

DIGITAL DEPRESSION : THE NEW VULNERABILITY

Dr. S. Jameela

Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science, J.B.A.S. College for Women, Chennai

Sumaiya Tabassum. S

I M.A. Political Science, University of Madras, Chennai

ABSTRACT :

In the recent years, there is a heavy rise in depression due to technology, what we now call “the digital depression”. Recent research findings indicate that social media forms the crux of this new vulnerability though it has various positive points to stand by. The aim of this paper is to analyse the concept, causes, prevention and solutions of this phenomenon called digital depression with respect to varied age groups in the society. Though the use of social media is continuously expanding and influencing our lives, it cannot be denied that there are negative impacts on the mental health of the people due to the same.

INTRODUCTION :

According to the Datareportal July 2022 global overview, 4.7 billion people across the globe use social media which is more than half of the world and 227 million new users have emerged in the last 12 months. In today’s world, technology has paved way to access information, connect with people and support each other at fingertips, yet posing hazards with its increased usage. This phenomenon of digital depression does not come with age restrictions and research indicates that individuals who are prone to more smartphone usage are likely to get affected at a larger extent.

Considered one of the most important variations in the lives of modern young adults and teenagers, as compared to earlier generations, is they spend a good deal less time connecting with their peers in person and greater time connecting electronically, mainly via social media. A few professionals see the rise in melancholy as evidence that the connections social media users shape electronically are less emotionally fulfilling, leaving them feeling socially isolated. “The less you are connected with human beings in a deep, empathic way, the less you’re really getting the benefits of a social interaction,” points out Alexandra Hamlet, PsyD, a clinical psychologist.

Social media has equally positive attributes in the current era of technology which can be listed as follows :

- Social media could make it easy to locate groups of like-minded human beings or make new buddies. Locating a close-knit network can assist us to *sense value and be accepted*. Social media is likewise a smooth way to nurture present relationships with own family and pals who've moved away.
- A very *big platform for all talent* is created through social media which has increased the confidence among people of all age groups.
- There is a culture of sharing personal stories on social media which has resulted in people *showing kindness and empathy* to even people they do not know.
- Social media is a strong tool to *raise support and create awareness* about various social issues.
- The business industry, especially start-ups have gained *immense audience* by sharing valuable content and branding.
- *Education and learning* has become limitless as anyone from any part of the world can access e-learning portals, training programmes, professional tutorials and valuable courses.
- Social media has increased the *creativity* among people, especially the young generation as there can be both positive and negative feedback about the work posted and new ways of improvising it. It also *motivates* a lot of young minds to not give up on their dreams and these come from the so called '*influencers*'.

WHAT IS DIGITAL DEPRESSION ?

Digital depression is a phenomenon where the individual is stressed due to the negative interactions in emails, social media, etc.,. Examples include anonymous and cruel messages, humiliation, impersonation, stresses related to online relationships, etc.

Here are a few signs that an individual may be digitally depressed :

- Anxiety
- Secrecy
- Anger
- Medical conditions like headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- Lack of social activity

CAUSES OF DIGITAL DEPRESSION :

It is reported that there is a connectivity between social media and *perceived social isolation*. Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO is definitely the fear of not being linked to our social space, and that need to be connected sometimes trumps something's happening within the real state of affairs we're in. The extra we use social media, the less we think about being present in the moment.

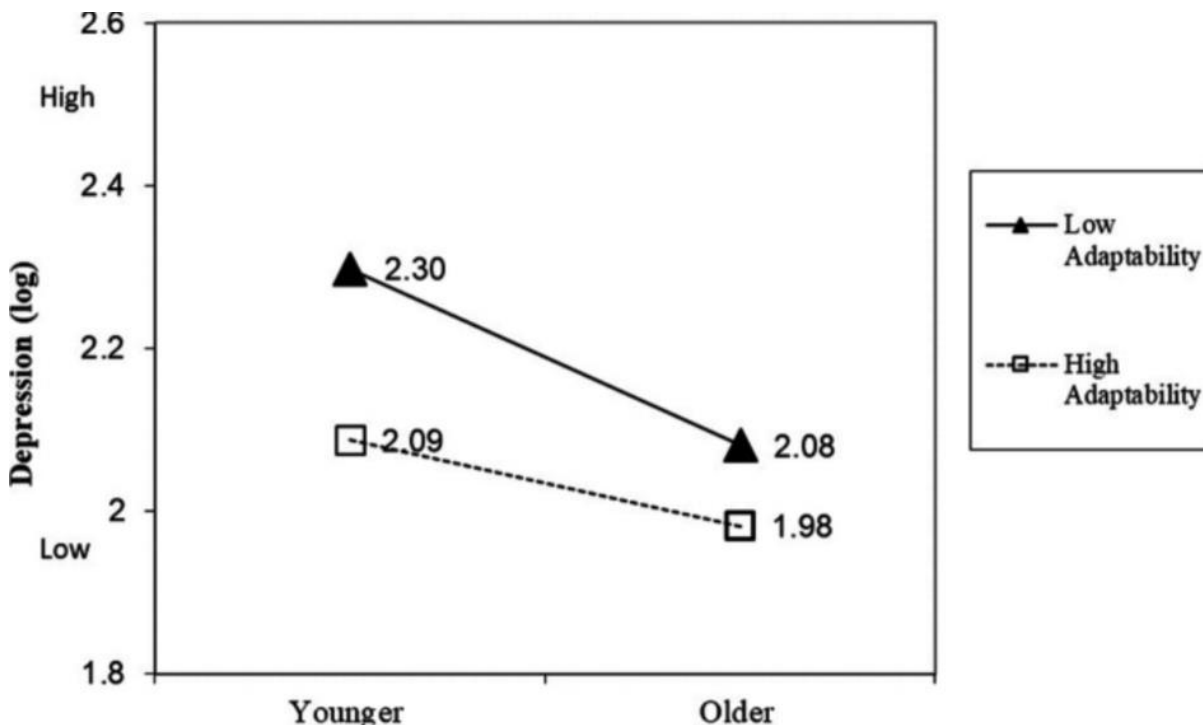
The idea of a *perfect life* can also be one of the causes of digital depression. This is because there are individuals who fall prey to *loss of self esteem* after they evaluate themselves negatively with artfully curated photos of folks who look prettier, thinner, more popular and richer. Many people are bombarded with their friends posting the most best pictures of themselves, or they're following celebrities and influencers who do plenty of photoshopping and have makeup and hairdo.

Lack of physical activities which includes learning new skills and exploring talents can also cause depression as this valuable time is invested in scrolling Instagram feeds and Facebook posts. Physical activities help in building confidence and clarity in thoughts while social media can be very addictive and frustrating.

Lack of sleep due to increased mobile usage even during the night leads to digital depression. It is observed that most of the adults use their smartphones even just before their sleep time. This can also cause lack of concentration which leads to frustration. The blue light has a massive impact on the sleep cycle of an individual as it would've been 20 minutes when you wanted to check your social media for 2 minutes.

DIGITAL DEPRESSION AMONG DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS – A CASE STUDY :

A comparative study was made in Singapore regarding the mental health between older and younger adults, especially in the covid crisis. The article states that ‘Older adults were found to report significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress as compared to younger adults. Although older adults were less able to perform essential activities during the lockdown, they were more adaptable psycho-socially. Logistic regression analyses revealed that for older age group, adaptability and health status significantly predicted better mental health. Older adults had higher odds of low depression scores [odds ratio (OR) 1.81, 95% confidence intervals (CI) 1.07-3.08], anxiety scores (OR 1.80, 95% CI 1.05-3.08), and stress scores (OR 3.05, 95% CI 1.72-5.41). In addition, adaptability was found to moderate the relationship between age and mental health with detrimental effects of low adaptability stronger for younger adults than older adults.’ The article concludes that older adults had better mental health than younger adults even during lockdown times and were more adaptable psycho-socially.



Moderator effect of adaptability on the relationship between age and depression

PREVENTION :

Being connected on social media can add comfort and joy and even prevent loneliness but if there is no line drawn to its usage, it can have devastating effects on the mental health of the individual. Since prevention is always better than cure, here are some preventive measures against digital depression.

- Sensible use of social media time like reducing the number of hours spent online can help focus more and enhance our mood.
- Engaging more in offline hobbies and skill development which helps shift focus eventually reducing the negative impact of social media.
- Having real friends offline is a great way to keep oneself away from using social media for a prolonged time period.
- Social media is always about the fancy life and expectations where we forget the real blessings that our life bestowed upon us. Expressing gratitude for the things we have in life and being contented with them is one best way to prevent digital depression.

ALREADY DIGITALLY DEPRESSED ?

Social media and technology can bring about harmful psychiatric outcomes and here are a few ways to stay in control.

- Affordable online and offline therapies are a great choice for individuals who struggle with stress, especially digital depression.
- *Digital Detox* is a must once in a while where the individual cuts off all social media usage and lives with minimal technology. This helps the mind replenish and reduces stress considerably.
- Never take technology to bed ! Keep away all gadgets before bedtime.
- Reading books and regular exercise keeps the mind and body sound and healthy.

- Restricting online conversations to selected people can bring about a positive change in our stress levels, reducing unnecessary anxiety. Face to face conversations make a much more positive impact.

CONCLUSION :

Man is social by nature. We definitely require companionship and the power of this companionship has a huge impact on our mental health. In this tech-savvy era, we are in desperate need for social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc. to connect with people which is unavoidable yet this cannot be made a substitute for real time human interaction and connection. It requires in-person contact with others to trigger the hormones that alleviate stress and make us feel happier, healthier, and more positive. Ironically for a technology that's designed to bring people closer together, spending too much time engaging with social media can actually make us feel more lonely and isolated and exacerbate mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

REFERENCES :

1. Kaitlyn Duling, "Social Media and Digital Stress (Teen Challenges)", 2021.
2. Lawrence Robinson; Melinda Smith, M.A., "Social Media and Mental Health", 2022.
3. Hunt, Melissa G., Rachel Marx, Courtney Lipson, and Jordyn Young. "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2018.
4. Ghaemi, S.N., "Digital Depression: a new disease of the millennium?", 2020.
5. Chou Chuen Yu, Nien Xiang Tou, James Alvin Low, "A comparative study on mental health and adaptability between older and younger adults during the COVID-19 circuit breaker in Singapore", 2022.