

Navigating the Digital Generation:
Adolescents and Social Media in the Post-COVID-19 Society

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Introduction

The COVID-19 virus swept the world by storm and completely changed the way we live. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health emergency from March 2020 to May 2023 (Rigby, 2023). Shortly after the start of the emergency, a nationwide complete lockdown was put in place from March 2020 to May 2020 (Katella, 2021). However, social distancing measures were still in place until WHO lifted the global health emergency. It was also during this time that social media saw a surge in users.

Data Reportal's Global Social Media status report stated that from July 2020 to July 2021, 520 million new users joined social media. This equates to an "annualized growth of 13.1%, or an average [of] 16 ½ new users every single second" (Saroj, 2023, p.290). According to public health physician Saroj Pachauri, in 2021 approximately 4.48 billion people, or 57% of the world's population, were social media users. The report further goes on to show that "when online, people usually visit an average of 6.6 social media platforms every month" and spend around 2.5 hours every day on social media (Saroj, 2023, p.290). Under the assumption that the average sleep time of a person is roughly seven to eight hours a day, this shows that individuals spent 15% of their waking lives on social media in 2021 (Saroj, 2023, p.290). Even after the global health emergency was lifted, the heavy reliance on social media still takes place in our community, with effects being both positive and negative.

For adolescents, the usage of social media is even higher and closely linked to negative health problems. Recent studies show that United States teenagers spend on average around 4.8 hours a day on seven of the most popular social media apps, "with YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram accounting for 87% of their social media time" (DeAngelis, 2024). Furthermore, 37% of United States teenagers state that they spend five or more hours a day on social media

(DeAngelis, 2024), and three in four United States high school students are frequent users of social media (Johnson, 2024). Unfortunately, 41% of the United States teenagers with the highest social media usage rate their health as “poor” or “very poor” (DeAngelis, 2024), hinting at the strong correlation between social media and mental health.

Problem Statement and Project Goals

The purpose of this research study will be to understand the impact of social media on adolescents in the current post-COVID era. I am interested in exploring whether social media has negatively affected adolescents' mental health post-COVID and the underlying reasons for their impact. I will use the term “adolescents,” which WHO defines as the ages between 10 and 19, as the exposure to media has been starting at a younger age. The global lockdown of the pandemic has not only physically isolated us, but also mentally disconnected us from our social interactions, developing a dependency on virtual connections, such as through social media. In this paper, “social media” will be defined as platforms where users can create and “consume digitalized content, communicate with fellow app users and share media in other online and offline spaces” (Boffone, 2022).

This work of unraveling the impact of social media on adolescents is not new. However, very few studies dive into the current situation of the post-COVID period, as the current society we live in is still an extension of the late stages of the pandemic. Many scholarly articles described social media usage during the actual pandemic, but very few are researching the present, the life after we supposedly returned to normal.

Additionally, I want to understand the physical impacts of social media on adolescents, such as the current cellphone bans taking place at schools across the United States, and how they are interrelated with the negative impacts of social media. As students are returning to physical

classrooms, schools are implementing cellphone bans during the school day (Meckler, 2024).

These implementations seem to be stemming from pressure from parents and teachers who view cell phones as not only distractions but also a cause of poor mental health (Meckler, 2024).

Furthermore, I will also dive into how we as a society can become more responsible in the usage of social media to minimize the negative effects on our community.

Literature Review

Positive Impact of Social Media During and Post-Pandemic

The pandemic lockdown period especially increased the reliance on connectivity, and social media was “extensively used to connect at a more personal and intimate level” (Siddiqua, 2023, p.14). During the pandemic, social media not only helped isolated adolescents to remain connected with their loved ones but was also an essential mode of communicating with medical experts (Saroj, 2023, p.289). In comparison to traditional media, social media users were easily able to seek news related to improving both physical and mental health (Siddiqua, 2023, p.11). The user-friendly interface for both creators and viewers, allowed for easy creation and sharing of content. Adolescents were also able to easily find support groups and peers on these platforms, which they may not have been able to do in their physical neighborhood communities. These positive effects of social media that heightened during the pandemic continue in our current-day society.

Even hospitals have been encouraging the use of social media or video applications for their patients to keep in touch with their loved ones (Sarangi, 2022). The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws and waivers from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Service (CMS) relaxed during the pandemic, making it possible for such recommendations to be installed (Sarangi, 2022). Telemedicine and online doctor consultations

have become the new norm, allowing sick individuals to consult with doctors from their homes (Sarangi, 2022). Until telemedicine, it was often the case that sick individuals could not consult a doctor unless they had a means of access, which was especially difficult for adolescents who were at risk of disadvantage. However, with the advancements in technology and updated policies, more individuals can now access both physical and mental health specialists for help.

Governments have also started utilizing social media for health education purposes. For example, the New Zealand Health Sponsorship Council developed an online anti-tobacco game to educate 12- to 24-year-olds on the dangers of using tobacco (Saroj, 2023, p.294), which was played and shared virtually by adolescents, a tactic that leveraged the heavy usage of social media among the corresponding age category. Other examples include the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, and the United Nations Children's Fund regularly using social media for health promotion, successfully reaching millions of their followers worldwide by adapting to specific regional contexts, cultural backgrounds, local languages and issues (Mendoza, 2020). Adolescent users who scroll through social media regularly can easily access these reliable sources of information, which was not possible before technological advancements.

Post-pandemic, we still see heavy usage of social media in our community, but problematic internet usage has significantly decreased due to lockdowns being lifted and people physically seeing each other again (Banner, 2023, p.27). Adolescents these days are more conscious of their mental health and "are taking it upon themselves to maintain their mental health and take breaks from social media applications whenever they feel things are getting too heavy" (Banner, 2023, p.27). Current-day adolescents are also using social media for civic engagement, such as TikTok users posting news content that even mainstream mass media

overlooks (Oden, 2023). From Palestinians reporting about their daily lives during the Gaza genocide to Ukrainian residents reporting about the Russian invasion, and all of the daily snapshots of life in between, we can observe in real-time the magnitude of these situations which were only previously accessible through filtered mainstream news outlets. This phenomenon can be thought of as a direct response to the pandemic, as adolescents then started filming content to show the realities of the virus.

Negative Impact of Social Media During and Post-Pandemic

While there are many positive benefits associated with social media, it is also important to take into consideration the negative effects of it. Health professionals such as Vivek H. Murthy argue that in general, "social media usage can spur depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, and low self-esteem, especially among teenage girls" (Meckler, 2024). A study conducted on Chinese students during the pandemic "revealed that higher level of exposure to media was directly associated with worsening mental health conditions" (Siddiqua, 2023, p.11). For example, excessive "exposure to disaster-related news triggered negative effects" among viewers, which then contributed to increasing mental health issues (Siddiqua, 2023, p.11). Even in studies conducted post-pandemic, individuals have been reported to use their devices more to distract themselves from the constant influx of stress that comes from browsing online (Sarangi, 2022). Passive scrolling of social media has been linked to emotions such as "inadequacy, envy, and insecurity," (Sarangi, 2022), which are detrimental and especially impactful for adolescents who are in the process of shaping their identity.

Another risk of social media for adolescents during the pandemic and is currently still a major issue is cyberbullying (Sarangi, 2022). This was especially harmful during lockdowns as social interactions became limited to online spaces (Sarangi, 2022). Studies have shown that

cyberbullying tends to peak around the ages of 14 and 15 years old and decreases into the later years of adolescence, but remains (Gohal 2023). Examples of cyberbullying include “sending angry, rude, or offensive messages; intimidating, cruel, and possibly false information about a person to others; sharing sensitive or private information (outing); and exclusion, which involves purposefully leaving someone out of an online group” (Gohal, 2023). While online spaces are becoming the third space, especially for adolescents, cyberbullying is a difficult issue because it takes place in spaces that adults cannot physically access. Fortunately, legal protection has been increasing across the globe to protect adolescents at risk. It is also currently a trending topic for applications that rose in popularity during the pandemic, such as TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp.

According to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which surveyed 20,000 United States high school students, teenage girls were more likely to report being bullied at both school and online, compared to teenage boys (Johnson, 2024). Another study reports that adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+ are more vulnerable to cyberbullying (Javed, 2023). These studies show that minority groups tend to be at risk for cyberbullying and will require effective protocols to protect them online. In addition, since cyberbullying is gaining attention with the advancements in social media and technology, it will become critical to understand why minority groups are prone to cyberbullying.

To combat the negative effects of social media, schools across the country are taking measures. As physical classroom sessions returned, certain states are implementing procedures to ban the use of cell phones during the school day. For instance, the Virginia Department of Education released guidance that recommended school districts to adopt policies that will restrict cellphone usage on school campuses from “bell to bell” (Elwood, 2024). This was a response to

Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin signing an executive order that called for “phone-free” learning environments in the state, citing concerns regarding “the effects of social media on teen mental health” and “to limit classroom distractions or reduce time on social media” (Elwood, 2024). Cellphone usage in schools has been a long-standing debate for educators (Elwood, 2024). A “fall 2023 Pew Research Center survey found that 72 percent of high school teachers reported that students being distracted by phones in the classroom was a ‘major problem’” (Elwood). Even the National Education Association is encouraging their teachers’ union members to negotiate policies to restrict access to students’ devices during the school day (Elwood, 2024). These physical protocols set in place to combat the negative effects of social media are still new. Hence, we as a society still require time to not only adjust but also to assess the effectiveness of these actions.

Importance of Media Literacy

With the increased usage of social media, we also see an upward trend with the spread of fake news. During the pandemic, fake news regarding the COVID-19 outbreak was widespread on social media, contributing to the misinformation about the virus (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.26). For adolescents who usually gain their information through social media channels, this is especially dangerous as they will be consuming fake news unconsciously. Even with censorship measures taking place especially recently, it is still less compared to mainstream media (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.26). It is also difficult to censor each content that pops up every second on these platforms, ultimately leading to widespread misinformation about the fake news.

Fake news can usually, but not always, be distinguished through “catchy headlines, exciting photos, and short focused videos that are meant to elicit emotional reactions and the needs to share” (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.28). In other words, they are content that is meant to

spark conversation in online spaces. Topics that are especially prone to be targets of fake news are politicians, arts, and sports stars (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.28), which are content that is often popular with adolescents and even the general public. News content is usually published without mentioning an origin or a source (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.41), which makes it even more difficult to differentiate between reliable and fake news. Therefore, it is crucial that as a community we share accurate information and advocate for accounts that share reliable content so that we are not predators of fake news.

Media literacy is defined as “the ability to apply critical thinking skills to the messages, signs, and symbols transmitted through mass media” (Vinney, 2022). It is a critical skill as it helps us make better choices in the media that we consume (Vinney, 2022). Ben Messaoud, Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communication at Qatar University, recommends the following when checking digital news’ authenticity: “verify the website link,” “check the people included in the news, and make sure of their identity, their positions,” “refer to well-known media,” “verify the publication date,” and verify the sources and photos and videos (Ben Messaoud, 2021, p.41-42). Multiple studies have shown that media literacy has led to less body dissatisfaction among adolescent and college women, who are known to be at high risk for eating disorders (Vinney, 2022). This was a result of showing these women non-skewed images of models and beauty standards (Vinney, 2022), which are concepts that are overflowing on social media and are known to be the cause of body dissatisfaction.

To tackle the surge of fake news that especially skyrocketed during the pandemic, country-wide policies are being implemented around the world. In February 2021, the Indian government “announced a new set of regulations for social media platforms, messaging applications, online news sites and Over the Top (OTT) platforms or streaming sites, functioning

in India” (Saroj, 2023, p.293). The regulation sets clear rules for Indian tech companies to function, such as having a physical presence in India and being able to identify unlawful messages and remove such messages. Additionally, this regulation emphasizes that social media platforms must always cooperate with the government, especially for investigations (Saroj, 2023, p.293). By having countries become proactive in media literacy, we are taking a step forward in protecting our adolescents from the dangers of social media.

Literature Review Reflection

Through my literature review, I realized that one of the limitations of my research is analyzing the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is a concept that has gained popularity post-pandemic. According to a report by Common Sense Media, in 2024, seven out of ten teenagers in the United States use generative AI tools, with the most common reason for using the tools being education-related (Knibbs, 2024). However, we are also starting to see a reliance on AI for emotional relationships. In October 2024, the mother of an adolescent filed a lawsuit against the makers of Character.ai, a customizable chatbot usually used for roleplaying. The mother is holding the maker responsible for the death of her son, “who killed himself after becoming obsessed” with the chatbot (Montgomery, 2024). Leading to his death, the 14-year-old used the chatbot every day and night and even consulted the chatbot in regards to going through with taking his own life (Montgomery, 2024). While the lawsuit is still under investigation, it was the first recorded incident in the United States where a death was highly linked to the usage of AI. As our adolescents grow with the usage of AI, it will be especially important to monitor the usage of AI and its impact, as it can lead to devastating results as in this case. Thus, it will become even more critical that future research dives into the social impact AI can have on adolescents who are still unstable in their identities and relationships.

Research Questions

My main research question is as follows:

- How are adolescents reacting to social media in the post-pandemic society?

Within the main question, I hope to also answer the following:

- How has social media positively impacted adolescents in the post-pandemic society?
- What are ways that we can help adolescents with the negative effects of social media in post-pandemic society?

General Research Plan

For my research, I plan on conducting both content analysis and a qualitative inquiry approach of ethnography rooted in grounded theory. The ethnography will be used to evaluate the current usage of social media among adolescents ages 14 through 19, which are usually the ages that adolescents start high school and university in the United States. For the content analysis, I will be analyzing past academic papers written by researchers from around the world regarding the relationship between individuals and social media, during and after the pandemic. For the qualitative research, I will be surveying by asking questions, such as the following, which will be answered through multiple choice answers:

- How much time do you spend on social media a day?
- What application do you spend the most time on?
- Which application do you use to get your main source of news from?
- (If under 18): Does your school ban the usage of social media during school hours?

I will also have a few open-ended questions to dive into the realities of social media usage:

- How does social media make you feel?
- How do you decide what to share or post on social media?

- What kind of accounts or content do you find the most interesting?

The research participants will be recruited through reaching out to both public and private high schools and universities in the New York City area. I hope to gain responses from a wide set of demographics, ranging in characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status. Adolescents under the age of 18 will be required to have parental consent to participate. I plan on collecting survey results from at least 100 individuals to strengthen the validity of my research. The research will be conducted in a classroom setting, with a proctor (usually the teacher or professor) monitoring the students for trustworthiness.

As the survey will be answered through mostly multiple-choice answers, the data will be analyzed through the frequency of choice of answers per age. The multiple-choice research questions will not ask the participants directly about the positive and negative effects of social media in the current society; rather, the frequency of answer choice will be used to determine the positive and negative outcomes of social media.

Limitations of Research

There are many limitations to my research, especially with the research being survey-based. Bias in research questions will be minimized through examination of word choice by three other individuals not related to the study. However, the data will inherently be skewed toward adolescents who can commute and attend physical schools, so it will not be able to reach the demographic of adolescents who are home-schooled or are not currently attending schools. In a university setting, the survey results may become biased towards certain majors (and hence certain preferences), depending on the course that will agree to conduct the survey. In general, the disadvantages of survey-based research are that there will be sampling biases, response biases, and survey administration issues (Voxco, 2021).

Sampling bias can occur when “the survey is not an accurate representation of the target population” (Voxco, 2021). As for my research, since the survey will target adolescents living in New York City, they may have more access to social media and the Internet as they live in an urban setting. Thus, my research will have sampling bias because it will only include a specific region of the overall United States population. To minimize this risk, I plan on using the latest U.S. census to identify the average United States demographic and choose respondents accordingly. For example, according to the 2020 Census, 5.99% of the United States population identifies as “Asian.” Therefore, if I am surveying 100 adolescents, six of the respondents will need to identify as Asian. While this may be a difficult situation to create when asking the schools for support, it is critical that our data is not skewed toward a specific demographic.

Next, response bias is when “respondents share misleading information” (Voxco, 2021). This can especially happen in my research, as my respondents may want to rush through the survey to leave. I will try to minimize this by making the survey concise and mixing the multiple-choice and open-ended questions so that the respondent will not get bored of just filling in bubbles. I will also offer a gift card incentive for respondents so that we will have more participants, which will hopefully minimize the outlier responses.

Lastly, there likely will be survey administration issues, such as “incomplete surveys or data entry mistakes” (Voxco, 2021). While I aim to be present during the survey conduction as much as possible, due to the number of respondents required, I may not be able to be present for all. If the administrator is not familiar with the background of the survey or with conducting surveys, it may be difficult to encourage the respondents to answer truthfully. Even when I am present, I may not be able to catch incomplete answers or mistakes on the spot, and will only notice afterwards. Thus, my research may be skewed towards responses and groups that

responded completely. I will try to use simple wording for my questions to minimize confusion, utilize online survey platforms to minimize the proctor's work, and utilize engaging content to maintain the respondents' focus.

Conclusion

The impact of social media on adolescents in the post-pandemic era is diverse, reflecting both its potential and inherent risks. While social media served as a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic, its continued dominance has raised concerns about adolescent mental health, misinformation, and even cyberbullying. By balancing the benefits of connectivity with strategies to mitigate harm, society can create a healthier digital environment for adolescents as they navigate their growing years. I hope that my study will contribute to the understanding of social media's evolving role in adolescent lives and propose actionable solutions for minimizing its negative effects while amplifying its positive impact.

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