USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENHANCE FAMILY TIES, PERSONALITY AND CAREER PROSPECTS OF INDIAN TEENS

Lakshyaa Arya

Vasant Valley School, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

When social media became an internet phenomenon more than a decade ago, there were concerns that it would have a detrimental effect on human productivity, especially the academic performance and mental health of students. Schools and colleges restricted the use of social media, and many continue to do so. However, with the growing popularity of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram, and the launch of messaging apps like WhatsApp, social media became an entrenched part of our lives. It served as a means to connect with others, stay updated with the news, and even as a tool for self-development. As the reach of smartphones and data connections grew in the hinterlands of the country, more Indians signed up for social-media accounts. For many teenagers, WhatsApp or Facebook became the first app to be downloaded on their new devices. India tops the list of number of users of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, far ahead of even their own domestic market in the USA. It is now certain that social media is here to stay, and so it is important to find ways that teenagers can use it productively, rather than restricting their access to it.

In this research article, I explore how social media can be used as a positive tool to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of Indian teenagers, and also how it can be used for community and family bonding, professional development and income generation. I have used secondary data collected through various sources like research papers and academic journals, newspapers, magazines and social-media platforms. I have also used case studies from my own observations of social-media trends and discussions among my peer groups.

Keywords: Mental health, positive psychology, social media

Introduction

Many scholars have studied the impact of social media on teenagers, both negative and positive. The aspiration for 'likes', 'shares' and 'follows' on social-media posts has led to severe mental-health consequences for users. In fact, the inventor of the Facebook 'Like' button, Justin

Rosenstein, himself deleted Facebook from his mobile phone because of the psychological effects this feature has on the human mind.

However, we cannot deny that social media is now an intrinsic part of our everyday lives, more so since the Covid-19 pandemic locked us all indoors. Schools and colleges were forced to take classes online, and teachers and students had to create various groups on socialmedia to stay in touch. Offices and workplaces also moved online, and workers communicated with each other through e-meetings and group-messaging apps. Even neighbours, family members and distant relations have now started keeping in touch with one another through WhatsApp groups. Yet, many parents, teachers and school authorities continue to view teenagers' use of social media with scepticism.

Social media is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Just like everything else, our social lives have also become defined by the digital revolution. Emojis and abbreviations have become part of the language we use to communicate with one another. Teens of my generation who are complete digital natives – i.e. born during the age of digital technology – have never seen a world without internet communication. For us, expressing ourselves and connecting with others through digital devices comes naturally, unlike for our parents or grandparents who had to make some effort to learn to communicate through texts and messages instead of phone calls or face-to-face conversations. In fact, one study found that teens prefer texting over talking face-to-face. When asked to choose their favourite way to communicate with their friends, 'texting' was their top choice (35%), followed by 'in person' (32%).

No doubt, social media has its share of hazards, and one has to be careful. Research has shown that the use of social mediais a major reason for teenage depression, and makes youngsters vulnerable to cyber-crime and internet addiction. There is also the problem of 'phubbing', or ignoring one's companion in favour of a mobile device, and FOMO, or fear of missing out. A study of400 adolescents and youth from five colleges in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, found that the prevalence of phubbing was 49.3%. In another study of 760 students age 12 to 16 years from Bengaluru, of whom 75% were using social media, it was found that a majority had mild social-media addiction associated with a multitude of physical, psychological and behavioural problems.

Further, various internet 'challenges' – in which users record themselves doing dangerous stunts – have led to drastic consequences, and even death, as in the case of the 'blackout' challenge on TikTokand others where people choke themselves until they become unconscious.

Despite all these risks of social media, the benefits and advantages are also sizeable. Instead of blocking social media for teenagers, it will be more constructive to equip them with the right tools and education to surf safely and even use it as a means for growth. Through this article, I aim to demonstrate these benefits, which have tremendous long-term potential to enhance the lives of the youth and help them optimise their strengths in their personal, social and professional spheres.

Materials and Methods

I have drawn my materials from various academic studies conducted from 2015 onwards, besides sources such as news websites, magazines, and social-media platforms. I have also noted observations from social media among my own peer group. For the purpose of this article, I have considered the following websites and platforms as coming under the definition of 'social media': Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, TikTok,YouTube, Vimeo, WhatsApp, Signal, Reddit, Imgur, Pinterest, Tumblr, Medium and Quora. I have not considered review sites like TripAdvisor.

Results and Discussion

Teenagers today use mobile phones almost like an extension of themselves. In an October 2020 survey of 1154 Indian youth from around India, almost 85% of those under 18 reported having their own smartphones. Out of these, 49% spend around five hours a day on their phones, and around 30% used it for more than six hours a day. Instagram emerged as the most preferred social-media platform with 98% of respondents saying they had installed it in their phones.

In certain states, the draw of social media is even higher. Another study on 200 teenagers aged 15 to 19 in Himachal Pradesh who had their own phones found that 69%boys and 61% girls spent more than six hours on social-media networking sites in a day. Most of them (96% male and 93% female) spent at least one hour daily on social networking sites. All 100% boys used social media immediately after waking up in the morning while 88% girls did so.It appears that boys were more attracted to social media than other activities in their free time: majority of the male respondents preferred to use social-media networking and female respondents preferred sports activities.

However, the same study found that 69% male respondents and 74% female respondents prefer talking to family members rather than spending time on social media if given the choice. This is perhaps an indication of the rise in nuclear family setups where parents and other family members are not so easily available to teenagers anymore as they may be workingor living elsewhere. Despite the preference of family over social media, the fact that youth are still

spending several hours per day on social media indicates that – in the absence of family – theyouth have no option but to find social companionship online.

I shall now list the various benefits and advantages that social media can offer the youth.

1. Personal Benefits

It has been proved that social media teaches children and teens about socialisation, sharing of knowledge, updating oneself of the daily news and events, besides helping them learn new things from various sources. It also helps them be prepared for new technologies and digital cultures, which are the future. By observing the way people interact on social media and giving information about the key trending subjects, teenagers can prepare themselves for real-world conversations and interactions. Hence, we can say that social media prepares teens for adult life in many ways.

The fear that many parents and teachers have about their children facing bullying or abuse is justified but the problem is not as acute as they imagine. One study ofteenagers in rural Tamil Nadu found that a majority of respondents did not faceany abuse on social sites, and they felt a sense of happiness while using social media. They also said that social media helped them to improve their knowledge and develop their network widely.

Social media also helps young people express difficult emotions, especially introverts, who do not feel confident standing up in class or in large groups. They can use creative means to express themselves – through memes, music, art or even anonymously – with more freedom than in real life. In any case, during the pandemic, it has become imperative to use social media to communicate with one another, hang out and play games.

Having an online outlet also helps teenagers deal with many complex issues that are painful in real life, such as gender identity, sexual orientation and body image. A case in point is the rising number of boys wearing makeup on Instagram, such as Shantanu Dhope, who shows off his makeup skills along with his moustache and beard, and has garnered over 36,000 followers. There are also many openly gay Instagrammers such as Raj Ahir, and transpersons such as Kali from Hyderabad, who shared how her grandmother accepted her after her transition.

Body positivity is also a buzzword online, and there are many such influencers who talk about self-love and accepting one's body for what it is, such as Neha Parulkar, whose tagline is 'Plus & Proud' and who has more than 40,000 followers, and Ashwathy B, who uses the hashtag #DarkisBeautiful and #DarkandProud to bring up the racism that dark-skinned people face in India. Having such role models is important for teenagers to develop a healthy sense of self, and not feel stigmatised for being different.

2. Academic Performance

Though there are concerns that spending so many hours every day on social media can take away teenagers from their school work, this is not necessarily the case. A small study of 112 students in Egypt in the age group 12 to 19 found that there was no significant relationship between using social media and the academic performance of students, neither in terms of hours spent on study nor the academic outcome and grades.

On the contrary, social media helps collaborate on group projects, interact with teachers outside the school environment, and gives them new ideas for careers outside of the scope of their own limited social circle. Teens can meet people outside their geographical boundaries or communities. This helps them improve their academic performance through creative and intellectual development, especially now that most school systems are breaking out of the stereotypical rote system of learning.

One of the important lessons from the pandemic is that social media has been a great tool to educate youngsters about Covid-19, and the precautions to be taken. Young people are spreading the message on Instagram through various creative means, such as Abhijeet Kain who makes funny reels on wearing masks and maintaining social distancing among other videos to keep his 728,000 followers entertained.

When it comes to education, in fact, YouTube has completely democratised the landscape, allowing even children from less privileged backgrounds access to good quality tutorials. The best example is Khan Academy, a nonprofit YouTube channel that has 6.7 million subscribers and aims to "provide world-class education to anyone anywhere".

3. Family and Community Building

At no other time has social media been so relevant as during the pandemic when it comes to social connection, sharing grief and expressing empathy. Besides providing basic information about Covid-19, social media allows the sharing of personal stories, which is more effective in promoting positive health behaviours and sense of community than citing statistics. For example, frontline health workers in India took to social media with messages like, "We stay here for you, so you please stay home for us." Celebrities from film and sports also shared their experiences with Covid-19, and urged their fans to take care of themselves.

Social media also served as a platform for activism. The collapse of the healthcare system during the second Covid-19 wavedrove desperate Indians to seek help on social media. While adults struggled to cope with medical shortages, India's youth demonstrated the constructive power of

the Internet, such as 16-year-old Gurgaon student Mahi Saraf, who along with her friends on social media helped to create online resources for updates on hospital beds and oxygen.

Besides Covid-19, social media helps in developing a sense of community and feeling closer to one's family and friends. In a study of 100 college students in Jaipur, 65% felt that social media helps them maintain social relationships with friends, and 33% said it helps maintain regular contact with parents and teachers. Several platforms online help youngsters deal with mental-health issues, such as It's Ok to Talk, which gives out advice and resources for dealing with grief and loss for young people.

Internet challenges – which are mostly related to dancing or performing physical stunts – alsoforce us to exercise and spend time bonding with family. Many Instagram pages feature siblings or couples or parents and children dancing together to the latest 'trend'. It creates an opportunity to invest in healthy relationships.

4. Professional Scope

One of the most important uses of social media is to build up a solid base for one's future career. Kaplan Test Prep's 2018 survey found that 25% of college admission officers visit applicants' social pages to learn more about them. This figure actually declined from 40% in 2015, because teenagers have become better at hiding their social-media identities, but a majority of admission officers still feel it is okay to check out a prospective student's social media profile if it is available. Many students have also lost the chance to be admitted to a prestigious college because of something they said on social media.

There has also been a significant rise in youngsters from around India earning an income by becoming social-media influencers. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTokgive an opportunity for young people to earn lakhs by posting content online. One example is Mili Sarkar, a 17-year-old village girl in West Bengal, who began earning and supporting her family with income from her viral TikTok videos in which she performed gymnastics, sometimes wearing a sari.

Social media is also a vibrant platform for political activism and for budding politicians to begin establishing their followers. Many young people also take up social-media activism for other causes, such as Black Lives Matter and Dalit Lives Matter. Feminism and climate change are also trending subjects that affect the youth, and there are several platforms where young people with common passions can come together, such as the UN Foundation's Girl Up campaign. Many social-media pages also directly offer career advice and opportunities, such as Open Call India, which offers a platform for young artists to learn, network and find work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while social media has its share of hazards, the benefits far outweigh the risks. As the world moves towards more technologically driven human interactions and increased digitisation of communication and knowledge-sharing, it is important for young people to be equipped with right tools and techniques to make the most of them. School authorities, parents and teachers must focus on the positive attributes and possibilities of social media in enhancing the knowledge, personalities and future-ready capabilities of students, instead of restricting their access to the internet.

Rather than stopping teenagers from spending time on social media, they should be trained in ways to stay safe and to keep a balance with other offline activities and human interaction. That way, we ensure the security, holistic development and progress of Indian teens.

References

1. Tom Embury-Dennis, 'Man Who Invented 'Like' Button Deletes Facebook Over Addiction Fears', Independent, October 6, 2017. https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/facebook-inventor-deletes-app-iphone-justin-rosenstein-addiction-fears-a7986566.html

2. Google dictionary

3. "Common Sense Research Reveals Everything You Need to Know About Teens' Use of Social Media in 2018", Common Sense Media, September 10, 2018. https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/news/press-releases/common-sense-research-reveals-everything-you-need-to-know-about-teens

4. D.A. Al-Sabti, A.V. Singh and S.K. Jha, "Impact of Social Media on Society in a Large and Specific to Teenagers," 6th International Conference on Reliability, Infocom Technologies and Optimization (Trends and Future Directions) (ICRITO), 2017, pp. 663-667, https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8342510

5. S. Davey, A. Davey, S.K. Raghav, J.V. Singh, N. Singh, A. Blachnio andA. Przepiórkaa,"Predictors and consequences of "Phubbing" among adolescents and youth in India: An impact evaluation study," Journal of Family &Community Medicine, 2018, 25(1), pp. 35–42. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfcm.JFCM_71_17

6. N.R. Ramesh Masthi, Pruthvi S. and Phaneendra Mallekavu, "A Comparative Study on Social Media Addiction Between Public and Private High School Students of Urban Bengaluru, India", ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, July - December 2017, Vol. 18 (2).

https://www.aseanjournalofpsychiatry.org/articles/a-comparative-study-on-social-media-addiction-between-public-and-private-high-school-students-of-urban-bengaluru-india.pdf

7. Alia E. Dastagir, "A 12-Year-Old Died After a TikTok 'Blackout' Challenge. How Social Media Is Changing Peer Pressure",USA Today, April 27, 2021. https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2021/04/27/tiktok-challenge-kills-12-year-old-how-peer-pressure-has-evolved/4853507001/

8. Institute for Governance, Polices and Politics, and Social Media Matters, and Youth Online Learning Organisation, "Patterns of Internet Usage Among Youths in India," 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hh-jAvU1n-mPDopCp-YLod4qbIVmp9lV/view

9. Vijay Singh, "Impact of Social Media on Social Life of Teenagers in India: a Case Study", Journal of Academic Perspective on Social Studies, April 2019, no. 1, pp. 13-24. https://doi.org/10.35344/japss.529285

10. Waseem Akram, "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society", International Journal of Computer Sciences and Engineering, vol. 5, 2018. https://doi.org/10.26438/ijcse/v5i10.351354

11. P Thirumoorthi and C Ramesh Kumar, "A study on the impact of social sites among the youngsters with special Reference to Vishnu computers in Erode District", International Journal of Applied Research, 2015; 1(11): 09-12. https://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2015/vol1issue11/PartA/1-9-168.pdf

12. Shantanu Dhope's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/shantanuuu/

13. Raj Ahir's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/_londonthumakda_/

14. Kali's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/melanatedbitch/

15. Neha Parulkar's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/nehaparulkar/

16. Ashwathy B's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/ashwathyy_b/

17. Tarek A. El-Badawy and Yasmin Hashem, "The Impact of Social Media on the Academic Development of School Students",International Journal of Business Administration, 2015, Vol 6. No. 1, pp. 46. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v6n1p46

18. Waseem Akram, "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society", International Journal of Computer Sciences and Engineering, vol. 5, 2018. https://doi.org/10.26438/ijcse/v5i10.351354

19.   D. A. Al-Sabti, A. V. Singh and S. K. Jha, "Impact of social media on society in a large and specific to teenagers," 2017 6th International Conference on Reliability, Infocom Technologies and Optimization (Trends and Future Directions) (ICRITO), 2017, pp. 663-667, https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8342510

20.   Abhijeet Kain's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/abhijeetkain/

21.   Khan Academy on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/user/khanacademy

22.   Seema Girdhar, Puneet Vasuja and Isha Garg, "A Study on Impact of Social Media on Teenagers: Pre and During Pandemic", Global Economic Order in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Challenges, Opportunities and Strategies, 2020, chapter 49, 389-397. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sangeeta-Tripathi-4/publication/351979947_Mental_Stigma_due_to_Communication_Crisis_in_the_age_of__COVID-19_A_Study_of_Delhi-NCR_India_and_Dhofar_Oman/links/60b36629299bf1f6d585408e/Mental-Stigma-due-to-Communication-Crisis-in-the-age-of-COVID-19-A-Study-of-Delhi-NCR-India-and-Dhofar-Oman.pdf#page=407

23.   Leela Jacinto, "India's teens pitch in on social media during Covid crisis, getting life lessons", France24, May 7. 2021. https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210507-india-s-youths-pitch-in-on-social-media-during-covid-crisis-getting-life-lessons

24.   Archana Kumari and Jyotsna Verma, "Impact of Social Networking Sites on Social Interaction – A Study of College Students", International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IJHSS), Vol. 4, Issue 2, Mar 2015, 55-62. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273144885_IMPACT_OF_SOCIAL_NETWORKING_SITES_ON_SOCIAL_INTERACTION_-_A_STUDY_OF_COLLEGE_STUDENTS

25.   It's Ok to Talk Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/itsoktotalk/

26.   Kaplan Test Prep Survey: Social Media Checks by College Admissions Officers Decline Due to Savvier Applicants and Shifting Attitudes", November 27, 2018. https://www.kaptest.com/blog/press/2018/11/27/kaplan-test-prep-survey-social-media-checks-by-college-admissions-officers-decline-due-to-savvier-applicants-and-shifting-attitudes-2/

27.   Vikramaditya Singh Bhati and Jayshri Bansal, "Social Media and Indian Youth", International Journal of Computer Science and Engineering, Vol.7, Issue-1, Jan 2019. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331471804_Social_Media_and_Indian_Youth

28.   Aekta Kapoor, "Up Close With Mili Sarkar, the Village Teen in the Viral Sari Back-Flip Video', eShe, December 2, 2020. https://eshe.in/2020/12/02/mili-sarkar/

29.   Girl Up Campaign Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/girlupcampaign/

30.   Open Call India Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/opencallindia/