



Social Media and Society: Exploring the Contemporary Benefits and Issues Relating to Social Media

Alya Khalif

Abstract

Social media has been a useful tool in society to develop connections, stimulate financial growth, and as a form of entertainment or inspiration. It has grown from non-existence to mass prevalence in mere decades. Social media has grown rapidly and has become a vital aspect of our economy, and has even assisted growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, misinformation, echo chambers, distrust, and causing issues with mental health are the consequences of unregulated social media. This paper will explore the benefits and issues relating to social media and provide insight to the boundaries of beneficial social media use.

Limitations

Social media is a relatively new field and although there is a plethora of study and information regarding this field, there is still much to be found. The future of innovation is unpredictable, and therefore the possible impacts of social media are subject to constant changes. Furthermore, this paper looks at a large-scale view of social media and does not focus on smaller or interpersonal aspects of social media. Additionally, there are impacts in society that are not addressed such as social media's impact on the development of a child's brain function.

Introduction

In 2023, an estimated 4.9 billion people use social media across the world. Social media refers to technologies that facilitate virtual communication, a modern form of communication. Since the first blogging sites gained popularity in 1999, social media has become a necessity in our lifestyles, from being used professionally at work to communicating with friends and family. As of January 2009, Facebook – a famous social media platform – had registered more than 175 million active users; that is slightly less than the population of Brazil (190 million). Furthermore, the social media app market in 2022 was valued at \$49.09 billion, demonstrating its widespread impact in society. However, everything has unexpected multifaceted nuances that arise from its prevalence. Teens who have spent more than three hours a day on social media are confronted with double the risk of facing poor mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression. In this paper, I will explore the role of social media in society, its impact on mental health, and psychological mechanisms related to social media. This paper will demonstrate that current social media “over-usage” is damaging to society and that, collectively, we must change the way we interact with this communication and entertainment medium. To understand social media, I will follow the methodology of searching for the impacts of social media in the economy, its role in society, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and addiction and mental health.

Methodology: The Economy

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, digital activity accounted for 6.1% (\$118.0 billion) of total economic value added (\$1,944.8 billion), and digital activity increased by \$8.6 billion in 2020-2021. Social media's efficiency and adaptability has caused its rapid growth. The social media market has grown from \$193.52 billion in 2022 to \$231.1 billion in 2023. It is expected to exponentially grow to \$434.87bn in 2027. In 2021, 4.3 billion people—more than half of the world's population—had a social media account, and the average user spent around two and a half hours per day on social media platforms (Kemp, 2021). Such a rapidly expanding industry has the potential to grow economies and produce jobs worldwide. Due to its versatility in marketing, trend-setting, education, and many other pursuits, social media adds a large economic value to our changing world.

Methodology: Role in Society

In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns became common globally, restricting people from leaving their homes and forcing change into society. Social media facilitated a large portion of the way we worked, had schools, friendships, or even government communication. Society, politics, the economy, and education were heavily influenced by social media. Dissemination of educational content spread rapidly through technology. For example, (Basch et al., 2020) reported in a study that the 100 most popular videos on the social media platform YouTube that used the word “coronavirus” had accumulated over 165 million views by March 5th, 2020, with 85% of the videos being from news channels. This highlights the beneficial spread of credible information made possible through social media. Hence, COVID-19 has exemplified social media's vital role in modern society. In short, social media provides us with an unprecedented amount of beneficial information.

Methodology: Disinformation and Misinformation

According to Cinelli et al., 2021, much of the “information” on social media is disinformation. This disinformation causes an increase in the spread of false ideas, which is further exacerbated by echo chambers. Echo chambers occur when communities are surrounded by the same repetition of ideas and beliefs. In social media, this is created through programming that recommends users with content they already enjoy, forcing users into a cycle of the same information. This causes the spread of misinformation and disinformation, both referring to incorrect information, the latter differentiated by the knowing use of incorrect information to manipulate, inflating issues and causing extremism. According to Timberg et al., (2021) the January 6th storming of the U.S. Capital was caused by the spread of misinformation - that the election results were false and that Donald Trump was the rightful President. The catalyst of this misinformation spread was through Facebook. User reports per hour of false news were hitting almost 40,000, the large majority being associated with Trump's official account. This misinformation has been associated with violence which caused serious injury, deaths and an estimated \$1.5 million in damage to the Capitol building (Duignan, 2023). The use of misinformation in an echo chamber may cause devastating outcomes such as the storming of the U.S. Capital and thus must not be taken lightly. Information is the basis of society's choices, and if the basis of our choices becomes false information, this could endanger all aspects of our lives, including elections, healthcare, and education. This false information can rapidly spread on social media, creating echo chambers and extremism, which negatively impacts all aspects of our lives.

During the pandemic, mass hysteria regarding COVID-19 spread through all social media platforms. The study by (Basch et al., 2020) – of the most viewed COVID-19 YouTube videos – elucidates that mass hysteria can be spread through social media. Less than a third of the videos mentioned prevention measures, and less than half mentioned the symptoms; in contrast, almost 90% addressed deaths, anxiety, and the quarantine status. In another study by Wang et al.,

2020 that surveyed 1,210 individuals, 53.8% of participants considered the pandemics' psychological impact moderate or severe. This fear encouraged governments worldwide to promote preventative health methods to their citizens. Under normal circumstances such actions may sound unreasonable or inconsistent with personal freedoms. These included lockdowns, the wearing of masks, social distancing, and vaccination. However, this highlights that social media can be used to control people as well as cause panic and hysteria. It becomes difficult to grasp the true gravity of problems or of any choices due to hysteria or tactical hysteria.

Methodology: Addiction and Mental Health

Alarmingly, social media has become synonymous with the word “addiction”. Social media addiction consists of behaviour demonstrating an over-dependence on social media - one that impairs the normal function of the person. The average teenager’s screen time is 7 hours and 22 minutes. Of that time, almost 5 hours are spent on social media. The average time used on social media is enough to diagnose addiction. Furthermore, the number of adults in the USA who use social media increased from 5% in 2005 to 79% in 2019. This demonstrates that the addiction is widespread. This addiction is a rather modern issue. It has been found to be related to many mental health issues that have been increasing in frequency. This addiction causes people to have decreased attention spans, according to Mills, K., & Mark, G., (2023) in a publication by the American Psychological Association. A widespread decrease in attention spans could cause major issues for the economic and social productivity of the globe.

However, a decrease in attention span is not the only downfall of social media use. Another downfall of social media is mental health issues, which also have a positive relationship with widespread social media use. As social media becomes increasingly popular, mental health issues increase. The total number of individuals aged 18–23 who reported experiencing a major depressive episode in the past year increased by 83% between 2008 and 2018 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019). This coincides with the rise of social media, as in 2010, a popular social media platform Instagram was launched and had gained 1 billion users by 2019. Furthermore, in 2008 Facebook surpassed Myspace and currently reaches almost 3 billion users. Another indicator of the relationship between mental health and social media use is seen in Pantic et al., (2012). In this study, it is revealed that depression and time spent on Facebook by adolescents are positively correlated and suggests that Facebook could be a cause for increases in mental health issues. With the average time spent on social media increasing, this trend will continue to worsen.

Logically, it would be difficult to accept that an over-dependence on social media effectively equates to poor mental health without exploring the reasons for this phenomenon. Social media is designed to utilise the psychological mechanisms of humans to become addicting. According to a study by Macit et al., (2018), social media manipulates dopamine production and other neurological processes to create user satisfaction. This manipulation causes similar biological and psychological symptoms to alcohol, cigarette and drugs. Furthermore, death and suicidal thoughts, low self-esteem, loneliness and social isolation, and depression are higher in internet addicts. Additionally, the release of dopamine in the brain causes users to feel happy, and constantly use social media as a mechanism to feel that same enjoyment. The release of dopamine draws similarities to other addiction mechanisms. This is exemplified by the constant human fear of missing out which creates anxiety, stress, social comparison and depression.

Such anxiety, stress and depression are worsened by social media. 45% of British adults feel restlessness when they are not able to access their social networking sites (Hilal Bashir et al., 2017). Moreover, the younger generation feels restless when they are not able to access messages of their social networking applications apart from their counterparts causing frequent checking of social messages exhibiting anxiety relating to this (Braghieri et al., 2022). This demonstrates the anxiety social media causes. Social media also causes stress to its users. There is a positive relationship between the time

spent on social media and depressive symptoms among high school students. This has been demonstrated in Central Serbia (Pantic et al.,2012) and among young adults in the United States (Lin et al.,2016; Patel et al. 2007; Twenge et al. 2019). Aalbers et al., 2019 found that participants who spent more time passively using social media experienced higher mean levels of depressed mood, loneliness, hopelessness, and feeling inferior compared to when their social media use was restricted. This demonstrates that social media use causes depression through the demonstration of depressive symptoms occurring frequently as the variable of social media increases. Continuing in the pattern of increasing social media use, and decreasing mental health does not create a better future.

An article, written by Festinger in 1957, discussed cognitive dissonance theory. Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual has conflicting opinions, which can lead to mental distress. Festinger explained that knowledge of inconsistent truths causes humans to try and “make them more consistent”. That would simply be manipulating your own mind to believe whatever truth suits your wants best. In terms of social media usage, that would be convincing yourself that social media is “not that bad for you” or that you are only going to spend “one more minute” mindlessly scrolling. This is a commonly shared experience for most social media users. A study by (Vaghefi and Qahri-Saremi, 2017) concluded that cognitive dissonance theory causes individuals to find it highly more difficult to stop their problematic behaviours. The same would be true for those with a social media addiction. These individuals have developed harsh behavioural addictions that they have allowed to develop through ignoring the facts or effectively conning their minds into believing another truth. Cognitive dissonance is yet another psychological mechanism social media programmers use to manipulate their users, and increase the addictive traits of social media.

Social media increases interaction with others, health support, and access to health information according to Moorhead et al. (2013). This means that although social media may decrease the health of a user, when used correctly it may improve their health through giving them access to support systems, advice and healthcare education. This elucidates that social media use must come with a level of self control and rationality to be able to make informed choices on the best way to utilise tools to improve oneself without compromising your health.

Findings and Analysis

Social media is prevalent in society for a reason. Social media’s benefits and problems caused to society may be categorised in three ways: digital literacy, disinformation, and revenue generation. Social media is a valuable tool for revenue generation as it facilitates more efficient work, marketing, advertising, gaining of information as well as being a money generating source of entertainment by itself. However, one must be cautioned regarding the disinformation and misinformation spread on social media. Unregulated and unverified information has the capacity to spread at unprecedented speeds and cause ill-informed decisions or distrust in society. Social media is a valuable tool for communication and information sharing if utilised correctly. It is of importance to be critical of the information seen on social media, as there can be a lot of misinformation and disinformation, and how you allow yourself to interact with social media. Gaining an addiction or to fall into the social politics and popularity of an app has detrimental effects on mental health. Thus, we must hold caution to how we use social media whilst still utilising the many benefits social media breeds.

Conclusion

Ergo, the rapid growth and widespread adoption of social media in our modern society have ushered in both significant benefits and considerable challenges. Social media platforms have undeniably transformed the way we communicate, share information, and conduct various aspects of our lives. These platforms have played a pivotal role during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling the dissemination of critical information and supporting remote work and education.

However, beneath the surface of this digital revolution lies a complex web of issues that demand our attention. The proliferation of false information, disinformation, and echo chambers on social media has raised significant concerns about the quality and trustworthiness of the information we consume. The erosion of trust in traditional news outlets further complicates the issue, leaving society grappling with a crisis of information.

Moreover, the addictive nature of social media is becoming increasingly apparent. The alarming statistics on screen time and the correlation between social media use and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, highlight the toll it can take on individuals. The design of social media platforms, purposefully triggering dopamine production and manipulating cognitive dissonance, has created a generation hooked on constant validation and connection. Currently, the impact of social media on society is undeniably profound, both in terms of its economic value and its influence on how we perceive and interact with the world. Nevertheless, the negative consequences, including the spread of false information, increased anxiety, and the rise in mental health issues, cannot be ignored. Hence, as we navigate this ever-evolving digital landscape, it is imperative that we take a critical and balanced approach to our relationship with social media.

Freedom of speech and the usefulness of Social Media platforms must be acknowledged and maintained. However, we must ensure that there are systems in place that restrict echo chambers and encourage perspectives to be challenged. We must further have groups that work to fact-check information and disarm schemes to cause extreme behaviour using misinformation. Awareness of the risks and the need for responsible usage is crucial. We must collectively reevaluate the way we interact with these platforms, emphasising the importance of digital literacy, critical thinking, and mental health wellbeing. By doing so, we can harness the undeniable power of social media for the betterment of society while mitigating its adverse effects and fostering a more informed, resilient, and mentally healthy digital world.

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