**Mental Health and Social Media**

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JANUARY 9, 2019 daily time

Results of a recent research on mental health and social media has been making the rounds lately. The study, based on interviews with approximately 11,000 14-year-olds found that almost 40 per cent of girls who spend more than five hours a day on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp show symptoms of depression; concluding that greater use of social media corresponded to an increase in depressive symptoms.

As technology has developed, the lines that were once distinctive between various types of digital media are now blurred. YouTube has started merging television content with interactive elements. Video gaming sites now give the option for social networking. It is estimated that 90 per cent of youth aged 13 to 17 use smartphones, with 45 per cent of teenagers reporting near-constant use of the internet. The current generation of adolescents spend less time in person with peers in comparison with previous generations. It is therefore not surprising that technology and the use of social media influences the identities and socialization processes of young individuals in a myriad of ways.

Social media is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allows people to be connected on multiple platforms, any time of the day – but for many, social media has replaced physical connections; which leads to greater isolation. It’s ironic that something that is meant to increase connectivity between individuals and groups actually causes higher levels of loneliness. The way that social media is used today tends to only highlight the successes of individuals, never the failures. For the onlooker, the fact that social media is a continuous stream of ‘perfection’, can have negative impacts on self-esteem, anxiety and levels of stress. Studies typically follow a four-pronged approach to assessing social media-induced stressors, which include (1) the notoriously used digital media term, FOMO (fear of missing out), by seeing others post about events which they weren’t invited to or were unable to attend; (2) feeling pressured to appear ‘perfect’ in posts or photos; (3) feeling pressured to get comments and likes for affirmation; (4) and the fear of being replaced if they aren’t readily available and constantly ‘visible’.

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The extent to which social media can harm our mental health depends largely on the ‘social comparison’ factor. It includes the degree to which we compare ourselves to what we see on our feeds, and the time we spend doing it. It also depends on the degree to which we believe that what we see is an accurate portrayal of reality, and the perceived similarities (or lack thereof) between ourselves and those we are comparing ourselves to. There is a rising phenomenon of ‘likes’ on social media posts being testament to social validation for many young users, with studies showing not just emotional changes but also physical changes in brain activity as a result of getting notifications on their profiles. A common symptom of depression, for example, is a constant feeling of worthlessness, which may be aggravated by social media. Once we start deriving a sense of worth based on our appearance or accomplishments relative to others, we place our happiness in a variable which is largely beyond our control.

Social media has made many feel invisible. Sitting behind a screen allows people to engage in (and encourage) bullying, hate speech, spamming, trolling, whatever else you may call it – because the space is unregulated in many ways, and they are able to hide behind a veil of anonymity with no one to answer to for their words or actions. The complexities of social media also mean that such cyber-bullying can take on different forms on different platforms. It has been explained by a psychological concept called the ‘online disinhibition effect’, which suggests that social barriers to negative behavior are lowered because the internet allows users to remain anonymous if they wish. Users can express themselves more freely than they would in face-to-face encounters and disregard moral responsibilities based on societal norms. There are no repercussions for bad behavior and no social etiquettes to be bound by. The invisibility factor perpetuates a lack of self-awareness and empathy.

We now spend less time jumping in rain puddles in our driveway and more time posting about the weather on Twitter. We spend less time appreciating the history and beauty of old architecture and more time finding the perfect angle of the sun’s rays for a picture on Facebook. Our travels are determined more by ‘Instagram-worthy’ spots and less by the life experiences new cities have to offer us. Our realities are blurred through filtered-lens, and our core identities are overshadowed in the process.

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Published in Daily Times, January 9th2019.