

Sociological Reflections on the Interaction Between Teenagers' Psychological Development and Social Media

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Abstract. In recent years, with the development of society in an era of digitalisation, the lives of teenagers have gradually been altered by changes in social networks. This paper will examine the all-around changes in society that have occurred as a result of this phenomenon, and investigate the effects on the self-concept, group dynamics and psychological well-being of teenagers online. Based on studies of related research and established theories in sociology, this paper will present the dualistic function of social media platforms at present: promoting global communication to an unprecedented extent and causing mental health problems. Based on the above research, although these virtual environments provide space for self-expression and community construction for young people, there are also certain risks, such as cyberbullying, extended social comparison, and pressure to build an online persona. The development of these platforms has been too rapid for the construction of traditional social control mechanisms, and as a result, adolescents are more exposed to new types of digital stress. Given the structural inequalities in digital access and literacy, this paper will also investigate the worsening digital divide and how it affects the unequal distribution of social capital among young people. The above discussions show that not all people have the same mental health problems caused by social media; they are also different due to factors such as socio-economic background and gender. Finally, the paper puts forward a balanced view based on sociology and proposes to strengthen digital literacy education for young people, improve the role of parents in supervision, and build ethical platforms to promote all-round healthy growth for young people in the digital age.

Keywords: Adolescent development; Social media; Sociology of youth; Mental health; Digital identity; Cyberbullying.

1. Introduction

At present, the psychological changes of adolescence and the wide spread of social media platforms have attracted the attention of sociologists and others at home and abroad. With the development of digital ecosystems, the living and learning spaces for young people have also been changed considerably [1]. Adolescence is a time of overall development when there are changes in cognition, emotions and society. At this time, people are preoccupied with forming their own identities, have become more independent of their families, and are seeking acceptance and emotional support from their friends [10]. With the development of digital communication technology, new factors have been added to the above development system. The Structure and algorithms of these platforms actively create an environment for people to communicate, and in doing so, should the content of social interaction [11]. Therefore, in order to understand how these virtual spaces affect the process of socialisation and psychological development for young people today, in-depth sociological research needs to be carried out [9]. Traditional places for socialisation, such as physical schools, local areas and community organisations, now work together with or compete against borderless digital networks [12]. A new model of digital life has appeared, and as a result, the previous theories of sociology are no longer fully applicable to this change. Research on the Structure and Culture of Social media has also investigated their effects on mental health. The first objective of this paper is to study the social traits of how teenagers' development of mental health and their use of social media are associated. Research on the formation of various groups in virtual spaces, modifications to peer relationships and social capital, negative impacts on mental health due to continuous social comparison, and new forms of deviance such as cyberbullying [4].

2. Theoretical Foundations of Digital Socialization

To understand the problems of mental health among young people on social media, some scholars have applied several social theories. Symbolic interactionism provides a basic system for studying how people give meaning to life and form themselves in society through daily interactions [13]. In the age of digital platforms, young people have continuously created symbolic systems and, through texts, pictures, other symbols, and so on, have negotiated their social roles and self-images. The virtual environment is a wide-ranging stage for the organisation and display of the self, intended for an unseen but ubiquitous audience [14]. The stable-state performance of digital equipment is relatively self-contained; thus, young people are constantly aware of and learn from the reactions of their peers' work [1]. A network of publics should also be built to study the structural conditions of adolescent socialisation at present. The three attributes of these areas are permanence, openness and discoverability, and spreadability [2]. The above particular structural affordances will probably alter the form of social interaction. Digital interactions do not disappear in time and space, so they have led to an expansion of the duration and area of peer socialization. The preservation of digital artifacts means that past behaviour and expression are still available, so the process of exploring one's adolescent identity is no longer free and fluid [2]. Adolescents are at a time when their behaviour will be observed by many people in society, so they are more likely to wish to take part in social activities. Network theory can also explain the diffusion of social capital among people in large-scale digital environments [15]. Teenagers use social media to construct bridging and bonding social capital. Bridge capital brings together all sorts of scattered people to introduce new ideas and information for young people.

3. Identity Formation and Network Dynamics

At this time, people are busy taking care of their own lives and have formed some supportive social networks for their mental health. In the past, the range of one's sense of self and society was often limited by place and class. At the same time, the large-scale digital world has also provided many new spaces for young people to learn about themselves [10]. The idea of a performative self is particularly prominent in this particular case; teenagers use all kinds of digital tools, such as profile descriptions, carefully selected photos and status updates, to present an idealised version of themselves [14]. This high selectivity in self-presentation enables people to emphasize socially acceptable traits while simultaneously concealing perceived flaws; thus, they wish to consciously manage the narrative they present for their social image. The social changes resulting from this digital curation are relatively substantial. As young people have spent more and more time and energy online, they are living their lives in virtual spaces and, at the same time, changing who they are [13]. Therefore, a relatively high internal pressure to maintain a desirable aesthetic and social image of digital life may lead to a state of heightened awareness and generalised anxiety [5]. In addition, a large number of digital validations have been based on some indicators, such as "likes", comments and the number of followers, and this has formed a positive feedback loop that has damaged the self-esteem of adolescents [11]. When their sense of self is based on how many people on the Internet like them, young people can be very inconstant due to such feedback.

With the widespread use of social media in recent years, the basic structure of relationships among young people has also been changing. Sociologically speaking, these platforms are new stages for the construction, maintenance and spread of social capital [15]. It is now easy for people around the world to connect with their classmates and build a wide network of friends in a short time. Many young people today have used social networks as extensions of their actual social life to build and maintain friendships in a new way [12]. The close support system of peers can provide some psychological support for young people in their immediate vicinity facing mental illness and offer a digital haven for lonely and misunderstood young people [10]. At the same time, there are also new and serious problems in the psychology of young people due to changes within digital networks. Most of the links shown by social networks are not close and not deeply felt. Focusing on accumulating a large number of 'friends' or 'followers' in culture may lead to the commercialisation of social interaction and reduce

complex human relationships to simple numerical indicators [7]. The above specific change will significantly reduce the quality of social capital; that is to say, an increase in the network may not be accompanied by an increase in deep, trustworthy ties. With the passage of time, people's public and private spaces have become increasingly close together in the era of digital communication.

4. Social Comparison and Cyberbullying

The internal structure of social media platforms promotes continuous and widespread social comparison, thus having serious and far-reaching negative impacts on the mental health of young people [8]. Sociological theories of social comparison believe that people will assess their own opinions, status and abilities by directly comparing themselves with others in their social groups. With the rise of the digital era, many such psychological problems have gradually spread among the population. Adolescents are continuously exposed to a large number of idealised and highly edited pictures of other young people's lives. These digital highlight reels often show extraordinary achievements, have an attractive quality and are popular among the public, thereby setting an unreasonably high standard for the daily lives of teenagers [5]. The first reason for mental illness in young people today is low self-esteem. In terms of sociology, it is making people feel worse about themselves more frequently and has been associated with an increase in all-age depression. When teenagers repeatedly believe that they are not as good as these ideal digital standards, they are likely to feel a deep sense of insecurity and inferiority, intense envy, and a strong feeling of unhappiness in life [3]. Many studies have shown that, in recent years, with the development of social media, more and more young people have been exposed to various comparisons online and are thus at a higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation [4].

With the development of the digital world, new types of deviant behaviour have also emerged, such as cyberbullying, and these are affecting the mental health of young people in recent years. Socially, cyberbullying can be considered a continuation of the old power relationship in a new era of high connectivity and technology [4]. However, due to the specific features of the new digital platform, such as anonymity and physical distance among users, as well as the rapid spread of information, both the scope of such behaviour and psychological harm have increased. Cyberbullying is no longer restricted to the physical form, and it does not happen in a particular place or time at school; it is far-reaching and continuous [11]. At any time and in any place, the victims are at risk of such harm, and as a result, they experience prolonged psychological distress and physical overexcitability. Deindividuation in sociology can explain why people behave anonymously online, for example, by cyberbullying. The two above conditions reduce the social and emotional constraints on deviant behaviour considerably: full physical separation from the victim and a risk of anonymity in interaction [13]. Therefore, the perpetrators have not been psychologically damaged by what they did and are therefore free from guilt. With increased public awareness of digital platforms, the harm to the victims has also risen. Humiliating content, malicious rumours and deliberate exclusion can spread rapidly among the whole public at the same time and thus increase the scope of social harm significantly [4].

5. Digital Divide and Social Inequalities

Although the platforms for social media are often called "the democracy of the world", in fact, different groups in various sectors of society have different purposes for using them. At present, the idea of the digital divide has gone beyond the problem of access to computers and the Internet; now, significant gaps in digital literacy and safe use of the Internet for all are also being pointed out [6]. Adolescents in relatively high-income families are generally more digitally literate, and their schools and parents usually have more funds available for high-quality education and care on safe online behaviour. These privileged young people are better equipped to deal with the complex algorithms and privacy settings, as well as highly personalised advertisements, of social media platforms [15]. Adolescents in disadvantaged areas may have a relatively high number of smartphones and use social media frequently every day, but they are often not exposed to regular education on the risks of digital

technology [6]. A high or low level of digital capital can have an impact on the psychology of young children. Young people with lower digital literacy are more vulnerable to falling for online rumors and digital abuse, as well as to the harm caused by the attention economy in China [11]. The conditions of life and the uses of social media among people in different social groups are generally not the same. Affluent young people can use these digital platforms more strategically for educational networking and the active accumulation of bridging social capital, while marginalised young people mainly use them for basic entertainment and local bonding social capital [15].

6. Conclusion

Research by sociologists shows that problems in teenagers' lives and mental health due to life on the Internet have various interconnected reasons in the context of social media. Digital platforms have altered the social environments in which young people live and study today during their adolescence. As shown in the all-around analysis above, social media is not an impartial tool; it has also influenced the formation of identity and peer groups, as well as all-around mental health. On the one hand, these platforms offer all-round connections with the world and help young people build a large number of social networks and support groups and experience various roles in life in a safe environment. At the same time, the basic structure and culture of digital ecosystems have also presented serious psychological risks that need to be dealt with. The continuous demand for good digital behaviour in society, the all-encompassing nature of upward social comparison, and the significantly heightened risk of cyberbullying have all created an extremely high-risk environment for young people today. Nowadays, the experience of young people is constantly being shaped by the conflict between their fundamental need for genuine relationships and the high demands of the corporate attention economy. To help the young people in society develop well mentally, an all-encompassing and socially-aware mode of education should be used. A narrow definition of the scope of restriction and broad condemnation of digital technology are not effective solutions. Therefore, all kinds of strong digital literacy education programs need to be developed in contemporary society to help young people think critically about online content and understand the structure of social media platforms better. At the same time, the world's leading technology companies, governments and other institutions need to work together closely to build moral spaces online that truly prioritize the well-being of the people over continuous and unsupervised use. Finally, we hope to build a safe, all-weather digital space where young people can live freely, make all sorts of friends, have good mental health, and learn how to face the difficulties in modern society. Therefore, we should no longer view social media solely as a cause for worry; instead, it is a wide-ranging social space that needs to be actively engaged with, and continuously updated sociological studies are required to truly support the mental health of young people.

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