-related addiction, users tend to voluntarily disconnect themselves from the outside world, avoiding real connections, thus making community building more difficult (Flaskerud, 2020). Additionally, social media networks have the power to produce mental health issues in young adolescents, including depression and decreased life satisfaction through the unrealistic ideals that are presented on these platforms (Watson et al., 2017), which could

result in users isolating themselves from their community instead of using social media to connect further with their community (Quach, 2020). Furthermore, networks on social media can cause insecurity and identity confusion in heavy users, especially those aged 15 to 18 who are contemplating themselves and their future, due to the nature of platforms oversharing others' lives (Elsayed, 2021). Consequently, young users who suffer from social media-driven self-esteem issues are less likely to engage with others in their communities (Bang, 2021). Altogether, social media has the potential to positively impact the lives of its' users if used properly with heavy education about the harmful effects, such as mental illness and addiction. Although, in the direction that society is currently going, social media is facilitating social isolation through addiction and mental health issues in young generations, thus not benefiting community building or personal connection.

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