

Perspectives on health and physical activity (BMPE6003)

Health nutrition and lifestyle

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The impact of social media on Mental Health

Introduction

Social media has become essential to modern communication, replacing traditional methods with digital platforms. According to Osborne-Gowey (2014), social media refers to websites and applications that facilitate online community building and information sharing. Over time, social media has evolved beyond being just a tool for communication and has now become a source of entertainment and a way to stay connected with friends and family who live far away (Li et al., 2022). In recent years, businesses have recognised the importance of social media and are using it as a marketing tool to reach potential customers and increase brand visibility (Jones, Borgman, and Ulusoy, 2015). The best way to utilise social media is by sending messages, posting pictures and mini video clips on 24-hour stories, writing statuses, posting original pictures and videos, and even using Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) (Leist, 2013).

Social media has empowered individuals to scroll through content and interact with it as they see fit through commenting, liking, and sharing, giving them a sense of validation (Tenenboim, 2022). Most social media platforms allow users to perform these functions, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, Pinterest, YouTube, and Reddit. These platforms serve different purposes and offer unique features.

According to Dixon (2023a), Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with over 1 billion registered users and an estimated 3 billion active monthly users. Other widely used social media platforms include YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Kanchan and Gaidhane, 2023). Shewale (2023) reports approximately 4.3 billion social media users worldwide.

Moreover, Buchholz (2022) states that the average person spends around 2.3 hours daily on social media. The moderate use of social media has increased since 2015 by 40 minutes Dixon, (2023b), which suggests that people spend a longer time on social media.

Social media users come from different genders, ages, races, and cultures (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021). Adolescents and young adults were introduced to digital platforms at a younger age than middle-aged and older adults (Gorea, 2021). The ubiquitous presence of social media in our daily lives has opened up many opportunities for personal and professional growth. However, social media use may harm mental and emotional well-being (Keles, McCrae and Grealish, 2019).

In addition, studies found that the excessive use of social media can lead to addiction and cyberbullying, causing severe stress, anxiety, depression, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), and insomnia (Naslund et al., 2020; Bányai et al., 2017). As social media gains more influence and attracts a growing number of users, professionals and individuals need to acknowledge its positive and negative effects and learn how to use it safely and effectively. Therefore, this essay aims to review social media's impact on mental health.

Body dissatisfaction and body dysmorphic disorder

Social media has influenced how people perceive themselves and others (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). As a result, one's psychological health can be affected negatively by poor body image, which creates body dissatisfaction and body dysmorphic disorder, which stems from low self-esteem for young people and adults (Kuck et al., 2021). According to Jiotso et al. (2021), body image is a person's perspective, thoughts, and feelings regarding their body; it represents what a person thinks when they look at themselves in a mirror and the views social media, peers and the public have on their body type.

Popular social media influencers and celebrities often conform to society's standards of beauty, which prioritise specific facial features and body types deemed "perfect". Social media has changed body ideals (Oakes, 2019). The ideal body type for women has undergone significant changes over time; as reported by Greep (2022), in the 1990s, the preferred body type was an extremely thin figure, often referred to as "heroin chic" (Arnold, 1999). This trend continued in the early 2000s but shifted towards a more toned and athletic physique (Bozsik et al., 2018). As we progressed through the years, social media influencers and celebrities began promoting a fully curved hourglass figure with a thin waist as the new beauty standard (Hernández et al., 2021).

The ideal body type often portrayed in the media can be difficult to achieve for most individuals without cosmetic surgery (Henriques and Patnaik, 2020). This unrealistic standard of beauty is further perpetuated by the widespread use of editing and filter applications on social media and the everyday use of make-up products to conceal perceived flaws, making it even more difficult for individuals to keep up with the idealised look (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017).

For males, various factors, including social media, have influenced the idealisation of a muscular physique (Gültzow et al., 2020). Men frequently face feelings of inadequacy due to regular exposure to images of chiselled bodies on social media, and they attempt to comply with unattainable beauty standards (Chi, 2015). According to Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), the social media platform Instagram is more photo-based, where the users post photos to interact with others. Social media that are image-based users tend to focus more on appearance.

Furthermore, Engeln et al. (2020a) conducted a study on young undergraduate females at Midwestern University; the participants scrolled through social media as part of the research. Females who use Facebook compared to females who use Instagram found that women who spent time using Instagram compared appearance more than those on Facebook. In addition to Engeln et al. (2020b) findings, women showed decreased body dissatisfaction and increased adverse effects after scrolling through both social media. Instagram usage is associated with a higher likelihood of body dissatisfaction due to the platform's focus on body image and self-presentation (Couture Bue, 2020). Specifically, Instagram encourages users to focus on their physical appearance and may exacerbate pre-existing insecurities by emphasising certain bodily features (Tiggemann and Barbato, 2018).

According to the research by Casale et al. (2019), engagement in appearance-focused profiles resulted in body dissatisfaction and an increased focus on appearance when assessing self-worth in women but no significant difference when assessing males. Body dissatisfaction in women was measured using the Contour Drawing Rating Scale (CDRS) by Thompson and Gray (1995), while the Muscle Silhouette Measure (MSM) and the Fat Silhouette Measure (FSM) were both developed by (Frederick et al., 2007). The participants selected their current body type and then their body ideal, with the highest score indicating body dissatisfaction. Karsay et al. (2020) state that social media has a positive effect on males compared to females. Most studies stated that girls tend to engage in more body-related content than boys, which may give them reasons to seek validation from social media users, especially their peers (Chua and Chang, 2016).

People who spend time on social media, particularly those who skim through posts from popular influencers, celebrities and peers, may begin to compare themselves and their lives to what they see online (De Vries et al., 2015). Comparing oneself to superiors with positive traits is known as upward social comparison while comparing oneself to inferiors with negative traits is known as a downward social comparison (Samra, Warburton and Collins, 2022). Unfortunately, upward social comparison is not always favourable; for instance, people may view their lives as dull since they may not appear as exciting or successful compared to those they follow or see on social media; this can lead to feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem (Park, Kim and Park, 2021). For example, the research by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015a) states that social media posts promoting fitness and exercise can negatively affect women's body image and self-esteem. Specifically, the researchers found that exposure to such posts led to an increase in body dissatisfaction and a decrease in state appearance self-esteem, meaning that women felt worse about their bodies and appearance after viewing these types of posts. In addition to the previous study mentioned by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015b), the findings highlight the potential harm fitness-related content can have on women's mental health and body image and call for more awareness and responsible sharing of fitness-related posts on social media.

The use of beauty enhancer apps has become increasingly popular in recent times, but it can have negative consequences on one's mental health. People who are dissatisfied with their appearance can become obsessed with their looks, and this can lead to body dysmorphic disorder if left untreated (Veale and Singh, 2019). Body dysmorphic disorder is a mental health condition that causes people to have a distorted perception of their appearance (NHS, 2020). In an attempt to achieve the perfect look and feel better about themselves, many people resort to cosmetic surgery. However, research by Laughter et al. (2023) states that social media can exacerbate the situation for people with body dysmorphic disorder, as it can lead to excessive use of cosmetic procedures, which can have harmful consequences. According to Aparicio-Martinez et al. (2019), young women may resort to unhealthy methods to achieve a thin body due to the pressure of social media body ideals. This observation supports the social cognitive theory that suggests people learn from what they see, developing behaviour and attitudes (Bandura, 2001).

In a previous study, Homan (2010) identified two primary beauty ideals coexisting among female college students, namely the athletic and thin ideals. It was found that the internalisation of the athletic ideal is linked to excessive exercise Kantanista et al. (2018), while internalising the thin ideal is associated with calorie restriction and weight loss

(Juarascio et al., 2011). The impact of social media on body image has been extensively studied, and it has been found that it can contribute to low body image, leading to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (He and Yang, 2022). Most studies on the relationship between body dissatisfaction and body dysmorphic disorder have found that young women have poor body image, which may explain why most research is focused on women (Perloff, 2014). These findings shed light on the importance of promoting healthy body image among social media users, especially women, to prevent the development of eating disorders and other related mental health issues; more research is needed on the relationship between males and body dissatisfaction caused by social media.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying happens when someone utilises technology to humiliate, injure, or hurt another person. It pertains to "wilful and persistent harm perpetrated via the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices." Bullying occurs in any online setting, including social media, video or computer games, message boards, and text messaging on mobile devices. Although bullying predates the development of social media, the term cyberbullying came about because people took it among themselves to create new ways on the internet to humiliate people. According to Tokunaga (2010), no research article mentioned the term 'cyberbullying' before 2004, demonstrating its recent existence. The most common strategy used for cyberbullying includes flaming, which is the act of sending offensive or irrational comments (Peled, 2019). As a result, Cyberbullying is now a global concern and can result in mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Ulvi et al., 2022). Peluchette et al. (2015) conducted a study among 572 university students from the United States and Australia who use social media. The study found that those who posted inappropriate or harmful content on social media, such as profanity or negative comments about others, were more likely to become victims of cyberbullying. In addition, most of the respondents stated they have experienced cyberbullying while using social media.

Similarly, Schodt et al. (2021) stated that adult men who reported using social media more frequently and actively had a stronger correlation between cyberbullying victimisation (CBV) and cyberbullying perpetration (CBP), while, for adult women, this finding did not emerge consistently. In fact, in Study 2, the association between mental health and cyberbullying was noticeably smaller for women than for males, and it was completely missing in Study 1. Although studies have shown that social media users are at risk of cyberbullying, it is essential to note that there are counteracting studies that state that with recent updates, social media now have community guidelines that users must comply with, or there will be consequences, this reduces the risk of persons being bullied while using social media (Jiang et al., 2020). For instance, Instagram removes any post containing negative comments or nudity (Instagram, 2018). Social media, despite being at risk of cyberbullying, also has its benefits. It has created a platform where people, especially young adolescents, can find and express their identity. For example, participants from the United Kingdom use the social media app TikTok to share thoughts and emotions and connect with others with similar interests, creating a sense of belonging (Winstone et al., 2021).

Fear of Missing Out

People are more connected than ever, yet they remain disconnected. They often prioritise social media over in-person interactions. Some individuals may be reluctant to take a break from social media because they fear missing out on anything important. Hence the constant checking of notifications. According to Przybylski et al. (2013a), Fear of missing out (FoMO) is "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent". Ryan and Deci (2000) established self-determination theory (SDT), which was used to construct the FoMO, while Przybylski et al. (2013b) used it to figure out what causes FoMO. However, SDT states that social connectedness may encourage intrinsic motivation, which subsequently can promote excellent mental health. Although social connectedness is the greatest good for mental health, Przybylski et al. (2013c) incorporated both FoMO and SDT, claiming that FoMO is an adverse emotional condition caused by unsatisfied social-relatedness needs.

The ongoing reaction to social media platforms encourages Fear of missing out. According to Elhai, Yang and Montag (2020), these reactions are also classified as addictive. It is a common occurrence that people share only the most exciting and glamorous aspects of their lives on social media, such as their travels, food, and trendy items. These posts are often called 'highlight reels'. While these posts can be inspiring, they can also create unrealistic expectations for others. As a result, when people see these highlights, they might compare them to their own lives and mistakenly think that others are always having fun. Excessive use of social media, such as checking multiple accounts and spending time scrolling through feeds before going to bed, can lead to addiction. Moreover, the urge to present oneself in a certain way on social media can also contribute to this addiction. Experiencing FoMO can cause anxiety when overwhelmed by social media. According to Gupta and Sharma (2021), regular exposure to social media can lead to poor mental health. According to the research by Tandon et al. (2021), 321 responses were collected from social media users aged 18-25, and the study states that FoMO is associated with fatigue, social comparison, and stalking. Studies have shown that Fear of missing out is linked to sleep disturbances, anxiety and depression (Li et al., 2020). This is because the constant need to be connected and engaged with others can lead to feelings of stress and pressure, which can interfere with one's ability to relax, sleep, and feel at ease (Pirdehghan, Khezmehe and Panahi, 2021).

Furthermore, individuals who experience FOMO may be more likely to compare themselves to others and feel inadequate, which can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression over time. In light of recent studies, it has been established that social media serves as a vital support system for individuals, particularly those undergoing a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has been one instance where people have reported increased social media usage; social media has helped individuals cope better during these trying times and provided comfort and support while navigating the isolation and social distancing measures (Cauberghe et al., 2021).

Potential solution and coping strategies

The use of social media has become a double-edged sword that offers people ways to connect with others while posing difficulties to mental well-being. A proactive and diverse approach is required to deal with the harmful impacts of excessive social media use (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Individuals can recover control of their screen time and build a better balance between the virtual and real worlds by establishing clear boundaries, such as setting time limits and executing occasional digital detoxes (Brevers and Turel, 2019). Being mindful of what we consume is essential. One effective way to improve our overall well-being is to curate social media feeds to include positive and uplifting content while unfollowing accounts that trigger negative emotions.

Offline activities, building face-to-face connections, and engaging in hobbies away from screens contribute to a more balanced lifestyle. Individuals can discover triggers for negative emotions associated with social media and develop techniques to address them through self-reflection (Zahrai et al., 2021). Finally, a mix of these coping mechanisms, support from real-life contacts, and professional advice can equip individuals to traverse the digital terrain with resilience and a positive mental attitude (Pandya and Lodha, 2021). According to Zhang et al. (2020), participating in solution-focused group counselling can have a positive impact on college students struggling with internet addiction.

Conclusion

Social media is a part of people's lives today. It helps them communicate and share ideas no matter the geographical region. Despite its many benefits, social media can harm people's mental health. Social media platforms have a significant impact on how individuals perceive themselves and others, leading to poor self-esteem and negative body image due to the unrealistic images people see on social media. Studies have shown that social media can cause people to be dissatisfied with their bodies, which increases the chances of having body dysmorphic disorder. The idealised beauty standards portrayed on social media can be unrealistic and unattainable, leading to stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, research has stated that cyberbullying is a negative factor of social media use and found that it is most common in young adolescents and young adults. Social media addiction has become a prevalent issue, leading to the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). People tend to overuse social media to the extent that it becomes the last thing they do at night and the first thing they do in the morning. Personal reflection and support groups can aid in coping with these risks. Professionals and individuals should acknowledge social media's positive and negative effects and learn how to use it safely and effectively. Social media can be a valuable tool for personal and professional growth but using it in moderation and caution is essential.

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