Online Therapist?

Critical Evaluation on Social Media and Mental Health

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Information and communication technologies (ICT) is all around us. This medium has helped people from two different parts of the world connect and interact without having to spend hundreds and thousands of dollars on a plane ticket. It has helped spread awareness about events going on nationally and globally (i.e: Presidential elections, Hong Kong protests, etc). Information and communication technologies has provided everybody with loads of education and entertainment. Some of the most prominent applications include YouTube, Netflix, Google, Facebook, and Yelp. Ultimately, ICTs have shaped today's social construct, which can be seen most especially in the trends of younger generations.

Types of ICTs I frequently use are email, social media networks (i.e: Instagram, Twitter, Yelp, Facebook, LinkedIn), instant messaging, and smart devices. There are some days when I believe I am "Techno-savvy" and other days where I identify as a "technophobe" because of the social effects technology has on society. Technophobe because I've noticed how isolated many people are becoming now that their lives are created behind a screen. I've noticed how the topic of most conversations are about things posted on the internet. I've noticed how much more impatient many of us have become because of the increased technological speed. This encourages me to pay more attention to how I live; how I interact with society. I find it so important to have days dedicated to putting your phone down, placing your laptop on the side, and pushing yourself to be present in the real world. Whether that's just reading a book at the beach, going to a cafe just to sit, or taking a stroll in the park. If not days, then at least moments. I make sure to decrease screen time and connect with others through face-to-face interactions. By doing this I believe it helps me not lose touch of human intimacy.

In this paper, I am going to be taking a critical look at social media's positive and negative effects on mental health for adolescents. I think that if we evaluate the relationship between social media and mental health by recognizing the role of accessibility, affordability, and dependency, we will have a better understanding of the society that we live in. With the increase in technologies, it's natural to be afraid of what's to come. However, the future of technology is in our control and it's up to us to determine the future of technology's influence.

Conversations about mental health has exponentially increased within the last decade and social media plays a part in that growth. Mental health has been around as long as humans have been alive, but now people are paying more attention to maintaining a state of wellbeing amidst our ever-changing tech-driven society. It's important to clarify that the reason behind the increase is due to the fact that people admit to social media's negative impact on their mental health. According to an online article entitled, "Mental Health Issues On the Rise Among Adolescents, Young Adults" it mentions that in a study done by the American Psychological Association "rates of mood disorders and suicide-related outcomes have increased significantly over the last decade among [adolescents and young adults]" (Rosenberg 2019) and in a National Survey on Drug Use and Health:

> Researchers of the study assessed data of 212,913 adolescents aged 12 to 17 from 2005 through 2017 and 398,967 adults aged 18 and older from 2008 to 2017. Between 2008 and 2017, the amount of adults that experience serious psychological distress in the last month increased among most age groups, with the largest increases seen among younger adults aged 18-25 (71%)... rates of serious psychological distress increased by 78%

among adults aged 20-21... Meanwhile, there was a decline among adults aged 65 and older (Rosenberg 2019).

With this information, we can see that mental health and wellbeing has decreased while our information and communication technologies has increased. Adolescents and young adults are much more vulnerable because they are in the most crucial developmental phase of their lives. It is a time where most changes are occurring not only physiologically, but psychologically and socially too. Amidst navigating their way through life in the real world, adolescents are put in a unique situation with the rise of technology, especially social media, because they must also navigate their way through the virtual world. This is a time of self-discovery and self-awareness. This dual-world scenario is troublesome for many people which explains the increase of mental health problems throughout the decade.

As stated previously, our ICTs have grown since its humble beginnings. Eventually more people began to have access to smartphone devices and access to the internet. In 2011, I got my hands on the iPhone 4S and I remember the first apps I downloaded was FaceBook and Instagram. Prior to the iPhone, I had a maroon colored LG EnV2 cellular phone that was strictly used for text messages and calling. With my new iPhone, I had easy access to all social networking websites which made me even closer to my in-real-life friends. According to the book *Tantalisingly Close* it states that mobile communication technologies promised to "bring ubiquitous connectivity, fluid sociability, real-time relief of anxiety, and omniscience and collectiveness through ever-present knowledge" (De Vries 2012) and my Apple iPhone 4S did exactly that. Having easy accessibility to social networking websites and applications opened the door to new communications; phatic communication to be exact. Photo-sharing apps like

Instagram, as well as, social networking sites like FaceBook and Twitter helped me stay connected with friends and even bond with people beyond the confines of my school. I had access to information about others and the world with just one click of a button. I was nearly addicted to social media because of the affordances it gave me. Scrolling through feeds, trying to learn what was going to get me noticed by other people, even if that meant posting a random cafe photo or a "like for a rate and tbh" Facebook status. This new idea of interconnectivity through social media consumed me.

Social media became not only a part of *my* daily routine but it did for everyone else throughout the world too. Usage went from 0.97 billion users in 2010 to 2.65 billion users in 2018 (Statista 2019). I think the primary reason why the numbers grew within a matter of years was started with the battle of smartphone devices: Android versus Apple. Both technology companies continuously compete to bring out the latest device for consumers. Meanwhile, app developers also keep up with their pace by increasing the affordability of social networking sites. In the beginning, social media's main affordances included: *Persistence, replicability, search-ability, and scalability* (Boyd 2008) but over time researchers have noticed new affordances such as: *metavoicing, triggered attending, network-informed associating, and generative role taking* (Majchrzak 2013). These affordances are the primary reasons why Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram remain one of the top 5 social media platforms in our society.

Metavoicing and *network-informed* associating are two interesting affordances. Metavoicing can be defined as engaging in the ongoing online knowledge conversation by reacting online to others' presence, profiles, content and activities" (Majchrzak 2013) and

network-informed associating as "engaging in the online knowledge conversation informed by relational and content ties" (Majchrzak 2013). Both of these affordances are interesting because though they do provide engagement on social media platforms amongst billions of people, they are also the root of the mental health problems that adolescents and young adults face. An example of metavoicing can be seen on Instagram with the use of "likes" and "reactions" to a user's post. Having the ability to react to others' content and accessibility to see how people react to your own content is a double-edged sword. With Instagram's new approach to creating a platform dedicated for creatives and business owners, metavoicing is necessary for owners to keep up to date with audience insights. It helps them to grow their personal business and continue their journey of being a digital nomad. It helps to establish their presence online (Marwick and boyd, 2008). However for personal users, having access to the amount of likes they receive, how many people visit their profile, and how many views they get takes a toll on their mental health. It seems that, the lower their likes, the lower their self-esteem. Over the years we've seen trends come and go, with people participating in challenges "for the clout" -- a phrase I've come to understand as a way to fit into society's standards -- just to receive public attention.

In addition to that, network-informed associating is another double-edged sword because amidst connecting with people from all over the world, it is easy to forget what's real and what's not. For example, on Facebook you are able to add Friends to your profile by adding your in-real-life friends (if they have a Facebook profile too) and even by adding people who you don't know in-real-life but have mutual friends with. I created my Facebook account when I was just thirteen-years old and I remember adding people I had mutual friends with -- which is why I

have nearly 1,000+ friends but still don't know half of them. In middle school I was incredibly

shy and having social media made it easier for me to talk to people without having to worry

about looking weird. It was also because of social media that I found it difficult to distinguish

between real friends and fake friends. The line between friends and acquaintances began to

converge with the rise of social media platforms. It becomes an even bigger internal problem

when the people you have as "friends" online don't claim you as your friend in real life. You

begin to wonder: Is there something wrong with me? What did I do? I thought if they followed

me back, they liked me? Why aren't we friends? *That* right there, is the catalyst of mental health

problems deriving from social media. Boyd identified that these problems come out of

impression management and *friendship performance*, thus causing social drama for users (2008).

She confirms that "the term 'Friends' can be misleading, because the connection does not

necessarily mean friendship in the everyday vernacular sense, and the reasons people connect are

varied" (Ellison and boyd 2008). Friendship performance is important to many adolescents who

are in the process of figuring out who they can truly call friends. This challenge is the cause of

insomnia, depression, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, loneliness, anxiety, and fear of missing out

(FOMO). Everybody wants to feel validated and sometimes they would jeopardize their

authenticity for the sake of impression management. Consciously or unconsciously catering to

their imagined audience by posting what would most likely give them a positive image or a

bigger audience following.

  Catering to an imagined audience on social media varies based off of the user's intent.

There are a great number of people who use social media as a personal space. Those who use

Twitter try to balance personal authenticity that encourages phatic-communication with the need

to keep certain information concealed from certain audiences (Marwick and boyd, 2008). I see this frequently on Instagram and YouTube when people share their own stories about certain topics (usually dealing with health) to help those who may need it. Adding vulnerability on social media platforms bring a sense of authenticity that enables other people to connect and build communities online. As a matter of fact, I did a little social experiment on my own Instagram to see what my followers had to say about the relationship between social media and mental health. My followers fall within the demographics of adolescents and young adults which is why I chose to use my Instagram. I first put a disclaimer letting my followers know that the following polls were going to be used to help me with my study. I noticed that this actually got people to engage with the questions more than I thought. My first poll asked: *Do you think social media -- specifically this platform -- improves mental health in some way, shape, or form?*

Yes: 23 votes (36%) **No:** 41 votes (64%)

Total: 64 votes (100%)

I then proceeded to ask them to explain why they answered Yes or No. For those who said *Yes* their responses were:

"*It creates a space to talk about mental health and how to care for yourself*"

"*I follow people with inspiring content and motivational posts, it's very uplifting*"

"*It's a good distraction. It keeps people in the loop of other people's lives*"

"*Social media is the best place for those who may not have access to the outside world around them*"

For those who said *No* their responses were:

"*It looks down upon anyone who doesn't look or act a certain way*"

"It creates a need for validation and encourages people to hide who they really are"

"Alludes social connection and then reminds me that I am alone"

"I feel like it does promote awareness of mental health, but it creates a place for self diagnosis, and creates a place to think that you have to label everything to some mental health issue, which is not the case for many"

"Either I post something I achieved or be pretty. But I have/feel neither"

"It can be a distraction from your own reality"

From this simple social experiment I did on my Instagram I've learned a couple things. I initially believed that social media could be an online therapist for those who find themselves struggling with mental health problems because there are profiles dedicated to promote mental health and wellbeing. In some way this is true because it brings support, comfort, encouragement, and validation just by simply posting self-care tips or words of affirmation. People have access to professional help, as well as, an online community that will continue the conversation about mental health and wellbeing. On the other hand, it's important to acknowledge that more needs to be done to decrease the negative effects of social media on young generations. All you ever see throughout your feeds are the best parts of people's lives, rarely ever their worst moments. Users feel compelled to post what they believe will get them more likes, more attention, and more positive feedback. But once their posts don't meet their expectations, it lowers their self awareness. It seems that there's this never ending rollercoaster with social media and mental health and here's why. Based on the responses given for those who answered *No*, it prompted me to think that dependency on social media plays a big role.

Dependency on our phones is a real issue today. Given that we have easier access to the internet and more social media affordances to our advantage, it's only normal to see that we have become incredibly dependent on our devices. These technologies were made to bridge the gaps between countries and continents, connecting us to our families and friends, no matter where we are in the world. They were made to inspire creators and promote creativity for all users; whether that be in gaming, videography, photography, or fashion. It's much more entertaining online than it is in person. But, the reality of it is that humans have become what E.M Forster once predicted about machines (Long 2016). Particularly, adolescents and young adults, their eyes are glued to their devices; always in the hands of the user. In a public space we have people looking down at their phones or secluding themselves with their airpods, instead of talking to the person next to them to pass time. Fortunately, this issue hasn't gone unnoticed. I found that if we continue to raise awareness of society's dependence on social media, push for moderate use, and encourage face-to-face communications, we are able to change the direction of technology's future.

In conclusion, social media impacts our mental health both positively and negatively. The process all starts with having access to it with our smart devices, next noticing the affordances it provides when it comes to searching or networking, which then results in our increasing dependence on them to find fulfillment. It's important to acknowledge that social media positively influences adolescents in a sense that they are able to build online communities, strengthen real-world relationships, and have a space for self-expression. But it's also crucial that we continue to work toward decreasing the negative parts of social media so that we can create a wholesome technological future for generations to come

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