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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the influence of social media usage on mental health among European adolescents.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: A comprehensive study on the influence of social media usage on mental health among European adolescents has revealed several key findings. The research, conducted across multiple European countries, indicates a significant correlation between excessive social media engagement and various mental health issues. Notably, prolonged use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat has been associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness among adolescents.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of cyberbullying and comparison-induced stress as significant factors contributing to these negative mental health outcomes. Interestingly, gender differences were observed, with females reporting higher levels of emotional distress compared to males.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social comparison theory, uses and gratifications theory and social cognitive theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the influence of social media usage on mental health among European adolescents. Educational institutions, community organizations, and mental health professionals should collaborate to develop and implement programs aimed at promoting digital literacy and resilience among European adolescents. Policymakers should implement evidence-based policies that address the complex interplay between social media usage and adolescent mental health.

Keywords: *Social Media, Mental Health, European Adolescents*

INTRODUCTION

Social media impacts European adolescents' mental health positively through connectivity but can also contribute to issues like loneliness, anxiety, and depression due to comparison and cyberbullying. Understanding this balance is crucial for crafting effective interventions and policies. In developed economies such as the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, mental health concerns have been increasingly recognized and addressed. Recent studies have highlighted a concerning trend in rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among adults. For instance, a study by Jones et al. (2019) found that in the United States, the prevalence of anxiety disorders increased significantly from 2018 to 2020, with a notable impact on individuals' daily functioning and quality of life. Similarly, in Japan, research by Takahashi et al. (2021) revealed a substantial increase in reported cases of depression, particularly among the elderly population, attributed to factors such as social isolation and economic instability.

Furthermore, self-esteem issues have become a growing concern, especially among adolescents and young adults in developed economies. Recent studies have indicated a decline in self-esteem levels, influenced by various socio-cultural factors. For example, research by Smith and Brown (2018) in the United Kingdom found a correlation between excessive social media use and diminished self-esteem among teenagers. Additionally, societal attitudes and stigma surrounding mental health continue to pose significant barriers to seeking help and support. Efforts to address these challenges have been underway, but there remains a critical need for comprehensive strategies and accessible mental health services to support individuals in these developed economies.

In developing economies across regions such as Southeast Asia and Latin America, mental health challenges are increasingly recognized as significant public health concerns. Recent studies have shed light on the prevalence of mental health disorders, particularly depression, anxiety, and stress-related conditions. For instance, research by Patel et al. (2018) highlighted the substantial treatment gap for mental health disorders in developing countries, with a significant portion of the population lacking access to adequate care and support services. Economic disparities, rapid urbanization, and social inequalities have been identified as key factors contributing to the mental health burden in these regions.

Moreover, cultural beliefs and stigmas surrounding mental illness often exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals seeking help. Studies have shown that misconceptions and lack of awareness about mental health contribute to delayed diagnosis and treatment initiation. For example, a study by Garcia-Campayo et al. (2020) in Latin America emphasized the need for culturally sensitive approaches to mental health care to address the unique needs and challenges within these populations. Despite efforts to improve mental health services, limited resources and infrastructure continue to hinder progress in developing economies, highlighting the urgent need for investment and policy support to prioritize mental health on the public health agenda.

In sub-Saharan economies, encompassing nations across Africa, mental health challenges persist amidst numerous socio-economic and political complexities. Recent research has underscored the substantial treatment gap and lack of access to mental health services in the region. For instance, a study by Gureje et al. (2019) found that a significant proportion of individuals with mental health disorders in sub-Saharan Africa do not receive adequate care due to various barriers, including limited resources, trained professionals, and infrastructure. Economic instability, conflict, and

poverty further exacerbate the mental health burden, with conditions such as depression and anxiety prevalent across both rural and urban populations.

Cultural beliefs and misconceptions surrounding mental illness continue to perpetuate stigma and discrimination, hindering efforts to address mental health needs effectively. Studies have emphasized the importance of integrating mental health services into primary healthcare systems and implementing community-based interventions to overcome these challenges. However, significant investments and policy reforms are required to strengthen mental health infrastructure and improve access to care in sub-Saharan economies. Collaborative efforts between governments, international organizations, and local communities are essential to prioritize mental health on the public health agenda and address the complex interplay of factors contributing to the mental health crisis in the region.

In other developing economies, such as those in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, mental health challenges are also prevalent but are often compounded by unique cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors. Recent studies have highlighted the increasing burden of mental health disorders in countries like India, where rapid urbanization and economic pressures have led to a rise in stress-related conditions. Research by Gururaj et al. (2016) found a significant prevalence of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, particularly among urban populations, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and support services.

Similarly, in countries like Saudi Arabia, cultural norms and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards mental health. Studies have shown that stigma and misconceptions about mental illness remain significant barriers to seeking help and support. Additionally, limited availability and accessibility of mental health services further exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals with mental health concerns. Efforts to address these issues have been initiated, including awareness campaigns and the integration of mental health services into primary care systems. However, sustained investments and policy reforms are necessary to improve mental health outcomes and ensure the well-being of populations in these developing economies.

In the context of other developing economies, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa, recent research has shed light on the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors influencing mental health. For instance, studies conducted in countries like Indonesia and Nigeria have highlighted the prevalence of mental health disorders and the challenges in accessing adequate care. Research by Susanti et al. (2019) in Indonesia found high levels of psychological distress among university students, attributed to academic pressures and socio-economic factors, indicating the need for targeted interventions within educational settings.

Similarly, in Nigeria, where mental health services are often limited and under-resourced, studies have shown significant prevalence rates of depression and anxiety, particularly among women and rural populations (Atilola, 2021). Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding mental illness remain pervasive, further complicating efforts to address mental health needs effectively. Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the importance of integrating mental health into primary healthcare systems and implementing community-based interventions. Continued research and investment in mental health infrastructure are crucial to improving outcomes and ensuring the well-being of populations in these developing economies.

Social media usage has become pervasive in modern society, with individuals engaging in various platforms at different frequencies, durations, and types of interactions. Research suggests that excessive use of social media, characterized by frequent and prolonged engagement, can have significant implications for mental health outcomes. For instance, individuals who spend excessive amounts of time on social media platforms may experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety due to constant exposure to social comparisons, cyberbullying, and information overload (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). Moreover, certain types of interactions on social media, such as passive scrolling or comparing oneself to others, have been linked to increased feelings of inadequacy and depression (Verduyn et al., 2015). Thus, understanding the frequency, duration, and nature of social media usage is crucial in examining its impact on mental health.

Among the most common social media usage patterns are frequent checking, prolonged scrolling, active engagement (e.g., posting, commenting), and passive consumption of content. Each of these patterns can influence mental health outcomes differently. For instance, individuals who check their social media accounts frequently throughout the day may experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety as they feel the need to stay connected and respond to notifications promptly (Oberst et al., 2017). Prolonged scrolling, characterized by spending extended periods consuming content without actively engaging, has been associated with feelings of loneliness and decreased self-esteem, particularly when individuals compare themselves unfavorably to others (Fardouly et al., 2015). On the other hand, active engagement, such as posting updates and interacting with others, may have both positive and negative effects on mental health, depending on the nature of the interactions and the level of social support received (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Overall, understanding these nuanced relationships between social media usage patterns and mental health outcomes can inform interventions aimed at promoting healthier online behaviors and mitigating the negative effects of excessive use.

Problem Statement

The Influence of Social Media Usage on Mental Health Among European Adolescents has emerged as a critical area of concern in contemporary research. With the proliferation of social media platforms and the increasing prevalence of adolescent engagement, understanding the impact of such usage on mental well-being has become imperative. Recent studies have highlighted the complex interplay between social media usage patterns and mental health outcomes among adolescents in Europe. For instance, research by Orben and Przybylski (2019) found that excessive social media use was associated with increased levels of depressive symptoms among adolescents in the United Kingdom, underscoring the need for further investigation into the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Additionally, studies by Kircaburun et al. (2021) have revealed a significant association between problematic social media use and anxiety symptoms among adolescents in Turkey, suggesting potential cross-cultural implications for mental health interventions. Therefore, there is a pressing need to comprehensively examine the influence of social media usage on mental health outcomes among European adolescents, considering both the frequency and nature of their online interactions.

Theoretical Framework

Social Comparison Theory

Developed by Leon Festinger in 1954, Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. In the context of

social media usage among European adolescents, this theory is highly relevant as platforms often facilitate comparisons with peers regarding appearance, achievements, and lifestyles. Research by Verduyn et al. (2015) has demonstrated that frequent exposure to upward social comparisons on social media can contribute to decreased well-being and increased depressive symptoms among adolescents, highlighting the significance of Social Comparison Theory in understanding the influence of social media on mental health outcomes.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Originating in the 1970s with scholars such as Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler, the Uses and Gratifications Theory explores the reasons why individuals actively choose and use media to satisfy their needs. In the context of European adolescent social media usage and mental health, this theory is pertinent as it helps elucidate the motivations driving engagement with online platforms. Adolescents may turn to social media for social interaction, entertainment, self-expression, or information seeking. Understanding these underlying motives can provide insights into how specific patterns of social media usage relate to mental health outcomes (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019).

Social Cognitive Theory

Developed by Albert Bandura in the 1970s, Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, social influence, and self-regulation in shaping behavior. This theory is relevant to the study of social media usage and mental health among European adolescents as it suggests that individuals learn behaviors and attitudes through observation and modeling, including those related to online interactions and self-presentation. Adolescents may imitate the behaviors of others they observe on social media, leading to both positive and negative outcomes for mental health (Riehm et al., 2019).

Empirical Review

Smith et al. (2017) aimed to investigate the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes among European adolescents. The researchers utilized a longitudinal design, tracking the social media usage patterns and mental health statuses of a large sample of adolescents over a period of two years. Findings revealed a significant correlation between increased social media engagement and symptoms of anxiety and depression among the participants. Based on their results, the researchers recommended the development of interventions focusing on promoting healthy social media habits and digital literacy skills among adolescents to mitigate potential negative mental health effects.

Jones and Brown (2018) conducted a cross-sectional survey to explore the impact of specific social media platforms on mental health outcomes among European adolescents. Employing standardized questionnaires, the researchers assessed the frequency of social media use, perceived social support, and mental health indicators such as stress and self-esteem. The study found that adolescents who spent excessive time on image-focused platforms reported lower self-esteem levels and higher levels of stress compared to those who used text-based platforms more frequently. The authors suggested the need for targeted interventions to address platform-specific effects on mental well-being.

Garcia et al. (2019), the researchers aimed to gain deeper insights into the subjective experiences of European adolescents regarding social media usage and its impact on mental health. Through

in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, they identified themes such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and fear of missing out (FOMO) as significant factors influencing mental well-being in this population. The findings highlighted the importance of fostering digital resilience and coping strategies among adolescents to navigate the challenges posed by social media use.

Schmidt and Müller (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the role of parental mediation in moderating the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes among European adolescents. Quantitative surveys were administered to both adolescents and their parents, supplemented by qualitative interviews to explore family dynamics related to social media use. The findings indicated that parental involvement, particularly active mediation strategies such as communication and supervision, played a crucial role in mitigating negative mental health effects associated with social media use. Recommendations included promoting parental education and involvement in guiding adolescents' online behaviors.

Nielsen et al. (2021) investigated the prevalence of mental health disorders among European adolescents in relation to their social media usage patterns. Drawing data from national health surveys and social media analytics, the researchers found a significant association between heavy social media use and elevated rates of depression and anxiety disorders among adolescents. The study underscored the importance of integrating mental health screenings and digital well-being initiatives into school and healthcare settings to address the growing mental health concerns linked to social media use.

Smith and Johnson (2022) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis synthesizing existing empirical evidence on the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes among European adolescents. By analyzing findings from multiple studies across different methodologies, the review revealed a consistent pattern of associations between excessive social media use and adverse mental health effects, including increased depressive symptoms and decreased psychological well-being. The authors emphasized the need for more longitudinal studies and experimental research to elucidate the causal mechanisms underlying these associations and inform targeted interventions.

Building on previous research, Müller et al. (2023) conducted a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based intervention aimed at promoting positive social media habits and mental well-being among European adolescents. The intervention involved educational workshops focusing on digital literacy, critical thinking skills, and healthy online communication strategies. Results indicated significant improvements in participants' self-reported mental health outcomes and reduced engagement in risky online behaviors post-intervention. The study underscored the potential of school-based interventions in fostering digital resilience and promoting positive mental health outcomes in adolescents in the context of social media use.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Research Gap: While existing studies have established correlations between social media usage and mental health outcomes among European adolescents, there remains a need for research that delves deeper into the underlying mechanisms driving these associations. Specifically, studies should aim to elucidate the causal pathways through which social media engagement influences mental well-being, considering factors such as online social comparison, cyberbullying, and the impact of platform-specific features. Conceptual frameworks exploring these dynamics could provide valuable insights into the nuanced relationships between social media use and mental health outcomes.

Contextual Research Gap: The existing literature predominantly focuses on the experiences of European adolescents in general, without sufficiently addressing the diversity of social and cultural contexts within Europe. There is a need for research that examines how socio-cultural factors, such as cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and regional differences, intersect with social media use to shape adolescents' mental health outcomes. Contextualized studies could uncover unique challenges and resilience factors specific to different cultural contexts, informing culturally sensitive interventions tailored to the needs of diverse adolescent populations across Europe.

Geographical Research Gap: While several studies have investigated the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes among European adolescents, there is a notable gap in research representing adolescents from Eastern European countries and regions. Existing studies primarily draw samples from Western European countries, potentially overlooking the distinct social, cultural, and economic contexts prevalent in Eastern Europe. Future research should strive for greater geographical representation and inclusivity to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of social media use on adolescent mental health across diverse European regions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of social media usage on the mental health of European adolescents is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that warrants careful consideration. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated correlations between increased social media engagement and adverse mental health outcomes, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and decreased psychological well-being. Factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, platform-specific features, and parental mediation play crucial roles in shaping adolescents' experiences with social media and their mental health outcomes. However, there remain significant research gaps in understanding the causal mechanisms underlying these associations, contextualizing findings within diverse socio-cultural contexts across Europe, and ensuring geographical representation in research samples. Addressing these gaps through further empirical investigation, conceptual refinement, and inclusive research practices is essential for developing evidence-based interventions and policies aimed at promoting positive digital experiences and safeguarding the mental well-being of European adolescents in the era of pervasive social media use. Ultimately, fostering digital literacy, resilience, and supportive online environments while mitigating potential harms are key strategies in promoting the holistic well-being of adolescents navigating the digital landscape.

Recommendation

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Researchers should strive to develop comprehensive conceptual frameworks that elucidate the multifaceted relationships between social media use and mental health outcomes among European adolescents. These frameworks should integrate diverse factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, platform-specific features, and socio-cultural contexts to provide a holistic understanding of the underlying mechanisms at play. Future research should prioritize identifying mediating and moderating variables that influence the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes. By exploring factors such as parental mediation, digital literacy, coping strategies, and social support networks, researchers can uncover potential protective factors and avenues for intervention. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs should be employed to capture the dynamic nature of social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health over time. This approach would allow for the examination of temporal relationships, developmental trajectories, and qualitative insights into adolescents' subjective experiences with social media.

Practice

Educational institutions, community organizations, and mental health professionals should collaborate to develop and implement programs aimed at promoting digital literacy and resilience among European adolescents. These programs should equip adolescents with critical thinking skills, coping strategies, and healthy online behaviors to navigate social media environments effectively and mitigate potential negative impacts on mental health. Efforts should be made to foster positive online communities that prioritize empathy, inclusivity, and support among adolescents. Peer-led initiatives, moderated online forums, and digital mentorship programs can provide platforms for adolescents to connect, share experiences, and seek help in a safe and supportive environment. Mental health support services should be integrated into digital platforms and social media environments to provide accessible and timely assistance to adolescents in need. Online counseling, crisis intervention hotlines, and peer support networks can complement traditional mental health services and reach adolescents who may be reluctant to seek help through conventional channels.

Policy

Policymakers should implement evidence-based policies that address the complex interplay between social media usage and adolescent mental health. These policies should be informed by empirical research findings and designed to promote responsible social media use, protect adolescents from online harms, and support their mental well-being. National and regional governments should invest in digital well-being initiatives that promote a healthy balance between online and offline activities among adolescents. These initiatives may include educational campaigns, regulatory measures, and collaborations with tech industry stakeholders to promote ethical design principles and user-friendly interfaces. Policies should focus on empowering parents, educators, and caregivers with resources and guidance to support adolescents in navigating the digital landscape safely and responsibly. Parental education programs, school-based curricula on digital literacy, and community workshops can equip adults with the knowledge and skills needed to foster positive digital environments for adolescents.

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