Digital Dynamics: Investigating the Impact of Social Media on Sexual Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Social media has revolutionized communication, transforming how people exchange information and knowledge, particularly among adolescents. Adolescence, a period marked by psychophysical development, emphasizes relationships and socialization. Today, the internet and social platforms offer accessible avenues for exploring human sexuality without traditional constraints. Adolescents use the internet to stay connected with friends and engage in various activities, including exploring sexual content and engaging in cybersex. Unfortunately, this has led to an alarming increase in risky sexual behavior among youths, with social media exposure playing a significant role. This paper sheds light on the negative implications of adolescents' social media use, particularly concerning risky sexual behavior.

Keywords: Social Media, Adolescents, Sexual Behavior, Risky Behavior, Internet Impact

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to internet-based platforms that facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content [1]. These platforms enable users to connect with both old and new acquaintances, exchange ideas, share images, videos, and audio files. Examples of social media websites include Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and WhatsApp. Over time, social media has evolved to incorporate various tools and practices that were not previously envisioned, expanding its functionalities. Students utilize social media tools for diverse purposes such as accessing information, engaging in group discussions, sharing resources, and entertainment [2]. This widespread use of social media among students has led to discussions regarding its positive and negative implications, both in the short and long term. According to [1], the foundation of social media can be traced back to the internet, where the World Wide Web (www) initially served as a platform for facilitating information exchange among users.

Social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter have gained significant global attention due to their widespread adoption. They have revolutionized communication, collaboration, and interaction, making these processes more efficient [3]. The introduction of social media has transformed how people exchange, access, and share knowledge, fundamentally altering interpersonal communication dynamics [4]. The advantages of

social media technologies include facilitating new methods of interaction, collaboration, and content creation [5]. Recognized as important tools for reshaping the learning and educational environment, social media enable the creation of interactive and collaborative learning environments when integrated into e-learning tools [6]. Over the past decade, social media have attracted a large user base, with student involvement in social media significantly increasing since 2004 [7]. Teenagers and students have embraced social media as a means to interact with peers, share information, and shape their identities, thereby enriching their social lives [8].

Risky sexual behavior among youths is on the rise, and social media use has been implicated as a contributing factor due to exposure to sexual content online [9]. Youths across the world transmit various information, including sexual content, through these technologies, exposing themselves to social media content featuring substance abuse, sexual risk, and violence. This has sparked public discourse on whether social media cause more harm than good to young adults, although little is known about how individual youths engage with such content and information [10]. Research studies have confirmed that risky sexual behavior is associated with young people and includes behaviors such as unprotected sex,

alcoholism, substance abuse, anal sexual intercourse, mouth-to-genital contact, and multiple sexual partners [11, 12]. These behaviors predispose youths to several sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, unwanted pregnancies, and unsafe abortions, which are major public health issues worldwide [13]. To prevent risky sexual behaviors such as STIs, the World Health Organization recommends educating people online about sexual health, as social media represent powerful channels for health promotion with more than 2 billion active users worldwide [14].

Previous studies have extensively explored the use of computer-based mediums to advocate for sexual health but have not specifically focused on social media [14]. However, [15] argued that mass media has limited effects in promoting safer sexual practices due to the prevalence of illicit sexual content that many young adolescent users are exposed to online. Social media has been identified as a significant influencer of the sexual patterns and behaviors of youths, with a common perception that it exposes them to such illicit content. Parental monitoring has been established as crucial to parent-child relationships and can moderate the frequency of social media use and subsequent sexual risk behaviors among adolescents [9, 16, 17, 18]. Despite this, there is limited empirical evidence on the effect of social media on sexual health behaviors among young individuals. Therefore, this study aims to assess the influence of social media on the sexual health behavior of youths.

Sexual Behavior
Sexuality encompasses the quality or state of being sexual and goes beyond the mere absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual health necessitates a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, along with the opportunity to have pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free from coercion, discrimination, and violence [19]. Key markers and indicators of sexual risk behavior (SRB) include early sexual initiation, insufficient contraception use, promiscuity, and sexual contact with unfamiliar partners [20]. Behavior, as defined by [21], refers to how someone conducts themselves and can vary between good or bad, desirable or undesirable. [22] highlighted that sexually explicit media exposes young individuals to adult themes at a formative age. Others argue that exposure to pornographic materials and knowledge and use of contraceptives, particularly condoms, heavily advertised, significantly contribute to youth involvement in sexual activities.

A study by [23] was conducted among students in a tertiary institution to examine risky sexual behaviors and suggest solutions to address the issue.

The National Population Commission [24] reported that 68.8% of sexually active respondents was higher than the 48.9% reported in the 2013 Nigeria National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) for youth. This difference could be attributed to the age bracket differences between the studies. The NPC study included individuals aged 18 to 24, while the NDHS focused on individuals aged 15 to 18. Notably, only 35 (36.8%) of sexually active respondents in the study had one sexual partner in the past year, with the majority (63.2%) having multiple partners, including 27.4% engaging with six or more partners. This finding is consistent with a study in Ilorin, Nigeria, which found that 62.3% of tertiary students had multiple sexual partners [25]. The prevalence of multiple sexual partners among youth may be linked to sexual experimentation and a lack of awareness of associated negative consequences.

Youths
The characteristics of today's youth vary depending on factors such as upbringing, economic status, and family connections. For instance, the millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, refers to individuals born between 1980 and 2000, succeeding Generation X in terms of birth year. Millennials exhibit a communication style that is notably open, particularly in terms of their frequent use of social media platforms. Technological advancements heavily influence every aspect of their lives, and they place a high value on money compared to previous generations [26]. Additionally, millennials are more receptive to political and economic concepts, making them highly responsive to changes in their immediate environment. Internet usage is pervasive among this demographic, with approximately 95% of the population accessing social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Out of a total population of 256.2 million people, over half, accounting for 132.7 million individuals, are internet users. Male users are slightly more prevalent, constituting 51.8% of all internet users compared to 48.2% for females. The largest percentage of internet users falls within the age groups of 25-29 and 35-39, respectively. Moreover, more than 106 million people utilize social media monthly, with 85% accessing it via mobile devices. The millennial generation, born into the digital age characterized by widespread cellphone and online shopping usage, comprises the majority of internet users [27]. This tech-savvy generation, defined by its openness and cultural adaptability, eagerly shares their activities on social media while actively seeking information.

Risks of Youth Using Social Media

i.   Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying refers to the deliberate use of digital media to convey false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another individual. It stands as the most prevalent online risk for teenagers and typically occurs among peers. While "online harassment" is often used interchangeably with cyberbullying, they represent distinct phenomena. Current data indicate that online harassment is less common than offline harassment, and most children who engage in social networking sites are not at risk of experiencing online harassment [28]. Conversely, cyberbullying is widespread and can target any young person online, leading to significant psychosocial consequences such as depression, anxiety, profound isolation, and, tragically, suicide.

ii.   Sexting

Sexting refers to the act of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phones, computers, or other digital devices [29]. These images often circulate rapidly through cell phones or the internet. While sexting is prevalent among teenagers, a recent survey revealed that 20% of teens have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or videos of themselves. Some teens who engage in sexting have faced serious consequences, including threats or charges of felony child pornography. However, some states have begun to classify such behaviors as juvenile-law misdemeanors [30]. Additional repercussions of sexting include school suspension for perpetrators and emotional distress, along with accompanying mental health issues, for victims. However, in many cases, the sexting incident remains confined to a small peer group or a couple and is not perceived as distressing by those involved.

iii.   Facebook Depression

Researchers have introduced a novel concept known as "Facebook depression," characterized by the emergence of depression symptoms in preteens and teens who spend extensive time on social media platforms, such as Facebook [31]. Adolescents place significant importance on acceptance and communication with peers, and the pervasive nature of the online environment may contribute to the development of depression symptoms in some individuals. Similar to offline depression, adolescents experiencing Facebook depression may face social isolation and may seek assistance from risky internet sources and blogs, potentially promoting substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive/self-destructive behaviors.

iv.   Privacy Concerns and the Digital Footprint

The primary risks facing preadolescents and adolescents in today's online environment stem from interactions with peers, improper use of technology, privacy concerns, oversharing of personal information, and dissemination of false information, as highlighted by [32]. These behaviors pose a threat to their privacy, as internet users leave behind a digital footprint of their online activities, comprising a record of visited websites. This digital footprint can have significant implications for their future reputations. Preadolescents and adolescents, often unaware of privacy issues, may unknowingly post inappropriate content online, not realizing the permanence of their actions. Consequently, their future prospects, including job opportunities and college acceptance, could be jeopardized by impulsive online behavior. Furthermore, indiscriminate internet activity makes children and teenagers more susceptible to targeting by marketers and fraudsters.

v.   Influence of Advertisements on Buying

Numerous social media platforms prominently feature various types of advertisements, including banner ads, behavior ads, and demographic-based ads, which not only shape the purchasing behavior of preadolescents and adolescents but also influence their perceptions of what is considered normal. Of particular concern are behavior ads, which utilize data gathered from users' browsing history to target personalized ads, aiming to influence their purchasing decisions. This form of targeted advertising is prevalent on social media platforms and begins influencing children from the moment they start engaging online [33]. To address this issue, many online platforms have started implementing restrictions on ads targeting children and adolescents. It is crucial to educate parents, children, and adolescents about the nature of behavioral ads to foster media literacy among young consumers, enabling them to recognize and critically evaluate the influence of advertisements on their behavior and decision-making.

The Influence of Social Media on Adolescent Sexuality

Adolescence is a critical period characterized by physical and psychological maturation, with relationships and socialization playing central roles [34]. During this time, teenagers navigate new roles and experiment with their identities, facilitated in part by the accessibility of the Internet and social media. In Europe, many adolescents regularly access the Internet without parental oversight, using it for various purposes, including maintaining social connections [35]. Some adolescents engage in

online sexual activities (OSA), such as cybersex, as a means of sexual exploration [36]. However, OSA can also be considered risky behavior, potentially leading to negative consequences [37]. Adolescents, characterized by traits like sensation-seeking and lack of control, may be particularly prone to risky cybersex use due to their limited understanding of healthy boundaries [38]. Interactions in cyberspace often lead to accelerated intimacy and a sense of identity that may differ from one's offline persona, a phenomenon known as the "hyper personalization effect" [39, 40]. While electronic media facilitate interpersonal connections, adolescents may feel less psychologically close to instant messaging partners compared to offline interactions [41]. Despite this, instant messaging serves important developmental needs by enabling teens to connect with peers and enhance their group identity [42]. The Internet and social media have also increased access to sexually explicit content and pornography, exposing teens to such material at higher rates than previous generations [43]. Some adolescents even report having their first sexual experiences online. However, exposure to sexual media during childhood and adolescence can evoke negative emotional reactions, including shock and embarrassment, with enduring effects [43].

CONCLUSION

Social media has profoundly impacted the lives of adolescents, revolutionizing communication and interaction while shaping their perceptions and behaviors, particularly regarding sexuality. Adolescents utilize social media platforms for various purposes, including accessing information, maintaining social connections, and exploring sexual content. However, the pervasive nature of social media has also led to an alarming increase in risky sexual behavior among youths, exposing them to sexual content and promoting unhealthy sexual practices. The negative implications of adolescents' social media use on sexual behavior are significant, with cyberbullying, sexting, Facebook depression, privacy concerns, and the influence of advertisements posing considerable risks to their well-being. Additionally, the accessibility of sexually explicit content and pornography online exposes teens to material that may have enduring negative emotional effects. Despite the challenges posed by social media, there is limited empirical evidence on its specific impact on sexual health behaviors among young individuals. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the nuances of how adolescents engage with social media content related to sexuality and its influence on their behavior. To mitigate the negative effects of social media on adolescent sexuality, interventions should focus on promoting media literacy among young consumers, educating parents, children, and adolescents about the risks associated with social media use, and fostering open communication about sexual health and healthy relationships. Additionally, strategies for enhancing parental monitoring of adolescents' social media use and promoting positive online behaviors are essential for protecting adolescents from the potential harms of social media on sexual behavior. Overall, addressing the influence of social media on adolescent sexuality requires a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration among parents, educators, healthcare providers, policymakers, and adolescents themselves to promote safe and healthy online environments for young individuals.

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