

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND FAMILIES

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Abstract

This paper intends to x-ray what social media is and how it translates to children, adolescents and their parents as it pertains to family living. Internet provide benefits in the areas of cognitive and social development and present risks as well as opportunities for adolescents growth and development. Using social media web sites is among the most common activity of today's children and adolescents. Any web site that allows social interaction is considered a social media site. Internet also provide benefits in the area of intellectual, emotional development and also present risks as well as opportunities to teenagers and children's development in functional and societal challenges. Social media offers today's youths a portal for entertainment and communication. As society becomes more reliant on the World Wide Web, the risk of internet addiction of children and teens is diagnosed with several emotional and social phobia. For this reason, it is vital that parents become aware of the nature of social media sites, given that not all of them are healthy environments for children and adolescents. Pediatricians, psychologists and childhood educators are in a unique position to help families understand these sites and to encourage healthy use and urge parents to monitor for potential problems like cyberbullying, facebook depression, sexting and exposure to inappropriate content. The benefits of social media use justifies this paper's output through opportunities created for information gathering, entertainment and social interaction.

Keywords: *Internet, Social media, Social Networking, Children, Adolescents, Cyberbullying, Family.*

Introduction

Around the world more than eighty percent of our youths are spending a large amount of time on internet. For the simple reason that the internet was introduced at a very young age into their lives, the new generation of children and adolescents became the first groups to use internet on a large scale and among the first to begin experiencing problems associated with excessive internet use (Subrahmanyam, Greenhold & Tyres 2004). Engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection and even technical skills. The Internet is a research site for testing theories of technology diffusion and media effects capable of integrating modes of communication and terms of content. Social media sites such as Facebook and myspace offer multiple daily opportunities for connecting with friends, classmates and people with shared interest. Records have shown during the last five years, the number of preadolescents and adolescents using such sites have increased dramatically. John and MacArthur (2010) maintained that a recent poll of twenty two percent teenagers log on to their favourite social media site more than ten times a day and more than half of adolescents log on to a social site more than once a day and seventy five percent of teenagers now own cell phones and twenty five percent use them for social media, fifty four percent use them for texting and twenty four percent use them for instant messaging (Gameinfowire, 2008) and Damiggio (2001). The above submission shows that a large number of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring on internet and cell phones.

Due to their limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure, children and adolescents are at some risks as they navigate and experiment with social media. Recent research by Gameinfowire (2008), indicates that there are frequent online expressions of offline behaviours such as bullying, clique-forming and sexual experimentation that have introduced problems such as cyberbullying, privacy issues and sexting. Other problems associated with social media awareness include internet addiction and concurrent sleep deprivation. A lot of parents today use technology incredibly well and feel comfortable and capable with the programmes and online issues that their children and adolescents are using. Nevertheless, some parents may find it difficult to relate to their digitally enlightened youngsters online for several reasons. Such parents may lack a basic understanding of these new forms of socialization which are integral to their children's lives. They frequently do not have the technical abilities to keep pace with their children in the ever-changing internet landscape.

Jackson, Barbatsis, Von, Brocea and Fitzgerald (2003) posit that networking is a process where children crossbreed their thoughts, interest on net to parents' advantage on live long issues. Besides, these parents often lack a basic understanding that the kids online lives are an extension of their offline lives. The end result is often a knowledge and technical skill gap between parents and youth which create a disconnect in how these parents and youths participate in the online world together.

Internet can be a positive influence on children if parents and other adults get involve when children gain access. But it can be hard to pick the good from the bad when it comes to media. There are many negative messages about media and how viewing and interacting with it might harm the child. Children can also benefit from media depending on the child's age, kind and quality of the media in use.

Adolescence is a period of transition between childhood and adulthood whereby identity formation, peer relationships, sexuality and self-worth are exploited. Today, for adolescents, the internet is acting as a new social environment where their issues are being explored. A transformation is being noted in how they communicate, establish and maintain relationships and find social support. Weiser (2001) conducted studies to explain why children, adolescents and different people's motives for using internet; and came with a conclusion that people's interaction online shaped their offline way of living.

Adolescents and the Risk of Social Media

Using social media becomes a risk to adolescents more often than adults realize. These risks fall into the following categories; peer to peer, inappropriate content, lack of understanding of online – privacy issues and outside influence of third party advertising groups under the following:

- Cyberbullying and online harassment: This is a process of using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing or hostile information about another person. It is the most common online risk for all teens and is a peer-to-peer risk. Online harassment is often used interchangeably with the term “cyberbullying”. Cyberbullying is quite common and can cause profound psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation and tragically suicide.
- Sexing: It is a sending, recording or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs or images via cell phones, computer or other digital devices. Most times, these images are distributed through cell phones or the internet. A recent survey by American Academy of Pediatrics (2010) revealed that 20% of teens have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or video of themselves. Some teens who have engaged in sexting have been threatened or charged with felony child pornography charges even though some states in Nigeria have started characterizing such behaviours as juvenile-law misdemeanors and conditional consequences including school suspension for perpetrators and emotional distress with accompanying mental health conditions for victims in USA and Europe. In many circumstances however, the sexting incident is not shared beyond a small peer group or a couple.
- Facebook Depression: Researches on excessive chatting on facebook accessed have proposed a new phenomenon called “Facebook depression” defined as depression (Hankins & Jiao (1999) that develops when pre-teens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites such as facebook and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescents life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents. As with offline depression, preadolescents and adolescents who suffer from facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky internet sites and blogs for “help” that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices or oppressive or self-destructive behaviours.
- Defective social relationship: Spending countless hours on the internet, children spend very limited time with family and actual friends. This weakens the family bond and limit interaction with actual people. These children miss out on real life interaction with different relatives which results in distorted social skills and limited real life social network leading to social isolation. Hankins, and Jiao (1999) and Vankenburg (2009) are of the view that adolescents who do not have close friendships consistently have lower levels of self-esteem and psychological symptoms of maladjustment. When people have more social contact, they are happier and healthier both physically and mentally.
- Distorted Senescence of reality: A nationwide poll showed that half of teens, ages 13 – 18 often communicate through internet with someone they have not met in person. One third have talk about potentially meeting face to face (Pelly Klaas Foundation, 2006). Some have endangered their lives like the case of Cynthia Osokogo 2013 “Lagos Sega”, where her facebook friend raped and strangled her to death in a hotel room in Lagos Nigeria on first face to face encounter for a business deal. (The New Nigeria News Paper June 13th 2012)

Many social media sites display multiple advertisements such as banner ads, behaviour ads that target people on the basis of their web-browsing behaviour and demographic-based ads that target people on the basis of a specific factor such as age, gender, education, marital status etc. This influences not only the tendencies of preadolescents and adolescents but also their views of what is normal. It is pertinent for parents to be aware of the behavioural ads because they are common on social media sites and operate by gathering information on the person using a site.

Benefits of Children and Adolescents Using Social Media

Social media sites allow teens to accomplish certain tasks that are considered important to them such as staying connected with friends and family, making new friends, sharing pictures and exchanging ideas. On the other hand, social media participation also can offer adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community and the world. This becomes more beneficial if adults get involved with children and guide in the use of media through visit to quality websites by engaging the use of educational software and view of TV shows that offer extra learning opportunities. When these adults watch TV and movies together with kids, discussing plot, how children feel about the happenings in the movie and compare with the real-life consequences of wrong and illegal actions create a balance in the child's development into society.

Media benefit the individual at various ages in life passage. For younger children, developmental benefits of media are:

- Literacy skills – For example learning letters of alphabets through programmes such as play school or educational computer games or Sesame Street.
- Numeracy skills: Learning to count through play school programmes.

- Creative benefits – developing skills in imagination, art and modeling, music and media through using software to create a picture or being inspired to make something by a TV show.
- Social skills through connecting with others on social networking sites by so doing, teenagers can develop their skills.
- Values through observing good role models in the media
- Political and social awareness by watching news, current affairs and documentaries.
- Children's motives: - Children use media for entertainment and relaxation purposes that is to relieve boredom, to play games or for social interaction and build identity.
- Adolescents' motive:- They also use it for social interaction, social identity, peer interactions, status boost and symbol, communication like e-mail or chat, facebook, twitter. As they mature they begin to use internet for global contact towards career, business networking and the likes.
- Gender Differences: - The girls have different motives for internet use which are:
 - Boys - for entertainment, more interested in video games, computer games and opportunities for online games, downloads, acquire news/information from peers (Beard & Wharf 2001)
 - Girls – To seek information for homework social interaction, keep in touch with friends by chatting, break new grounds in career and knowledge enrichment, book etc. (Jochen & Valkenburg, 2008)
- Reading, writing and critical thinking skills through using blogs, chat rooms and becoming involved in message boards such as movie and news sites.

Conclusion

Many social media sites display multiple advertisements such as banner ads, behaviour ads that target people on the basis of their web-browsing behaviour and demographic-base ads that target people on the basis of a specific factor such as age, gender, education, marital status that influence not only the buying tendencies of preadolescents and adolescents but also their views of what is normal. It is also important for parents to be aware of the behavioural ads because they are common on social media sites and operates by gathering information on the person using a site. Precaution should be used to educate children and adolescents about online world and how to manage and avoid its hazards.

A prime concern of parents is that the internet affects the social skills of children. There are two ways of looking at this; the internet critics would say that children tend to spend less time in social activities or communicating with family and friends. On the other hand the internet enables them to make new friends who are situated in distant places.

Recommendation

The social media offers many opportunities for information gathering, entertainment and social interaction. Indeed, many positive effects can be experienced from time spent online. Nevertheless, sexual salutation and exposure identity treats, cyberbullying, online addiction should not be ignored by parents.

Child educators and pediatricians could assist parents in child internet access through these;

- Discuss with parents the importance of supervising online activities via active participation and communication as opposed to remote monitoring with a "net-nanny" programme to monitor the internet in the absence of parents.
- Discuss with families the need for a family online-use plan that involves regular family meetings to discuss online topics and checks of privacy settings and online profiles for inappropriate posts. The emphasis should be on citizenship and healthy behaviour and not punitive action unless truly warranted.
- Advice parents to talk to their children and adolescents about their online use and the specific issues that today's online kids face
- Advice parents to work on their own participation gap in their homes by becoming better educated about the many technologies youngsters are using.
- Pediatricians and child educators are expected to increase their knowledge of digital technology so that they can have a more educated frame of reference for the tools their parents/clients and families are using.
- Families can be provided with information on challenging issues that kids face online and reputable online resources like tips on sexting, public education site, healthy children.org and social media.

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