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The Effects of Social Media on Young People Through the Lens of Covid-19

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The School of Professional Studies, Clark University

Capstone Research Thesis

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Abstract

This study looks at the relationship between social media and its effect on young people's well-being by examining the available literature and research on the topic. Because Millennials and Generation Z do not remember a time before the internet and social media, it has become an influential and crucial part of their lives. Many suggest that social media is harmful to young people, while others argue that the benefits of the internet and social media outweigh the costs and risks. By analyzing the current research, it seems like there is still a lack of consensus on this debate. The goal of this study is to provide a general overview of the prior research and literature in order to suggest future areas of study to help improve internet safety and the understanding of how young people use social media.

Chapter 1: Introduction

General Introduction of Research Project

First popularized in the 1990s through blogging, chat rooms, and message boards; social media has become one of the most widespread and prominent forms of communication in the world. Over the last decade and a half, due to the creation of popular websites such as Facebook and Twitter, social media has grown exponentially and provides people all over the world with the chance to connect and communicate with each other quickly and simultaneously (Richards et al., 2015). This accessibility to this type of communication has only increased since the invention of smartphones and tablets, allowing even people on the go to be able to connect to their favorite social media app (Swist et al., 2015).

Because human beings are social animals, communication and feeling connected to one another are “fundamental aspects of human life (Spoor & Kelly, 2004, p. 398).” In order to fulfill this innate social need for communication, we have created thousands of different ways to keep in-touch and connect with one another that have evolved along with the invention of new technology and modes of communication. Prior to social media, inventions such as email or personal messaging boards and online discussion groups led the way and sparked the interest in different forms of online communication because of their ability to connect people faster than ever before (Sajithra & Patil, 2013).

This desire for quicker communication has only escalated since the invention of traditional social media in the late 1990s to early-mid 2000s as the urge and relative accessibility of the internet increased exponentially. This has allowed for the invention of current social media due to the access it provides individuals to an even more efficient way of connecting with loved ones and staying updated on their lives (Sajithra & Patil, 2013).

However, due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, many of the everyday communication methods, such as in-person communication and experiences, have been severely limited in order to stop the spread of the virus which has led to social media becoming one of the only options for staying connected with friends, family, and the world. Social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as video chat platforms such as Google Hangout and Zoom, have seen an increase in daily usage like never before (Koeze & Popper, 2020). Along with this, the inability for children to go to in-person classrooms and spend time with friends outside of the household has resulted in more and more kids turning to social media as a way to keep in contact with their friends and keep up with their school curriculum and responsibilities (Koeze & Popper, 2020). As a result, the question of whether social media and other online communication methods are safe for children has been raised again by both parents and experts with this current increase and necessity for internet communication (Drouin, 2020).

Research Problem

This paper is a research thesis project that aims to explore the available literature on the impact of social media on adolescents and young children, specifically the known effects of social media on Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z). Millennials are defined as individuals born between the years of 1980 to 1994 while Gen Z encompasses those born between the years 1995 to 2015 (Williams, 2015). Another goal of this research thesis is to compare children's social media use before and during the Covid-19 pandemic and how changes in lifestyle due to the pandemic may have affected this. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the question: What are the psychological and sociological effects of social media on the well-being of children? Two sub-questions that will also be examined: 1) What are the negative and positive aspects of children's social media use? 2) How has the current Covid-19 pandemic impacted

children's social media use and communication? The main hypothesis of this research paper is that there is a general lack of consensus surrounding the potential harms and benefits of social media on young people's well-being. By looking into these questions, the researcher hopes to provide further insight and knowledge on the topic of social media and how the specific benefits of this type of communication can be utilized by young children and the negative aspects can be decreased.

Rationale for Research Project

Since the beginning of social media, it has managed to work its way into most people's everyday lives. It is where we are able to stay connected with friends from years ago and has also evolved into a place where we can keep up with groups we are a part of, or even group chats with employers about current projects or business. Because of this, there are a lot of benefits to social media that have allowed us as a society to stay connected with each other. These positive aspects have also extended to children with multiple studies and reports evaluating the advantages that social media can have for children and adolescents. Some of these benefits include increased communication skills, potential social connections, and networking with peers that were not available to previous generations (Klass, 2012).

However, there are many negative aspects that have also been highlighted through the findings of multiple qualitative and quantitative studies about the effects of social media (O'Reilly, 2020). A lot of this information has also focused on the potential effects that social media has on children and adolescents since they are in very vulnerable and influential development periods in their lives. Additionally, this is a topic of study and conversation because this current age of social media specifically is a relatively new phenomenon that has not been previously documented prior to a few years ago (Guadagno et al., 2016). Some of the potential

negative effects of social media on children that have been documented are social media addiction (O'Reilly et al., 2018), the issue of FOMO, or the Fear of Missing Out that many children (and adults) experience (Barry et al., 2017), as well as multiple mental health and physical health problems (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

Due to this debate, the general lack of consensus on the impact that social media has on children and adolescents has caused an interesting relationship between individuals who think social media is the cause of many of children's emotional and health problems, and those who think that the benefits of social media outweigh these potential issues. This has caused the positive aspects and benefits of engaging in social media to not be utilized while also downplaying the existence of the actual dangers and negative aspects of social media and living in a digital age (O'Reilly, 2020). However, this debate becomes even more complicated with the added challenge that Covid-19 and severe lack of in-person communication has caused for everyone worldwide, including children who are unable to participate in in-person schooling and interact with their classmates, peers, and friends in-person (Drouin et al., 2020).

Key Terminology

Covid-19: A global pandemic that caused schools and businesses to shut down with public health measures put in place to reduce the spread of the virus (Ellis et al, 2020). As of 2021, this pandemic is still ongoing.

Cyberbullying: “The use of digital media to post threatening messages, embarrassing pictures and rumors intending to cause harm to others (O’Reilly et al., 2018, p. 2).”

Developmental Psychology: “Developmental psychologists focus on human growth and changes across the lifespan, including physical, cognitive, social, intellectual, perceptual, personality and emotional growth (“Developmental Psychology Studies Humans Across the Lifespan,” 2021, p.1).”

FOMO: Otherwise known as “the Fear of Missing Out” which refers to the feeling of loneliness and/or exclusion from social events or activities in-person or on social media (Barry et al., 2017).

Mental Health: Refers to the state of our emotional, psychological, and social well-being and can determine our mental state (Felman, 2020).

Social Media: First popularized in the 1990’s, social media has grown into a worldwide phenomenon through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Social media provides individuals to connect with other people faster and easier than before (Richards et al., 2015).

Social Health: Refers to the state of individuals well-being in terms of developing important social skills and maintaining crucial social interaction and connections with other individuals (O’Reilly, 2020).

Chapter 2: Theory

Theoretical Foundations

Mental Health

Childhood and adolescence are crucial development periods where their social and emotional health can be the most impacted, which will carry on habits and behaviors into adulthood. Because this is such an important period of time, the potential impacts that social media has on children and adolescents should be studied and analyzed since they may be the most susceptible to the negative consequences (Barry et al., 2017). Even though these effects, negative or positive, have not been completely determined, there has been significant research that has found that there is a possible link between social media usage and mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, as well as potential threats to mental health like poor self-esteem issues, self-harm, decreased sleep, and increased stress in children and adolescents (Barry et al., 2017). According to Richards et al., (2015, as cited in Kraut et al., 1998) people who used social media for only three hours a week experienced higher rates of depression, with teenagers being the group most susceptible to the harmful effects.

However, there are other studies that suggest that social media can actually be a benefit to children's mental and physical health when it is used in moderate amounts (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). Although, because of Covid-19, children are required to spend more time online than before, which may be considered excessive to the point it is harmful (Drouin et al., 2020).

Social Health

As previously mentioned, humans are social creatures that require human connections and bonds in order to cultivate social and emotional support (Spoor & Kelly, 2004). Without these proper social connections, social health can suffer, meaning that these individuals may be

isolated, have reduced social skills, and feel disconnected from society (O'Reilly, 2020). This social connection is also vital for children and adolescents to be able to build these relationships with their peers, learn social skills, and gain social capital and status. This is also the period of time where adolescents are extremely motivated to establish relationships with their peers to provide them with the validation and social and emotional support that they require (Ellis et al, 2020). With new technology such as the internet and social media being so popular, children and adolescents can be connected with friends easier (Richards et al., 2015), especially now during the current pandemic where face-to-face communication is limited (Ellis et al, 2020).

Covid-19 has caused problems for everyone, with many adults having to work from home and kids having to complete their schoolwork online which has developed into many people having a lack of social interaction. However, throughout the pandemic research has shown that even though everyone is physically isolated from one another, social media has been a great resource for fulfilling this human social need while remaining safe (Ellis et al, 2020).

Adolescents being able to connect with friends during the pandemic have also been observed to “mimic in-person dynamics (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 183).”

This social interaction is also important for their development of identity, but now children are also concerned with their online identity or persona, meaning how they are perceived online, which is an added pressure to current and future generations (O'Reilly et al., 2018). According to O'Reilly (2020), with this added pressure, “while communication and social interaction were viewed as essential to adolescent well-being, it was also acknowledged that contemporary adolescents are subjected to significant levels of stress and pressure, which can be a threat to positive health (p.3).”

Safety and Risks

The internet is a great place to learn new information, connect with friends and family, and build communities, but it is also associated with having a potential risk of exposure to harmful and damaging activities and content (O'Reilly et al., 2018). One of the major problems and risks is the potential for online harassment or cyberbullying and “trolling.” Although bullying has been going on for generations, children and adolescents are now exposed to the threat of harassment at the hands of their peers or anonymous individuals online, known as cyberbullying or trolling, which remains a constant problem for today’s youth (O'Reilly et al., 2018). According to O'Reilly et al., cyberbullying is “the use of digital media to post threatening messages, embarrassing pictures and rumors intending to cause harm to others (p.2).” Because this type of bullying takes place online, it feels like young people can never escape and can be exposed to it in the comfort of their own homes (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

Another risk to children is the potential of addiction. This addictive nature of social media is not a coincidence; developers of these social media platforms intentionally design them so that they release the neurotransmitter dopamine (which makes us feel good), when we are using them (Dreifus, 2017). Social media and the internet can sometimes seem like a drug, where people can get obsessed with staying connected even if this puts individuals’ well-being at risk. As stated by a 12–13-year-old study participant, “social media is like an online drug... it has good side effects and bad side effects (O'Reilly et al., 2018, p.8).” Adolescents have also been observed to have “underdeveloped cognitive mechanisms that inhibit self-regulation (Ellis et al, 2020).” This cognitive factor makes it so young people are unable to control their habits which can eventually lead to addiction (Ellis et al, 2020).

Finally, “young people on social media sites are more prone to risk-taking behavior that may place their health at risk (Richards et al., 2015).” These risky behaviors, such as substance use, sexual activity, and violence, have been observed on adolescents’ and teens’ social media profiles which could potentially impact them in the future (Richards et al., 2015). However, even though potential exposure to the risks may be low, once exposed, young people may develop a sense of resilience or tolerance to the risks online, as well as offline (Swist et al., 2015).

Overview of Literature Reviewed, Discussed and Applied

Even though there is a general lack of consensus on whether social media is considered to impact children and adolescents’ well-being negatively or positively, there have been a lot of studies examining the *potential* outcomes of youth exposure to social media. In this present study, both sides of the argument have been researched to provide the most unbiased review of the information as possible. The information from this paper also came from a variety of reliable sources that explored the relationship between young people, social media, and observed impacts, good or bad.

A number of the articles researched are presentations of findings from qualitative and quantitative scientific studies that have used a diverse, recruited study sample of children—sometimes parents as well—to find correlations or connections to social media and well-being. A few of the methods used to gather information were interviews, focus groups, or surveys. Some of these studies also used children from other countries such as England and Australia to signify that this debate is occurring in places throughout the world, not just in the United States. These studies were peer-reviewed and approved by the proper ethics boards to ensure that no participant was harmed during or after the research was conducted. These resources were obtained from various sources including Clark-provided databases such as JSTOR and

PsychInfo, as well as reliable research found through Google Scholar. To make sure that the information was as accurate as possible, most of the research used was relatively new; a couple sources used were even from the past year.

Other sources to gather information for this project were trusted news outlets such as the New York Times. Although there were some scholarly sources that talked about it, there was a general lack of in-depth research conducted on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic since it only started a little over a year ago. These news articles provided the research with the information and perspectives of parents and children currently living in the pandemic and their observations of how well children have been adjusting to all of the changes, as well as how social media has played a role in the foundation of new modes of communication being popularized. The use of these articles offers a unique perspective because a pandemic of this scale has not occurred in 100 years.

Chapter 3: Methods

Study Method and Design

This research project was designed as a capstone thesis aimed as an in-depth literature review of the present and available research on the psychological and sociological impacts of social media on children and adolescents' well-being and health. In order to do this, numerous perspectives, theories, and methods were examined by the researcher in order to present an unbiased and comprehensive review of the material to date. After the research was analyzed and grouped by topics or similarity, the researcher was able to compile a list of prominent themes found throughout the articles and studies reviewed. This then led to the formation of the paper and the current analysis of the findings and themes.

Study Sample

Due to the fact that current "young people" fall into two generations, Millennials and Generation Z, both of these age groups were studied. This is because the research that has been conducted has taken place over the course of these two generations' lifespans, causing an overlap in the data. In result, the age range of the sample is technically from 6-40 years old. However, the research was only focused on the impact that social media has on children under the age of 18, meaning that some of the Millennial population may have been excluded from some of the research. The reason for the distinction between older and younger Millennials that were included in this study is because the difference between these two subgroups is very large. Many young Millennials and almost all of Gen Z do not remember a time before the internet and social media were part of their lives, making them staples in their upbringing.

These two generations also vary in their values and experiences, much like the generations that have come before, but because of the internet these differences may be more

well-known and kept track of. Millennials and Gen Z tend to mostly use different social media platforms, were raised using different technology, and are influenced by separate things.

According to the New York Times, Millennials are known for first popularizing the famous social media platform Facebook, where Gen Z has mostly migrated to other various platforms including anonymous “platforms like Secret or Whisper, as well as Snapchat, where any incriminating images disappear almost instantly (Williams, 2015, p. 3).” This is because Gen Z was the first generation to not remember a time before social media and was raised when smartphones were just being released (Williams, 2015). One Gen Z-er even mentions that “when I think of Generation Z, technology is the first thing that comes to mind (Williams, 2015, p.2).” However, in spite of these differences, they are the only two generations so far that have spent their most formative and influential years (childhood and adolescence) with the internet and social media, and each comes with a unique and valuable perspective of this experience. Children and teens who are also going through online schooling currently offer an even more interesting perspective that has never been observed or recorded before in this way.

Analytical Techniques Applied

For this capstone project, the information was analyzed by reading and evaluating previously written articles, editorials, and journals, as well as research studies that have already been conducted. The topics of these findings mostly pertained to either social media or the importance of social connections and community. Sources that were on the topic of social media analyzed the impact on well-being, potential risks, potential benefits, future areas of research, and how the information can be utilized to create a safer environment and harness and improve the benefits. To make sure that both sides of the argument were analyzed as equally as possible, sources that included both the negatives and the positives were included, as well as those that

avored one side, as long as they also discussed potential risks or benefits as well. This analytical approach allowed the researcher to synthesize the current research available on the topic and develop and identify potentially new conclusions or themes based on the previous findings and perspectives.

Reliability and Validity

As stated by Roberts and Priest (2006), “reliability and validity are ways of demonstrating and communicating the rigor of research processes and the trustworthiness of research findings (p. 41).” The reason for this is to make sure that the information being presented is not misleading or providing false or flawed statements to the reader (Roberts & Priest, 2006). In simple terms, reliability refers to how consistently will the findings be able to be replicated or reproduced in similar circumstances (Roberts & Priest, 2006). Although slightly similar, validity makes sure that the measures being used actually measure what they are intended to (Roberts & Priest, 2006). In terms of this study, the research would be considered reliable if the findings or themes could be found or observed again in a separate study in similar circumstances. This study would be considered valid if the research that has been analyzed was used with the same intentions as the previous researcher and is presented accurately.

In order for this study to be as reliable and valid as possible, the researcher used a number of various sources and perspectives to make sure that the information presented is accurate and unbiased. To do this, both research studies (qualitative and quantitative), journals, editorials, and other peer-reviewed articles that talked about or studied similar topics were used to gather data and create common themes. Also, by using this combination of sources, the research can be influenced by a number of perspectives including a research perspective as well as the perspective of young people, their parents, and journalists. By using many different perspectives,

the information can be considered unbiased since multiple sources and data were used to formulate the findings.

Assumptions and Implied Limitations

In every study there are assumptions that need to be made and predicted limitations of the research and the findings. Some of the assumptions about this study that need to be made are that even though the paper was designed with the purpose of being as unbiased and accurate as possible, there is always a possibility that reading the previous research and articles may have influenced the direction of the paper and the themes that were observed. Another assumption is that because the researcher also grew up in the period of time where social media was first emerging, their personal perspective and experiences may have unintentionally influenced how the findings were interpreted and presented. There are also some limitations of the study as well, one of them being that because this research only involved the impact of social media on young people, this information and findings cannot be applied to any other age group or population. Another limitation is that even though research from multiple countries was used, the countries also happened to be affluent, “developed” countries, so this data also cannot be used to explain parts of the world that are not categorized the same way.

Chapter 4: Findings

Brief Overview of Research Project

The main reason that this topic was studied in-depth was due to the interesting finding that most of Gen Z does not remember a time before the internet and social media. This was a unique viewpoint that has not been observed before, since Gen Z is the first generation to be fully raised in the digital age. However, this constant connection to the internet and social networks has created the debate on whether social media is beneficial or harmful to children and adolescents who use it. Young people are influenced by social connections because it is a very important time developmentally for them (O'Reilly et al., 2018). With the addition of smartphones, individuals, including young people, are able to constantly keep track of their social platforms which many argue may cause harm in the long run. On the other hand, many people defend social media and other social networks saying that the benefits of being able to form these social bonds and connections outweigh the negative aspects (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). Although, a lot of this research was completed before the current Covid-19 pandemic that caused young people to have no choice (or very limited choices), but to connect with their friends over social media or other similar communication platforms.

Results

By analyzing the current studies and literature on the topic of the effect of social media on young people, four separate themes were found: first, does social media help or hurt mental health? Second, social media as a method to fulfill social needs; third, the pandemic gives way to new forms of staying in touch; and finally, young people talk about their issues in the third person. Through the analysis of the available research and literature, these themes represent the common experience and issues that young people face in the age of the internet and social media.

Through these themes, we can provide insight and a new perspective on the potential harms or benefits of social media also within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These insights will then be able to influence areas that could be improved and benefits that can be utilized.

Does Social Media Help or Hurt Mental Health?

The childhood and adolescent years are crucial time periods for overarching development, but with the extra stress of the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of young people are experiencing added anxiety, depression, and increased technology/social media use (Drouin et al., 2020). Even before the pandemic, multiple studies have found a link between social media usage and increased levels of mental health disorders (such as depression and anxiety) in children (O'Reilly et al, 2018; Barry et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2015). There has been an observed link between social media and potential threats to mental health, including, but not limited to, sleep problems, self-harm, impulsivity, risk-taking behaviors, body image issues, and low self-esteem (Barry et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2015). However, in spite of the potential negative mental health effects, numerous studies have also examined the potential benefits of social media on young people's mental health, such as new resources for support networks that can provide mental health help (O'Reilly, 2020), or through connecting people with similar issues and experiences (O'Reilly et al., 2018). According to O'Reilly (2020), children who have been diagnosed with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to isolation and "that the communication and connectivity of social media could be especially beneficial for this group, giving them more positive outcomes consistent with their peers (p. 3)."

Ever since social media platforms started becoming popular with older Millennials using sites such as Myspace and Facebook to share life updates, the conversation about whether these platforms cause more harm and damage than benefits has been a constant topic of debate (Barry

et al., 2017). Currently, the debate looks at apps and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Also because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the younger generations must keep in contact with peers, acquaintances, and friends through communication methods that do not require face-to-face communication, such as various social media platforms. This lack of in-person communication has been known to cause various mental health issues in the past (O'Reilly et al, 2018), but with this being the only way for kids to communicate with their friends, the options are limited, causing the majority of children to rely on social media to keep in touch with their friend groups (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). The stress of the pandemic and school closures has also limited young people's access to mental health support, but with these online connections, children can stay in contact with old friends and meet new people or find communities that may be dealing with the same issues (Ellis et al., 2020).

Social Media as a Method to Fulfill Social Needs

Throughout the literature, it is consistent that while there is disagreement about the harms and negative effects of the internet and social media, there is a general acknowledgement that they can provide young people with the social connections that they require. In developmental psychology, it has been found that children need strong peer relationships in order to develop and strengthen their social skills and support networks (O'Reilly, 2020). Through social media, children and adolescents can continue to build these networks even during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ellis et al., 2020). Using social media as a resource to make social connections has also been proven to “reduce isolation, improve social skills and provide a platform for continued communication (O'Reilly, 2020, p. 3).” Developing a sense of identity and belonging is also pivotal for young people, so finding a community of people with similar interests can promote the formation of this identity, self-expression, and self-acceptance (Swist et al., 2015). Many

who support the benefits of social media also say that during the pandemic, social media can provide children and adolescents with a sense of normalcy that allows them to have this social engagement with their peers (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020).

However, even with these benefits, there are still many negative social aspects of social media that should be recognized. One of the negatives is frequent cyberbullying from peers, meaning that children who are bullied in school may not have an escape from the torment they receive since they can be bullied from their own home through social media. By using the internet, people are able to say things that they would never say to another person's face, and frequent Facebook use has been linked to a higher chance of being bullied (Richards et al., 2015). Yet even when they log off, they may experience “FOMO” meaning the Fear of Missing Out. This phenomenon has been linked to higher social media usage since many young people feel like they are going to miss something or feel left out if they are not involved in the conversations or social activities which can lead to feelings of distress and exclusion (Barry et al., 2017). Because of this, children may become addicted to social media in order to keep up with social expectations and to reduce the feeling of being excluded from their peers. Many young people refer to social media as an “online drug” which means that they are aware of the severity of its potentially addictive qualities that can negatively impact well-being (O’Reilly et al., 2018, p. 8).

Pandemic Gives Way to New Forms of Communication

As discussed, social media has been able to provide young people with a sense of normalcy in the pandemic since they can keep in contact with their friends while being quarantined (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). Through this, new forms of social connection, made possible by the internet, have grown significantly with new platforms and modes of

communication. One of the most famous platforms that has recently gained popularity with young people is the online video game, “Among Us,” where players complete various tasks on a spaceship and are assigned either the role of “Crewmate” or “Imposter.” The Crewmates must complete the tasks they are assigned while they are trying to avoid being killed by the Imposter who is disguised as a regular Crewmate. Crewmates also must also try and determine who the Imposter(s) are and successfully vote them off to win the game (Lorenz, 2020).

Even though “Among Us” was released in 2018, it didn’t become popular until September of 2020, when young people discovered it as a new and interesting way to spend time with friends during quarantine. This is because in order to vote off the Imposter, everyone playing must (virtually) gather and discuss who they think the Imposter is, giving them a chance to talk to each other over a new medium. This game has also been compared to playing a board game with friends in-person which is a fun social activity; “There’s more natural conversation that arises from it. It’s more of a party game. You’re kind of just hanging out with friends and the game is secondary... To excel at the game, you have to know if people are lying, telling the truth and their general personality (Lorenz, 2020, p. 2).”

However, this is not the only example of new social platforms that have become popular due to the pandemic. Video chat has become a huge resource for providing young people with their social needs. Websites like Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout, and more have allowed people to stay in contact with friends and family relatively “face-to-face” even if the communication is not in-person. These platforms have also been necessary for young people to receive their education since in-person schooling was not an option. These social and educational platforms are also important because a lot of our communication relies on the aspect of non-verbal cues like hand gestures, facial expressions, and eye-contact which is not possible without seeing the

individual in-person or on video (Turk, 2020). Video chat is not perfect because only a portion of the body is visible on screen, but it provides young people with a chance to communicate face-to-face and develop their nonverbal communication and social skills.

Young People Talk about their Experiences in the Third Person

The final theme that was observed is that when children and adolescents were questioned about their social media use or the perceptions that they have on the impact it has on well-being, a lot of them answered using third-person language. This use of third-person language was observed when young people would talk about the negative aspects of social media, but they did not or were hesitant to say that they themselves have experienced these effects (O'Reilly et al., 2018). For example, when asked about cyberbullying, the young participants talked in-depth about how rampant it is on social media and the harms it can cause, but they very rarely expressed personal stories or experiences on the topic (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Another example of this occurred when the topic of social media addiction was discussed. When participants acknowledged that they “were avid users of social media themselves, many argued that social media is addictive for some... In other words, when considering people being addicted to social media, they generally spoke about others, *some people*, rather than self-identifying as overusing these channels themselves (O'Reilly et al., 2018, p. 8).”

Through the language that the participants used in the interviews, surveys, and other research methods, they seem to be more comfortable talking about the harmful aspects when they are not “outing” themselves as an individual who experiences the negative effects. Young people often used phrases like “some people” and “you” when referring to adolescents more broadly to talk about the expectations and impacts of social media. Only rarely would they talk about themselves or use the word “I” to discuss their experiences (O'Reilly, 2020). Other studies

that have been conducted to expose some of the barriers that young people experience when and if they seek out mental health help have found that many people feel too embarrassed to get help because of a prominent societal stigma surrounding mental health (Gulliver et al., 2010). Many fear what others will think of them or assume about them if they were to receive treatment or help even if they recognize that they can benefit from it (Gulliver et al., 2010).

Brief Descriptive Analysis

Through these findings and the common themes presented in the research, it shows that when used in moderate amounts, social media can be a huge resource for young people to connect with their peers, build communities, express themselves, and mature socially. Especially because of the pandemic, young people have been able to harness the positives that can come from using social media as a method of communication and spending time with friends. Although, most of the benefits to social media seem to revolve around the social aspects, but not as much with mental health benefits. There are benefits to mental health, but these advantages are also socially related like finding people who understand their experiences and new support networks. Mental health issues like anxiety/depression and risks like low self-esteem, body image issues, and risk-taking behaviors are still a product of frequent social media use and may even be amplified by the negative social aspects like cyberbullying, FOMO, and addiction.

Reliability and Validity of the Analysis

In order to present a reliable and valid research paper, information from multiple sources were examined to determine the impact that social media can have on young people with a discussion of how Covid-19 affects this relationship. A combination of primary research studies, literature reviews, and journalistic articles were used to gather the information and provide a sample that represents the population of young people who have grown up with the internet and

social media. Because of this, the current research study is considered reliable and valid, with the exception of the limitations that were previously discussed.

Explanation of Hypothesis

The main hypothesis for this paper was that there was a lack of consensus about whether the benefits of social media outweigh the harms and vice versa. This debate has led to the benefits of social media to not be utilized to their full potential and some of the harms and risks to be downplayed. This hypothesis was partially supported by the finding that this debate is still occurring, but many of the more recent studies and articles paint social media in a more positive light because of the Covid-19 pandemic and when used in moderation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Brief Overview of Material

Young people are in a very impressionable period of mental and social development, and due to the prevalence of social media, much of this development is occurring on and aided by the internet and social media. Because of this, the negative and positive aspects of growing up on social media have been examined in-depth, but there is still a debate on if it is safe for young people to use social media. The harms of social media are discussed within the context of the mental health issues that are common with frequent usage (anxiety and depression) and the negative social aspects that occur online such as cyberbullying, FOMO, and potential risk factors. However, on the other side, the benefits that are discussed revolve around the social connections that social media can create and the formation of identity through these connections. By analyzing the research, it has been concluded that even though there are obvious harms and benefits, there is still a lack of consensus among experts and parents about whether the negatives outweigh the positives or vice versa.

Full Discussion of Findings and Implications

Social media has been criticized for its potentially harmful effects while at the same time praised for its benefits for young people's well-being. Within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this debate has become even more complicated due to quarantine and lack of in-person communication and social events. Based on the research conducted, there is some potential that social media may cause or amplify mental health issues when used too frequently that can impact psychological well-being (O'Reilly, 2020). Young people also have a hard time talking about their own negative experiences with social media and tend to reflect this by talking about how other people are impacted by it instead (O'Reilly et al., 2020). But there are benefits

that may improve children and adolescent's development of identity, social connections, and social skills (Swist et al., 2015). Social media has been shown to provide young people with a sense of normalcy during the pandemic which has led to new forms of communication and staying in-touch (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). Through the research, it can be seen that there are multiple underlying sociological factors like social expectations and social connections, as well as time spent on social media, that play a role in the potential benefits and harms and how these benefits and harms are discussed, especially during Covid.

Full Discussion of Research Analysis of Findings

One of the only things that is agreed upon in the literature is that using social media in moderate amounts, with some parental supervision, can decrease the risk of harm to well-being and increase the benefits (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). But, due to social media being a relatively new mode of communication, there is still a lot of research that must be conducted. Young people are also hesitant to admit that they may have experienced the negative aspects of social media either because the harms are discussed more than they are experienced (O'Reilly et al., 2018), or because there is a social stigma surrounding seeking mental health help (Gulliver et al., 2010). Also, since the younger generations do not know a time before the internet like older generations do, there may be aspects of social media that older individuals and researchers (who also tend to be older) may not fully understand. However, because of the pandemic, eyes are starting to open about the benefits of social media during a time where in-person and "normal" social interaction cannot occur. Covid-19 may have also led to children interacting with the internet and social media earlier than previously observed, which suggests that young children can learn about internet safety before they experience the harms.

Full Discussion of Hypothesis and of Findings

The hypothesis of this current research project was that there was a lack of consensus about the harms and benefits of social media on well-being due to the mixed messages that young people, and the general public, receive about social media use. This hypothesis was partially supported due to the ongoing debate expressed in the findings, but because of the pandemic, the positives of social media are starting to be fully discussed in public discourse and in research. However, even though the hypothesis was partially supported, there is still a definite need for future research and literature to discuss this topic as well as strategies for minimizing harm and utilizing benefits.

Post Analysis and Implications of Hypothesis and of Findings

Children and adolescents, as well as many young adults, have never lived in or remembered a world without social media which amplifies its presence in the lives of young people. This option for social connection and communication has (generally) always been available to them, and even if they are too young to partake, they are still aware of it. In addition, with the growing popularity of online social games like “Among Us” that appeal to a younger audience, it is clear that new forms of communication and social media will keep being invented and utilized by young people. Social media is not going away anytime soon; it will continue to grow and change, so we must take advantage of this opportunity to harness the benefits of the internet and teach young children about internet safety. Like social media, the negatives of the internet are not necessarily going away either, but they might be able to be mitigated. Future research that also includes this aspect must be conducted in order to better understand young people and how they use social media since it is such a large part of their lives.

Chapter 6

Summary of Academic Study

This study was conducted by analyzing and examining the previous research, literature, and journalist articles on the topic of how social media impacts the well-being of young people through the additional lens of the Covid-19 pandemic. As expressed in the literature, there is still a lack of consensus about whether social media provides benefits to young people or if it is not worth the harm that it causes for children and adolescents. This seems to be the case because older generations who grew up without social media do not fully understand how young people use social media and how it can help them develop healthy coping mechanisms and social connections. These benefits of social media also come with the assumption that parents will also supervise their child's internet activity to the extent that they can keep them relatively safe and teach them how to interact with the internet safely on their own. Parents and other adults should also keep up to date with the new forms of communication on the internet as a way to understand how to keep young people safe, but more importantly understand that social media also has benefits when utilized correctly.

Reference to Literature Review

This project could not have been completed without the literature review that was conducted prior to analyzing themes and writing the paper. This was able to provide the researcher with insight about how the prior research and literature was presented in order to formulate common themes that were observed across the findings. Through this prior literature review, it was determined that there is a lack of consensus because of the negative light that social media is portrayed in by older generations who may not fully understand what it is or how to utilize it properly.

Implications of Academic Study

The major implication of this current study is that teaching internet safety and how to utilize the benefits of the internet must be taught to children at a young age. Because of the pandemic, children need to keep up with their social connections through social media, so teaching them how to be safe and reduce harm can help them decrease their experience with the negative aspects of social media and the internet. This knowledge must also be passed onto the older generations so that they can keep up with new social mediums, to accept how young people use social media platforms, and so that they can teach this information to their kids. Social media is here to stay and with the invention of new technology, young people will continue to be exposed to and use the internet. It is imperative to teach current and future generations how to reduce the negatives of social media, and more importantly where/who to go to if/when they experience its harms and that it is not something to be ashamed of.

Limitations of the Theory or Method of Research

One of the limitations of this study is that this information cannot be applied to populations that are not represented in this research. Since Millennials and Generation Z were the study sample, this information does not represent older generations' experience with social media. Also, because social media and the population of this study are both young, there may not be enough in-depth knowledge on the topic, so the current information may be contradicted in the future once we understand the long-term effects better. It is also possible that since the researcher is within the age of the population of interest, their prior opinions and understandings may have impacted how the findings were analyzed, which could have led to the research being misinterpreted or presented wrong.

Recommendations or Suggestions of Future Academic Study

As previously discussed, teaching children about internet safety is essential, so future studies should look into how this can best be taught to young people so that they can utilize the internet and social media for their benefit while also being cautious of the negative aspects without being scared of the harms or ashamed if they experience harm. This research should also include how this information can be presented in a school setting as well as how parents can educate their children on this topic. Future studies should also focus on how the benefits of the internet can best be utilized by young people to enhance education, social connections, and identity development. It will also be interesting to see how future research will incorporate the new forms of communication that have become widely known due to the pandemic and the factors that go into different forms of communication becoming popular.

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