

Critically consider the extent to which social media impacts upon the health and well-being of children and young people in the United Kingdom.

Social media has become omnipresent in today's society, with it having a considerable impact on the lives of people of all ages. Screen time has become the norm to many, including young people. A recent report found that 93% of children aged 8 to 11 will spend thirteen and a half hours online per week, with this amount almost doubling in the 12 to 15 age range (Ofcom, 2019). The phenomenon of social media is somewhat new, and therefore the research on its impact on children and young people cannot provide us with a complete view. However, there has been a significant link made between social media and health and well-being of young people. This is not to say that social media was the root cause of emotional ill health and low levels of well-being, but it does suggest that social media can aid in amplifying these issues (House of Commons, 2019, p. 3).

This essay aims to determine how children's health and well-being is defined, whilst critically considering the impact social media has on it. As health and well-being is a complex concept in regard to children and young people, this essay will look at emotional health and well-being in particular. In addition, social policy and its importance to this topic will be highlighted. Also, this essay will examine the changing trends in regard to young people and their use of social media. Importantly, the major impacts social media is having on children and young people's emotional health and well-being will be focussed upon.

In the past, the term 'health' was primarily considered to be linked with physical aspects of life, with very little emphasis placed on the emotional and mental health of children. However, we are able to understand now that both physical and emotional needs play a vital role in the overall view of health and can often impact each other (Underdown, 2007). When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970), we are able to see that there is a number of stages which need to be met in order for an individual to feel a sense of fulfilment and gain the ability to meet their full potential. This model suggests that all aspects of health play a vital role in the success of a person, with the basic human needs such as clean water and a balanced diet setting the paving stones for more complex aspects, for example, a positive sense of self-esteem and an understanding of their own belonging (Harper, 2003).

Similarly to emotional health, the importance of children's well-being has only been widely recognised within the last two decades. According to McAuley and Rose (2011) children's well-being has become

of paramount importance in order to ensure children have happy, fulfilled futures in which they are able to contribute positively in society, this is defined as well-becoming. As of more recently, children's well-being has been taken into consideration when focussing on policies and practices which affect children, this has been described as the ecological approach to children's development. This approach was originally recognised by Bronfenbrenner in 1979. His theory suggests that life experiences have a large impact on well-being, and the effects of these impacts will be seen in all aspects of the child's life (Johnson and Huggins, 2019). In contrast, there is an argument presented by a range of philosophers which suggests that well-becoming hinders a child's relative happiness in younger years as there is too much focus on their adult well-being (Angner, 2010). Tiberius (2006, pp.494) states that our focus should be on 'subjective well-being', which he defines as 'what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good for us'. Others have agreed with this statement, and there are claims that suggest that well-being and quality of life can only be truly determined by those who live it. This suggests that subjectively lived experiences are fundamental in regard to well-being (Scanlon, 1998).

Undoubtedly, it has been argued that children's emotional health and well-being is being impacted by the use of social media, despite of the age restrictions on many commonly used platforms being set at the age of 13 (The Lancet, 2019). In order to critically consider the impacts it is having we need to be able to examine the definition of social media, as well as the changing trends which may have affected the usage. Internet usage now has a major impact when considering how we are able to participate in society, children and young people are offered opportunities from social media which were otherwise impossible in past years (OECD, 2018). The internet now plays a vital role in the lives of a large percentage of the United Kingdom's population, whether it be to gain knowledge, communicate with loved ones, or purely for personal enjoyment. Neighbouring countries to the UK, such as France and Spain believe having the ability to access online services and information holds such great importance in a person's life that they formally class it as a Human Right. For some young people communicating online and using social media plays just as vital of a role in their everyday life, being 'connected' to their peers through their mobile devices means that there are many options for children and young people to choose from in regards to social media (OECD, 2018). According to O'Keeffe (2011) more obvious platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp are undoubtedly classed as forms of social media, however there is also other websites which are often overlooked. If users are able to communicate socially in any way then this is considered to be a social media site, this includes platforms such as Youtube, Sims, TikTok, and even blogs. Although these social networking sites (SNS) offer opportunities to communicate and gain a sense of enjoyment, it

also opens the door for interaction with strangers, and can leave children feeling vulnerable to the cyber world (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2012).

Many have raised concerns regarding the use of social media by young people and children, including parents, teachers and even policy makers and researchers. This is partly due to the fact that social media is becoming more popular among children and young people every day (Brown and Marin, 2009). According to a global research study produced in 2019 there has been a significant rise in the number of social media users since 2010 (Smart Insights, 2019). There are currently 3.484 billion users of social media, with this number rising by at least 9% each year. Statistics show that the highest percentage of users throughout a range of social networking platforms were under the age of 24 (Ospina, 2019). A possible explanation for this could be the rise in children and young people having access to or having their own smartphones, laptops or tablets. Since 2012 there has been a significant change in the availability of access to social media which young people have, this includes 91% of people aged 15 having their own mobile device with internet access. The PISA tests which took place in 2015 showed that there had been a noticeable rise in all aspects of social media use by young children in the short space of time since the previous tests in 2012 (OECD, 2018).

From personal experience in working with children and young people in a particular setting since 2015, I would feel compelled to agree with this statement. Although students are not permitted to bring mobile phones and tablets with them on a daily basis, they are allowed to bring them in on a special day such as 'game day'. From this it is clear to see that a large number of children have access to these types of technology from a young age. As well as this, I have also noticed a rise in children from this particular setting requesting to be friends or asking to follow myself and other members of staff on a variety of different social media platforms, despite all children in the setting being below the age of the restrictions set. This is not just an issue which we are seeing in this particular setting, but research suggests this is a common trend throughout the UK. A 2017 newspaper article written by a 'secret teacher' stated that they have also witnessed a rise in access to mobile devices and use of social media in the last five to seven years. In their belief the major concern with this is due to the fact that although as previously mentioned there are age restrictions to these platforms in order to ensure children's safety, there is little being done to ensure the restriction is implemented. Due to this, children are having a difficult time coping with the internet exposure which has a negative impact on their resilience (The Guardian, 2017).

In order to combat these issues, a range of social policies have included social media and internet safety into their statements in recent years. Social policies can be defined as aims or goals of what should happen in regard to how they impact people in real life situations. The main purpose for

social policies is to improve welfare in areas such as education, health care, employment and human services (Blakemore and Griggs, 2007). An example of this is the Resilience for the Digital World (2016) paper, which was produced by Young Minds. The paper recognises the advantages that the use of social media has for young people, however it also offers action points and strategies to attempt to ensure that young people are not becoming overwhelmed or negatively impacted by the usage. The action points include incorporating digital resilience in school's curriculum and using this to encourage children and young people to identify how to have a balanced life in the digital and real world. As well as this, it also offers the notion that children and young people have a responsibility for their own safety and should be taught how to protect themselves digitally. In addition to this, it is also mentioned that children should be encouraged to develop empathy and show awareness, as well as take responsibility for their actions online (Young Minds, 2016).

Similarly, Livingstone *et al* (2012) claims that these recommendations are vital to ensuring children are safeguarded whilst online. Emphasis is put on the government's responsibility to provide children and young people with a curriculum in which digital skill and safety are of paramount importance. Furthermore, the Successful Futures review (2015) of the Welsh Curriculum produced similar beliefs that digital learning should be intertwined in the school curricula. The review found that society is evolving digitally, and children therefore need to be prepared for the inevitable changes. As high levels of digital competence are already expected in the work force, these can only be expected to grow in the coming years which increases the demand for today's children and young people to be equipped with the digital skills needed (Donaldson, 2015). From this review birthed the new curriculum in Wales which comes into place in 2022. The new curriculum aims to ensure that digital literacy holds as much value in school's across Wales as numeracy and literacy (Welsh Government, 2019).

Furthermore, HM Government produced a green paper in 2017 which focused on strategies to ensure safety online. This paper agreed with the statement from the Successful Futures review (2015) in acknowledging that there is a duty of care placed upon the Government in order to ensure children and young people are equipped to use the internet and are knowledgeable in regard to doing so. The paper suggests that a whole school approach is necessary when tackling online safety and offers guidance to schools in order to ensure that support is given (HM Government, 2017).

Although these social policies have been put in place to protect children and young people's emotional health and well-being, it is important to consider who is deciding what recommendations and considerations are right for this age group. An issue which has been raised for many years is that children and young people have little involvement in issues which involve them, for example for many

years schooling has been regarded as children doing what they are told, typically by adults, and not being an active participant in their own learning (Kohn, 1993). Since then there has been little change in how we educate and care for children and young people, despite of the introduction of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child act which emphasises the importance in Article 12, every child has the right to a voice and that should be respected and listened to by adults (Unicef, no date). However, the policies previously mentioned have been written by adults, with little or no input from children who are affected by social media. The social policies previously mentioned are derived from an andragogical viewpoint, in which adult policy makers have determined how best to deal with the issue of social media and children and young people (Forest and Peterson, 2017). As learning and understanding is very complex, it is difficult to determine how a child is best able to understand information from an adult's perspective therefore presenting policies from an andragogical standpoint has little impact on children and young people (Edosomwan, 2016).

It is undeniable that the internet has already changed the world we live in, children and young people are now growing up in a digital world which is impossible to ignore. As a result of this 'digitalization' there are a range of impacts to emotional well-being which need to be considered (Unicef, 2017). Firstly, as a result in the rising use of social media it is believed that for some young people this is their primary source of social communication, because of this a significant number of children and young people's emotional and social development is taking place online. Due to this, it is often the case that offline issues get brought into the online world in the shape of cyber-bullying (McBride, 2011). Cyberbullying has been defined as a repeated, aggressive action which is carried with intent to upset or cause harm to someone, using online or electronic tools to contact a victim who is unable to defend themselves (Cheng, 2012).

According to a recent survey, England have one of the most reported issues with cyber-bullying among children and young people. Headteachers across England reported that 27% of them deal with cyber-bullying or 'trolling' each week, this is compared to a 3% average worldwide (OECD, 2018). A reoccurring identification amongst research suggests that the impacts of cyber-bullying profoundly affect the emotional health and well-being of children and young people. Victims of cyber-bullying often feel a sense of exclusion from peers, as well as loneliness. As a result, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety are common in young people and children who have experienced this (Cowie, 2013). A study of the comparison in impacts between offline bullying and cyber-bullying found that although the feelings of fear, loneliness and depression were mentioned in both categories, defenceless was only mentioned by young people who had been bullied online. A possible explanation for this could be due to the fact that there is no escape to cyber-bullying. As traditional forms of bullying typically take place in school, children are able to go home and feel safe. However, as

previously stated, a significant number of children and young people now have access to social media from their own personal devices, this means that the victims are vulnerable to the cyberbullies at all times of day (Ortega *et al*, 2009).

Furthermore, research suggests that in regard to victims of cyberbullying, young people between the ages of 11 and 18 are most at risk. A theory for this is that at this age range most young people have a need to feel accepted and fit in with those around them, however there is no significant gender which is seen to be more at risk when it comes to cyberbullying (Ackers, 2012). In particular, the victims who are in school are at highest risk of becoming affected by the impacts of cyberbullying in later life. Consequently, there are short-term and long-term impacts of cyberbullying, with each having a significant effect on emotional health and well-being. Studies suggest that short-term impacts of cyberbullying take a more physical impact on health and well-being with the victim showing symptoms such as stomach pain, headaches and being unable to sleep. Importantly, it is also noted that victims who have been cyberbullied are reported as having difficulty with behaviour in school as a result. Similarly to traditional forms of bullying, research suggests that victims often feel isolated, unsafe, and unsupported, particularly in regard to school staff (Cowie, 2013). Importantly, a significant risk of depression has been listed in both short-term and long-term impacts of cyberbullying. As a result of this in later life it is noted that there are considerable links between depression, cyberbullying and antisocial behaviour, as well as alcohol and drug issues. Cyberbullying and the impacts of it, can manifest itself in all aspects of life which is why there is such great importance placed on the prevention and eradication of all forms of bullying (Fahy *et al*, 2016).

In addition, as a result of the frequent exposure to images, comments and likes there has been an increase in young people having negative feelings about themselves and their lives. For many of these young people this results in obsessive social media use and comparing themselves to those online (Young Minds, 2016). In this instance there is a higher risk for girls in comparison to boys. As a result of social media, almost three-quarters of girls aged 14 are suffering with low self-esteem, depression and have admitted to feeling 'ugly' or 'overweight' compared to those they see on social media (Campbell, 2019). Research suggests that dissatisfaction with their own bodies was witnessed in girls as young as nine. The children in this study acknowledged that there is an idealised view of weight and appearance amongst their peers which is largely modelled around people they follow on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The same study found that young girls aged 12-15 have felt pressure to diet or watch what they eat as a result of adverts on social media or sponsored posts by celebrities they follow (Tiggemann and Slater, 2014).

Moreover, research suggests that there is a clear correlation between body dissatisfaction and social media. Sociocultural models suggest that this could be because girls and women are frequently observing and comparing themselves to the appearances of others on social media (Fardouly *et al*, 2015). Surveys produced over long periods of time have also suggested that young people with body dissatisfaction are more likely to have issues with this in later life, as well as unrealistic body ideals and eating disorders (Perloff, 2014). Some believe that social media plays a part in this due to the society of social media and how being 'thin' is encouraged and shown to be the only way a person is able to be loved, accepted and respected, whereas being overweight is demonised and linked to laziness and shame (Jade, 2019). From research which examines the link between eating disorders and social media we are able to see that many people with eating disorders often have low self-esteem and self-belief, but also it is noted that they also scored lower in all aspects of health than those without an eating disorder. For example, in areas such as mental health, psychological well-being, vitality, and physical health (Doll, Peterson & Brown, 2005). It is also noted that young people with eating disorders, in particular anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder have reported that they have thoughts that their lives are not worth living, have self-harmed, or had thoughts of self-harm, and have had thoughts or attempted suicide (Sidani *et al*, 2016).

Notably, there has been considerable links made between excessive use of social media and mental ill health conditions such as depression, anxiety, self-harm and post-traumatic stress disorder. Due to this there is significant concern for young people, as one of the leading causes of death in this age range is suicide (Young Minds, 2016). Recently, one of the most commonly used social media platforms, Instagram, has received negative attention as a result of the widespread, unacceptable images and depictions of self-harm which are publicly available. Researchers believe that viewing these types of graphic scenes have an impact on vulnerable audiences such as young people, and are often imitated as a result (Arendt, Scherr and Romer, 2019). Responsibility has been firmly placed on the social media platforms, as it has been suggested that these companies need to do more to protect children and young people from the content available to them (Adams, 2019). The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield has written an open letter to these social media companies urging them to reflect on their platforms, and fix issues such as explicit suicidal content being easily available to young users. She also suggests that if they are not able to fix these issues, then they are encouraged to explain to children and young people why they are not able to protect them (Longfield, 2019).

Another essential point to mention is that young people are the loneliest age group, according to findings from a number of sources (BBC, 2018; The Office for National Statistics, 2017; the Eden Project, 2015). A survey which consisted of 55,000 people from all over the United Kingdom found

that of people aged 16-24, 40% admitted to feeling lonely often or very often (BBC, 2018). In today's digital age there are more opportunities to connect with people being invented every day. Young people are currently better connected than any other generation, as well as possibly having friends, family and support at school these children and young people are feeling lonely. The cause of this largely being blamed on social media and the internet, as loneliness and social anxiety are linked to high usage (Nowland, 2018).

It is hypothesised that the use of social media has revolutionized how people communicate and connect worldwide, the suggestion being that there should be an overall increase in people's well-being. However, this has not been the case especially in the instance of children and young people who have been said to have the most to gain from social media, albeit the situation may have changed in recent years (Griffin, 2010). Loneliness amongst children and young people has been described as a potential epidemic, which has similar risks to obesity and substance use, and has been linked to serious risks to health in children and adults (Asher and Paquette, 2003). Links have been made between loneliness and depression, as well as suicidal thoughts, physical and emotional ill health and lower academic achievement (Mann and Solmi, 2018). A report which researched the impact loneliness had on young people included a case study of a person who found himself feeling socially excluded and lonely as a result of social media. This person describes the situation as a vicious circle in which he could not escape, as cyberbullying left him unable to feel accepted anywhere and therefore he felt he struggled to socialise. He did not have a supportive family background and lost his primary caregiver as a young adult which in turn left him being homeless. In this case, he became even more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness as a young, homeless man (Action For Children, 2017). From experience in working with children and young people who are vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, and in particular a case which is very similar to this one. It is in my opinion that these major changes will play a crucial part in later life, and may lead to issues such as substance abuse and mental health conditions. For example, if we consider Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), this tells us that the more a child is exposed to adversity the more of an impact this will make on their physical and emotional health, as well as exhibiting risk-taking behaviour and a lack of resilience (NHS, 2018). It is also suggested that similar effects can be seen from loneliness, with high levels of reports stating that loneliness has considerable links to substance misuse, stress, disturbance of sleep, and paranoia, as well as impacting resilience and empathy in children and young people (Bonetti, Campbell and Gilmore, 2010). However, it is believed that establishing and maintaining relationships has the potential to not only combat negative impacts such as those stated previously, but also allow us to flourish in a way in which gives us a sense of belonging and boosts self-esteem. Positive social relationships allow people the opportunity to feel a sense of happiness and better life satisfaction.

Currently, there is adequate evidence to suggest that social media has the ability to nourish these positive social relationships, however it is only the user who is able to facilitate and gain from the potential positive impacts (Pittman and Reich, 2016).

Despite of the possible negative impacts of social media on children and young people's health and well-being which have been mentioned, it is also important to consider the positive impacts. Although many studies have focussed on the harmful side of social media, there is evidence to suggest that if used correctly there is potential for children and young people to thrive with social media being an important aid in life (Hughes, 2019). An illustration of this is as a result of digital technology being more accessible to children and young people, they are able to use this to their advantage by accessing information and support online. Applications have been specifically invented in order to tackle the possible negative impacts mentioned previously, such as depression and mental ill health. These types of outlets offer opportunities for children and young people to discuss personal struggles, as well as offer advice and strategies to aid with coping with their issues in a welcoming online community. This gives children and young people a sense of belonging and can promote feelings of social inclusion which in turn improve self-esteem and self-confidence (OECD, 2018). Similarly, a recent survey which looked at 1000 young people suggested that they believe social media helps in order to gain support and nurture relationships. This could be due to the fact the same young people asked said they felt more able to express themselves and tell others how they are feeling online (The Children's Society, 2018).

Likewise, social media has been said to empower young people to find out who they are as a person and gives an outlet for creativity to be enhanced. Specific social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and individual blogs have been defined as a channel for expression as a result of the ability to freely writing, photograph and video topics which inspire the individual (Zoller, 2018). Research suggests that these types of outlets are able to help boost confidence, raise happiness, improve mental health in children and young people (House of Commons, 2019). As a result of this, programmes have been introduced across the UK which aim to encourage children to develop creative content for social media accounts in order to support their emotional well-being by giving them a safe place to express themselves and increase resilience (Head Start, 2018).

However, a significant amount of attention has been raised, both by policy makers and academics, on the 'digital divide' in today's society. The inequalities in digital availability has been highlighted in recent research which suggests that children and young people from middle class families are more likely to have regular access to the internet and social media. Therefore they are more likely to benefit from the positive impacts of social media (Livingstone, 2015). As well as children

and young people who are from deprived backgrounds, those who are in care, excluded from mainstream education, and children and young people whose family are seeking asylum are also at risk (Elwick et al, 2013). It is a misconception to believe that all children and young people are digitally literate as we are able to see from a recent report that there are 300,000 young people who are not digitally engaged and lack basic digital skills (Carnegie Trust, 2018). The major concern with this is that those who are vulnerable to digital isolation are at risk of being left behind, this in turn has the potential to impact a range of aspects such as job opportunities, and socialisation. Similarly, this also has a significant affect on the emotional health and well-being of children and young people as it isolates and negatively impacts self-worth as young people are unsure of how they can succeed without these vital aspects of the modern world (Ashworth, 2017).

In conclusion, this essay has considered the impacts social media has on children and young people's health and well-being, with a focus on the emotional effects it has. From the research gathered it is clear to see that the impacts stated are largely negative, such as significant reports of cyberbullying, as well as higher levels of suicide, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, and a rise in loneliness. All of which have been shown to impact children and young people's emotional health and well-being. Despite of the considerable potential of harm from social media which has been mentioned, there is potential to use these platforms for good and therefore reap the benefits (Swansea University, 2017). As previously stated, social media and its impacts on children and young people is a relatively new phenomenon (House of Commons, 2019, p. 3), which suggests that currently we are not able to see the full picture when considering the holistic impacts which affect children and young people, however this essay has aimed to give as much relevant information in order to critically consider the impacts.

In this essay emotional health and well-being, as well as social media were defined in order for the reader to gain a better understanding of the possible impacts. Also, the changing trends in regard to social media and children and young people were noted. As well as this, social policies which focus on children and young people and social media were discussed whilst considering the ideology behind these policies. Importantly, the major impacts on emotional health and well-being were focussed upon, as well as considering the impacts of the digital divide on young people.

From this essay, it is clear to see that social media does impact children and young people's emotional health and well-being, whether it be in a positive or negative way. Analysis suggest that although we are not able to see the full picture currently, the rapid growth of social media and internet use by young people cannot be ignored. Therefore it is incredibly important to ensure that all children and young people are equipped in order cope and flourish in today's digital world.

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