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Is the Age of Social Media Leading Towards Social Isolation?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In this paper, the authors have attempted to explore the ill effects of unmonitored and uncensored popular communication media used for socialisation. The major thrust of the paper is to make business owners, marketers, and other stakeholders more aware and initiate a movement of awareness towards the usage of social media.

Design/Methodology: The present research in hand adopts an exploratory research design, wherein different incidents of usage of social media have been compiled based on online reports, statistics, and scholarly work. Further, the work can be extended in terms of experimental research to get the results of various interventions.

Findings: Social media is more than Facebook only. Crossing boundaries of nations and capability to be available even with low bandwidth and poor data connection; earlier faced a lot of challenges in different parts of the world. Some still talk about the digital divide; some deny it.

Research Limitations: This study based on secondary sources highlights the negative aspects of social media has inherent limitations of any type of secondary data-based research. The best example is banking and financing institutions and governing bodies. Further, more insights have been highlighted in the present work.

Managerial Implications: It is alarming and would be disastrous unless combined responsibility is undertaken by all the stakeholders to ensure that the understanding and intended purpose of social media and its usage are continually monitored, evaluated, and managed.

Originality/Value: The study highlighted the precautions to be taken to avoid the undesired future of irresponsible digital natives, who can be a burden to society. The paper suggests the precautions and the interventions to be advised with the required administration approaches by different stakeholders, specifically with the spread of consumerism, business concerns need to indulge in responsible marketing while employing social media.

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Introduction

Social media has recently been reported as one of the latest communication technologies taken the prime attention of marketers and the masses. Social media is used by almost five billion of the world population of all ages and has evolved as one of the prominent communication technologies for all generations. Digital access to the internet and access to information has resulted in diverse ways of information sharing; communication; and interaction specifically newer Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Originated to provide a virtual platform for communication-message to audio/video; crossed different milestones of becoming an important platform for online conferencing and interacting. Special thanks to the outburst of COVID-19 and worldwide lockdowns and subsequent pressure of exploring newer ways to communicate and socialise, newer platforms emerged as part of social media.

Let's take an example, as of April 2023, there are 2.99 billion monthly active users of Facebook out of which 2.03 billion are daily active users (Datareportal, 2023). Whereas over 4.9 billion total users were reported using social media worldwide by the Forbes 2023 report. And it is predicted to reach around six billion by the year 2027.

Social media has opened a plethora of new opportunities for individuals and organisations to involve internet-based social interactions. Consumers and corporates are utilising these digital platforms to share content-text/images/videos, network with others to express their opinions and engage in activities; to corporates and to the ones that are most near and dear to them. The general availability of the internet and high-speed data connectivity has allowed using such media platforms, which include email to post on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Resulting in avoiding personal face-to-face interactions and meetings. The advent of Web 2.0 technology applications has facilitated. Web 2.0 is a relatively latest advancement, that has utilised the internet by introducing social media as a major communication phenomenon. Web 2.0 has given its users easier interconnectivity and participation on the web. Social networking sites (SNSs) are now a popular web technology among netizens for enhanced social interactions and information sharing (Hajli, 2014). Social media is a mode used for socialisation that is technology-

based, which makes it imperative to view and assess its impact on society and users at large, first as a 'sociological phenomenon', and not merely as a 'technological intervention' (Kumar & Thapa, 2014).

In India as well, increased information availability on the internet has opened innovative ways of socialization and communication through chats, email messaging, video and voice chat, document sharing etc (Statista, 2024). Social media have enabled netizens to interact with anyone and anywhere in the world who share interests and activities across political, social, economic, and geographical boundaries (Kumar & Thapa, 2014). Many top SNSs and service providers, such as Facebook, have been making efforts to become more local outside their own country and thus there is a rapid growth in the global users of these sites. Especially, in Asian countries this trend is picking up and is gaining the attention of the corporate, as there are conducive forces-higher levels of disposable income, consumerism, availability of smartphones and connected devices (Fleck, 2023).

In recent times, there have emerged intensive discourse and debate among the intelligentsia about the perceptible impact of social media on opinion-building and expression (Allington et al., 2020; Elisabeta, 2014; Liu et al., 2021). Some of the research cited the acceleration of some of the civil society movements by social media (Fuchs, 2021).

Several pieces of research conducted by scholars in different environments distinctly demonstrate the negative impact of social media in different categories (Amedie, 2015).

Studies have shown that social media fosters a false sense of online "connections" and superficial friendships leading to emotional and psychological problems (Winstone et al., 2021). Additionally, social media is seen as becoming easily addictive to users particularly those belonging to younger age groups, thus, taking away family and personal time as well as diminishing interpersonal skills, leading to antisocial behavioural tendencies. At last, the easy availability of information and lack of laws securing the privacy and personal security of people surfing the internet has degraded social media into becoming an instrument for criminals, and anti-social elements like- terrorists to commit crimes and other illegal activities.

Economically, however, corporates can employ social media to direct customer engagement in a timely and relatively with better efficiency. Making the media effective and relevant to the giant MNCs as well as to small and medium-sized firms. Therefore, the universally acknowledged fact is that the usage of social media is not an easy task and may require better and more creative ways of thinking, but the potential gains are far from negligible (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Research Methodology

Given the increased adoption of social media by the masses as the mode of communication, entertainment, and information sharing. There are pros and cons related to the usage. It is imperative to review the scenario. Following are the research questions addressed in the current research in hand-

What are the most useful and appreciated uses of the social media?

What are the darker side effects of usage of social media?

The idea is to critically review the situation to suggest precautions for the users of social media and the different stakeholders related to the media industry. Special emphasis is paid to youngsters and children as they are heavy users and lack the experience and wisdom to think about the long-term consequences of their actions on digital media. Additionally, their social needs have been severely affected by two years of stress due to outbreak of the COVID-19. To answer the research questions secondary data- from digitally published sources are searched and have been compiled as different sections in the paper. Recent research and the paper published related to the same have been utilised to present the scenario.

The Age of Social Media: Impacts and Assessment

Affirmative Consequences

Numerous positive attributes of employing social media usage have been reported. These digital platforms enable its members and users to form a group and interact with compatible people for sharing and referring to. Researchers have reported that SNSs support students to significantly perform better in studies,

primarily due to ease of connecting on completing school homework and assignments, collaboration for the group activities and project work assigned, and for the co-curricular and extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. As an excellent marketing tool, social media is gaining importance. In the current economic environment, social networks have a strategic importance for organizational competitive advantage (Garrigos-simon et al., 2012). Additionally, SNSs can be employed for faster information sharing as compared to any other medium of communication. Many benefits have been appreciated by the different stakeholders of this tech-based media. Nonetheless, there is a darker side, it has produced harmful side effects to the users and society as well.

Social Media plays an empowering role in spreading knowledge and information. SNS sareopen to all and have an unrestricted flow of information sharing, anyone can add to their knowledge bank (Amedie, 2015).

Removing different communication barriers SNSs have communication channels that are decentralised and are open for all to participate and be more democratic even in the repressive countries. These platforms have the capacity for a wide variety of formal, informal, scholarly, spontaneous, and unscholarly writings to prosper (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). This promotes sharing, exchanging, spreading and collaborating to strengthen creativity with a wide range of issues and diverse concern areas ranging from individual health, relationships and education to national economy, politics, etc.

Although it has been a boon by making it easier to interact with the family, friends, relatives and known around the globe. Thus, breaking time and space and even cultural barriers, through translation. Yet, social media has a negative effect because the combination of isolation and global reach has eroded Indian culture. As social media and their uses have evolved rapidly even over the past ten years, trying to predict where they will be and how they will be used in another twenty may be a mercurial, elusive challenge (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Impact of Consuming Content on SNSs for Children

Socialization and Communication

SNSs enable children to perform many tasks online which are important to them offline. Interacting with friends and family, finding new friends, updating, and sharing memorable moments, and experiences in the form of views, pictures, and videos and exchanging views and ideas. These online media also offer advantages that encompass a better view of self, others and surroundings, events, community, and the world. Encourage them in community engagement for charity and volunteering for various causes and issues. This results in their personality enhancement and promotes shared and joint creativity through the sharing and development of skilled-based interests and efforts. Social media also encourages them to expand online connections via common interests while finding others from more diverse backgrounds. This in turn encourages them to learn and practice respect, trust, acceptance, patience, and exposure to personal and global issues among all adolescents. Thus, fostering personal identity, and opinion along with enhancing unique social skills.

Enriched Learning Opportunities

Students now a days are on social media for sharing and completing tasks, assignments, homework, and other group projects. For instance, WhatsApp and Instagram-like platforms allow groups to collaborate, share and exchange concepts, and notes, and update about assignments. Some schools LMS do have their own blogs and discussion boards as teaching tools. These benefit the teaching-learning process of reinforcing English language skills-written with expression, and creativity. Research suggests that regular engagement in daily activity, on these platforms, has shown benefits to children and adolescents via enhancing their communication skills, social connection, and even their technical skills (Nagata et al., 2020). Recently, the number of pre-adolescents and adolescent users of SNSs has increased intensely. A detailed study of 29 countries' adolescent social media usage and well-being reported different levels of social media prevalence and divided users into

intense and problematic users. Problematic adolescent users of social media were reported to be at risk of lower well-being, whereas intense usage was normative behaviour contributing positively towards specific domains of well-being (Boer et al., 2020).

According to Tremolada et al., (2022), the research on adolescents in the age group of 17 to 19 years, in Italy reported that they spent more than three hours a day on WhatsApp and two hours per day on Instagram, while Facebook usage was 35 minutes per day. Females were reported to use more social media as compared to their counterparts. This is just one example of the scenario; a major portion of the adolescent age group resorts to the Internet, cell phones and this media for their emotional and social network development (Untari et al., 2020).

Accessing Health Information

Very easily and that too anonymously young adolescents can get their health-related queries solved through information available on the internet (Goodyear et al., 2021). There are several reliable and authentic resources available about holistic health and available (healthline.com). On the topics, that are mostly socially avoided, and people are hesitant to talk about, such as safe sex, infections that can be sexually transmitted, symptoms of stress and depression, cure, and precautions (Chou et al., 2020). Some websites and communities can be supportive to people with chronic illnesses with similar conditions, wherein the members can discuss, and be helpful to members to find solutions. There are multiple ways of communicating through mobile-instant messaging, and text messaging, which in multiple ways enhance their well-being. The apps and websites with-audio and videos enhance knowledge about illness, medication requirements, side effects, benefits of following the diet and precautions, results of carelessness and healthy lifestyles (Roy et al., 2020). Digital social media is on hand-held devices like smartphones, tablets, etc. results in increased liberties and comfort for teens to gain knowledge about health and related issues and simultaneously seek experts' help. However, all the data and information available may not be reliable and

can be misleading, youngsters need to have parental or assistance of knowledgeable to apply discretion in selecting and interpreting the information before acting upon the same as authenticity is critical. Here support of parents, teachers and well-wishers plays an important role to be an open discussion on these topics. A social circle and network can be supplemented with digital social media.

Negative Impact of Social Media on Children

Increased usage of social media among youngsters and kids is a common phenomenon post COVID as these apps and sites are a rich source of entertainment and like-minded, adventurous and extroverts also find a platform to be active, as there is no protocol and decorum defined. There is no censorship of the content uploaded (Wilksch et al., 2020). There is no limited capacity in terms of any self-regulation and peer pressure to follow the trend, which navigates the young mind towards the risk of experimenting with social media, in terms of watching, sharing, and uploading improper and indecent content. There are several incidents of cybercrime and offences – bullying, sexual experimentation, and clique-forming (Datta et al., 2020). On top of it embarrassment and guilt among the children which leads to hiding and not reporting the incidents and not seeking help aggravate the matter to psychological complications. Other related issues that are counterproductive are social media addiction, stress, and depression due to sleep deprivation. Excessive usage leads to addiction to social media without any realisation by the adolescents themselves. Related risks are due to inappropriate content; peer-to-peer pressure; ignoring personal privacy, and influences of commercial and other types of advertising. Social media plays with the innocence, comfort, and trust among participants. Youngsters try to replace human physical companionship, and emotional support via virtual connections to gratify their socialisation needs (Alonzo et al., 2021). It also obstructs self-control and unguided independent thinking leads to experimenting with strangers and the temporary enjoyment and fun often leads to the undesired consequences. Ironically, this leads the youngster to turn into an antisocial generation. They

prefer texting to meetings or even conversations over the phone; face-to-face meetings are avoided by having online chat. Human interaction in person has been replaced by socialisation on Facebook and Instagram.

The major threats to children and adolescents while online platforms are risks from each other and exposure to improper content, lack of respecting the privacy of others, and wrong or personal information sharing leading to unnecessary complications or pressures to follow undesired conduct and behaviour. These types of behaviour risk the overall psychological well-being.

Different websites use different types of cookies to collect information about the visitors in terms of the “digital footprint”. This implies that each post and activity by youngsters on social media results in a digital footprint and can be determinantal to their future and family reputations (Surmelioglu & Seferoglu, 2019). Disrespecting the privacy concerns of others, and posting derogatory and inappropriate posts in terms of pictures, messages, and videos results in issues and complications. In the future, this may result in questioning while joining for education and work thus jeopardy their future. Further, they may fall into the trap of fraudsters and get exploited and abused.

Role of Parents

It is parents who needs to be aware of the conduct and activities of social media sites. Due diligence needs to be applied to guide the children towards healthy open environments for sharing and expressing. Ecological perspectives emphasize the role of social networks in the upbringing of child. There is research evidence highlighting that parental self-efficacy has a strong relation with child-rearing practices across all ethnic groups and social support has a mediation effect (Macphee et al., 2008). Parents must evaluate the content and the sites to be sure about the appropriateness for the child to be active. For sites, there are settings and other requirements for which parents should evaluate themselves and the active conversation and activities their ward is going to indulge in. It is common practice to falsify gender and age among the members of social

websites. Parents must be conscious of making their wards aware of the type of content uploaded and shared with whom while stressing online safety.

There is a discrepancy between parents in terms of comfort with technology as some less-tech-savvy parents find it difficult to understand and relate to the concerns of the youngster's online activities. They may lack familiarity with the newer and diverse forms of socialization apps, which can become an integral part of the lives of youngsters (Hartas, 2021). Mostly parents do not possess the necessary technical knowledge and abilities or may have their time constrained to keep abreast with the ever-changing digital world. Thus, it results in a knowledge and technical skill gap between parents and their wards, leading to distance and disconnect between the two.

Psychological Repercussions of Social Media Usage

Facebook Depression

It is defined as depression that develops because of spending excessive time on social media sites, and Facebook and leads to classic symptoms of depression. The urge to seek acceptance from others and stay connected with peers has been a necessary element of social life. Yet the intensity of the digital world may trigger depression in some adolescents, along with other surrounding environmental conditions. As in the case of offline depression, children who suffer from Facebook depression are reported to be at the risk of social isolation (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021). Further, they may turn towards risky sites and blogs seeking help which may promote substance abuse, aggressive or self-destructive behaviours or unsafe sexual practices (GS & K, 2011). Social media makes the youngster overly self-conscious about their appearance and this may lead to excessive anxiousness and ultimately, they may develop depression. Another Western study reported that individuals engaged excessively in social media, cell phones, gaming, and texting, were found to develop depression and anxiety. Research evidence has already established excessive social media usage leads to depression and related issues and ultimately stressful life (Heffer et al., 2019).

Social Media and Anxiety

Stress as such can be caused due to the usage of social media. In a study of seven thousand mothers, wherein 42% of mothers had the photo-sharing site Pinterest (Fung et al., 2020). It was found that they were occasionally suffering from Pinterest Stress. Depression anxiety can be the result of chronic stress. Being constantly alert of receiving the messages, creates a kind of anxiousness, resulting in the release of the stress hormone cortisol.

The other reason causing depression anxiety is the stress due to constant endeavour to project oneself unrealistically and reach the perfection perceived by others. Thus, social anxiety stress is associated with the efforts to display oneself as perfect. Heavy social media usage results in the constant release of the stress hormone cortisol, which may cause damage to the gastrointestinal tract, leading to an immuno-inflammatory response in the body and brain, leading to depression and anxiety.

False intimacy is another undesired consequence of social media (Korkmazer et al., 2019). Primarily, social media promotes fun, excitement, daring, experimentation and highlighting success which youngsters enjoy and relish, without appreciating the hardships. So, to follow the trend, youngsters also flaunt their activities. They try to showcase the desired behaviour hide the true self of imperfections and ignore the realities. They embrace the self-created illusion of virtual perfection and false connection and real-life relationships. Researchers have reported that these artificial associations can culminate into long-term emotional and psychological issues.

Social Media and Catfishing

Over-involvement and addiction to social media networks may hamper real-life relationships. As relations with close family members and others may suffer because of spending more time and devoting more energies towards social media effort is put into the illusion of social media. The term Catfish describes people who create false social networking profiles, and strangers using a fake or stolen identity, and create a deceptive world, which is found to ruin relationships and psychological well-being (Borchert & Heisel, 2022).

University of Utah anthropologist, Pauline Wiessner, in the work on social networks, reported that Anonymity supports darker impulses. People striving for relationships may believe to find them in the most unlikely of places e.g. social media. Thus, stays vigilant and grounded in reality (Amedie, 2015).

Social Media and Criminal Activities

Malicious, fraudulent, and irresponsible individuals take advantage of the freedom of social media platforms, through falsification of identity and information to scam, attack, and seek pleasure from hurting others. Criminal-minded use social media to hide their identity and commit crimes such as cyber-terrorism, cyberbullying, human trafficking, drug dealing, etc.

Social Media and Bullying

Cyberbullying is the deliberate use of digital media to communicate embarrassing, false, or hostile information about others. The most common online threat for all youngsters is a peer-to-peer risk.” Online harassment” is interchangeably used as “cyberbullying”. Cyberbullying is quite common online and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes which may lead to anxiety, depression, severe isolation, and, even suicide. In this aggression is expressed through digital mode, via the Internet and especially through social media. The individual first hides the identity, posing a false identity, through a fake profile to terrorize.

Recent studies indicate that approximately 20 to 35% of adolescents themselves reported to be involved in cyberbullying, a victim, a bully, or both. Such instances may leave the sufferer with deep psychological traumas and may lead to suicide. Research evidence supports it as a cause of an increased risk of mental health problems and suicidal tendencies. This link between cyberbullying and suicide is gaining a lot of concern and attention. As per cyber laws exchanging hostile messages is termed as a crime and nations have passed laws against cyberbullying to protect bully-victims (Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache & Mishara, 2021).

Social Isolation

Social isolation is a potent but little-understood risk factor for morbidity and mortality, and

its negative consequences are most profound among the elderly, the poor, and minorities (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic hit most of the world and the stress caused due to catching the infection, produced other undesired psychological issues-symptoms of anger, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, which further intensified during confinement, social isolation, or quarantine. Home confinement including quarantine and home isolation led to psychological issues and raised concerns in the scientific community, especially older people (Sánchez-Teruel et al., 2021).

Implications

Excessive social media usage leading to addiction may be high for an individual, leading to a risk of anxiety, depression, stress, unrealistic expectations from self and others, and false connections. High intensity of the virtual world requires constant attention, engagement, and over-emphasis on the user’s experience, of self-awareness which usually triggers depression. Additionally, this social media pressures one to project as “perfect”, which leads to denial of reality and self, ignoring family and the truth, leading to falsification, causing depression and anxiety. Further, it promotes superficial connections which are more likely to cause long-term emotional trauma and psychological issues. False intimacy appears on social media both intentionally and/or unintentionally, as seen in the filtered selfie photo and catfish are examples. Personal negative impacts, both psychological and emotional, of social media usage, are likely to continue unless addressed wisely.

The analysis highlights the concerns of parents and children. Both need to be supporting each other as family members to be open and transparent and not neglect each other’s dependency. Here more crucial role is for parents to be updated and watchful and monitor the behaviour of their offspring. Here schools and policymakers also have an important role in creating awareness and encouraging young adolescents to become responsible netizens, respecting the privacy of others and security concerns. For various types of digital crimes and fraudulent activities, laws need to be well established and communicated. Specifically, censorship on the type of content shared through SNSs is still a remote idea, on which technological enthusiasm can work. The corporates need to indulge in ethical

and responsible usage of these media to restrict the spread of misleading information and dubious promotional activities. On top of they need to be watchful of the usage of their cloned website or promotional offers.

Conclusion

To summarize, social media appreciated for the positive benefit of rapid information sharing, does have a darker side. This enables participants to falsify their identity and develop superficial connections, thus avoiding reality which may result in victimisation and the sufferer may develop depression. Further can protect criminals and terrorists, to promote their activities. Finally, since social media addiction is a relatively new concern and the impact studies are reasonably few, its negative aspects are very rarely discussed. Discounting positive impacts does not hurt in the long run, nearly as much as negative ones do. In this paper, authors have highlighted the harms posed by this unmonitored and uncensored digital medium of communication for youngsters, causing the gradual breakdown of social cohesion and destruction of social value systems. Social media usage and its impacts need to be constantly monitored and evaluated.

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