

Social Work in the Digital Age

Abstract

Social media is a growing and ever-changing method of communication that has a strong impact on the psychosocial well-being of today's adolescents. Studies have found that social media can be detrimental to adolescent self-esteem, can be used to bully and manipulate others, and can exacerbate depressive symptoms. Furthermore, adolescents self-report utilizing social networking websites to find support, guidance, and community revolving around problematic behaviors such as self-harm and eating disorders. Social workers who treat this population should become familiar with the multitude of outlets in order to best support their clients. This paper draws from the authors' experience with this population and the literature to date in order to establish the need for a social work prepared for the digital age.

Social media is an umbrella term for technology-based communication tools that connect people and allow for the sharing of information. One of the first social media platforms launched in 1997, "Six Degrees," was the first website to allow millions of users to connect through the Internet via personal profiles, friend lists, and school affiliations (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As Internet use became more prevalent, blogging sites continued the social media phenomena.

Social networking sites are an important subset of social media (Social Media, 2017). Social networking sites include specific features, such as the ability to create a personal profile and communicate either publicly or privately with other users. Additionally, many social networking sites allow users to "friend" one another, providing special access to one another's accounts, and "follow" or "subscribe" to specific users which permits another user's information

to be more visible throughout the site. Users who friend, follow, or subscribe to other users create a virtual community potentially based on factors such as common interests, actual in-person relationships, or mutual friends. While social networking sites are not the oldest form of social media, most online information sharing occurs on popular apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Social Media, 2017).

Facebook was introduced in 2004 and has become one of the most popular social networking sites by allowing users to connect with others through sharing text, videos, and pictures on personal profiles (Freitag, Arnold, Gardner & Arnold, 2017; Social Media, 2017). Twitter, created in 2006, also allows users to post multimedia, but it specializes in short message systems known as “tweets,” which were initially limited to 140 characters and recently expanded to 280 (Social Media, 2017). Users can share status updates with their followers, who can then read the tweet, reply to the tweet, or share the original user’s tweet to their own followers through a process known as “retweeting.” Instagram was launched in 2010 and its primary purpose is to share media such as pictures or short videos instantaneously (Lenhart, 2015). Similarly, Snapchat, introduced in 2011, enables users to share pictures or videos with the distinguishing characteristic that these images and videos disappear within seconds of the recipient viewing them (Social Media, 2017).

Our focus is to analyze the authors’ experiences working with young people and current research about adolescents’ use of social media to consider implications for social work practice in the age of ubiquitous social networking. In particular, our work is interested in exploring how social workers engage individuals born after the year 2000, who came of age in a world with wide-spread Internet access, instant messaging systems, and various forms of mediated connection. For our purposes, we define “adolescents” as individuals aged 12-18, or students in middle school and high school. We will use the terms “adolescents” and “youth” interchangeably.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today's adolescents have been labeled Generation M(edia) due to the extensive amount of time this age group spends online (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014). Since 2015, the Pew Research Center has been studying adolescent technology use in a series of reports. Their initial 2015 report found 92% of adolescents go online daily, 89% specifically use social networking sites and 24% of teenagers say they are online "almost constantly" (Lenhart, 2015). With this level of social media activity, current networking sites have replaced some aspects of individual and relational development—allowing adolescents to explore and develop their identities and relationships by expressing and sharing their emotions and experiences while receiving feedback from others (Lerman et al., 2016). At the same time, levels of depressive symptoms have increased greatly in adolescents as technology has become more accessible (Weinstein et al., 2015; Egan & Moreno, 2011).

Ybarra, Alexander, and Mitchell (2005) found that youth with high levels of depressive symptoms use social media more often than those with lower levels. This relationship may be related to the youth's desire to avoid in-person social interaction as well as to use social media as a resource and outlet to discuss depression itself (Lerman et al., 2016; Lenhart et al., 2010). While it may be beneficial for youth to use social networking sites as an informal support network, adolescent's susceptibility to peer pressure can lead to unsafe behaviors in this vulnerable situation. O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) explain that, similar to depression off line, adolescents who suffer from social networking related depression may rely on this informal "help," which ultimately can lead to self-destructive behaviors.

Reddy, Rokito, and Whitlock (2016) argue using anonymous forms of social media is particularly appealing to youth who feel isolated, which is common among those who self-injure. Normalizing behaviors, such as self-injury, may create a supportive community for

the adolescent to not feel as isolated or stigmatized. However, the accessibility also poses a risk of increasing interest in the behavior or triggering those who are recovering from the behavior. Research shows connecting adolescents through social media increases the likelihood of social contagion—when two or more people engage in self-injury within 24 hours of each other (Reddy, Rokito, & Whitlock, 2016). Though the exchange of information is not inherently bad, discussing unhealthy behaviors or coping mechanisms poses a great risk for youth engagement in the behaviors.

Unhealthy behaviors have also been related to the ways in which adolescents constantly compare themselves to an unrealistic ideal when they use social media. Brown and Tiggemann's (2016) study shows frequent exposure to images of attractive celebrities and peers is detrimental to an adolescent's self-image because it increases negative mood and body dissatisfaction. Cohen and Blaszczynsk (2015) use the social comparison theory to explain that body dissatisfaction increases with exposure to peer social media images compared to conventional media images, such as celebrities or models. This finding is daunting as many users strategically select thin and attractive pictures of themselves, which are coupled with comments reinforcing this body type. Compared to conventional media that is assumed to be digitally altered, people consider social media to be a more accurate depiction of their peers. Clark (2017) also found that constantly comparing the self to friends, peers, and acquaintances on social media can put a person in a low mood and increase negative thoughts about one's body, which can lead to unhealthy amounts of exercise and food restrictions (Clark, 2017). These habits of presenting the self, combined with the platform to discuss eating and exercise habits with others, intensify concerns with body image.

Social networking platforms also provide a space for and present unique forms of bullying and harassment. Studies suggest bullying peaks during adolescence but continues beyond, which is particularly important in this current paper because of the high

percentage of adolescents who are connected to social networking sites every day (Jun, Xu, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2012; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). In the United States, a national average of 14.8% of youth experience electronic bullying, or cyberbullying, through social media messaging, email, and texting, and the distribution of screenshots (Kann et al., 2014). A screenshot captures an image of whatever is displayed on a device's screen and thus whatever images or messages sent as a private communication can be shared without the original sender's consent.

Social media has also been used as a vehicle for inter-partner harassment. 18% of adolescents reported that a partner had used social media to harass them, 11% shared a partner's private content without their permission with the use of social media, and 17% feared consequences from their partner when they did not respond to a call, text, or other form of communication (Glauber, Randel, & Picard, 2007). Many teens have reported feeling as though they were taken advantage of when a partner shared an intimate photo of them with others (Glauber, Randel, & Picard, 2007). Indeed, we have found through our work experience that an intimate photograph that one sends to one's partner can be shared instantaneously with the recipient's friends within seconds, and it is not uncommon for other adolescents to use these images as a form of blackmail over one another. For example, a partner can threaten to post a compromising photograph on Instagram or on Snapchat if they do not get what they want from their partner.

Cyberbullying and harassment have led to a dramatic increase in adolescent suicide, other mental and physical health issues, and lower academic achievement (Jun, Xu, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2012; Cook et al., 2010; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Thus, use of social networking applications and websites is an important factor to consider when adolescents present with symptoms such as low achievement, depression, isolation, and/or thoughts of self-harm.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Our experience working with adolescents confirms that social media permeates most, if not all, forms of socialization and communication. It is important to note that while many adolescents report being involved in online groups that promote detrimental behaviors—such as Instagram photo groups that glorify anorexia, bulimia, and forms of self-harm, such as cutting—others seek assistance and support for their depressive symptoms from both peers and anonymous contributors through social networking sites such as Facebook (Lenhart, 2015). Teens have reported utilizing hashtag searches such as “#proana” or “#ana” to find groups and online posts that support Anorexia, “#promia” or “#mia” to find groups that support Bulimia, and “#thinspo” or “#thinspiration” to find posts and groups that support unhealthy dieting, eating habits, and weight control to encourage quick weight-loss and idolize thin bodies. Though some websites and social media platforms have banned some of these hashtags, the material is easy enough to find if you know what you are looking for.

There have been several instances, in our experience, in which adolescents struggling with self-harm behaviors, such as cutting and burning, reported joining online communities through Facebook and Instagram. They reported that these communities provide information about how to engage in and hide the results of self-harm. These groups provide encouragement and support for others engaging in these behaviors. There are a multitude of ways adolescents communicate and it is important we can address the variety of ways development and mental health can be affected.

Self-harm groups are not the only ways in which we have witnessed adolescent symptoms being affected by social networking sites. Additionally, many adolescents struggling with depression reported increased feelings of sadness when using social networking sites. Many individuals explained that viewing peers, friends, and acquaintances on Instagram and Facebook and feeling as though they lead perfect lives. Several adolescents have explained that people on social media are always engaging in fun activities, looking

great, and accomplishing a variety of achievements, not recognizing that many people only share the positive aspects of their life with the public. These reports from adolescents emphasize that the constant comparison of oneself to unrealistic, ideal images of people online can put one in a low mood.

It can be hard for social workers to relate to, understand, conceptualize, or appropriately address the extent to which social media impacts the day-to-day lives of adolescents as many did not grow up with the same technology. In all of our work with youth, several adolescents discussed feelings of loneliness due to viewing friends spending time together without them on Snapchat. A social worker who might not be aware of the constant use of social networking sites may focus on this event as a one-time incident. However, the client will most likely continue to see people together via social networking sites and continue to feel left out. Therefore, the social worker must be aware of the constant use and availability of social networking sites to assist clients in appropriately responding to an incident, such as this example, as a potentially ongoing stressor rather than a one-time event.

IMPROVING AWARENESS AND DEVELOPING INTERVENTIONS

Social workers are therefore encouraged to approach the world of adolescent social media use through a lens of cultural humility by developing skills, attitudes, and behaviors that enhance the therapeutic relationship and bridge the social media-driven cultural divide (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015). Though it might appear farfetched to expect all professionals to understand the inner-workings of the multitude of social media platforms as an average adolescent might, a basic understanding of the most commonly used platforms can go a long way when building rapport with as an adolescent client. The various platforms have developed their own norms, rules, preferred uses, and expectations. It is not the client's responsibility to spend time from their therapeutic sessions to

educate professionals about the ways in which different apps and sites function.

Research notes that within this developmental stage, adolescents are constructing and reconstructing their identities while peer interactions become particularly important due to the creation and transformation of cultural norms both on- and off-line (Galarneau, 2011, 2012; Rutledge, 2013). Adolescents learn how to navigate these social networks and behave in different ways on different platforms. For instance, one rule adolescents adhere to on Instagram is that close friends are expected to “like” and “comment” on a photo within the first few minutes of it being posted. It is not uncommon for teens to have group chats where one will update the others when a new picture or selfie is posted so the friends can provide attention on social media. It is important when working with adolescents not to dismiss these kinds of interactions. Social media is important to them; it is a way they can express themselves and stay connected with each other.

As communication shifts outside of the realm of in-person contact, it is important that social workers are able to adapt to be more aware of the technological world in which clients are immersed. In order to bridge the divide between social workers and social media, the National Association of Social Workers should offer continuing education unit courses or webinars that strictly focus on the ever-evolving adolescent utilization of communication platforms during this digital age and the uniquely individual norms, rules, preferred uses, and expectations that have developed within these different platforms. One course could be designed to educate professionals about the functions and cultures of these various social networking applications and websites. A separate course could provide education about the ways in which online predators utilize social media to find, contact, and manipulate victims and how social workers can intervene if they have suspicions about the identity of an “online friend.” For example, a presenter might teach the group how to

recognize a fake Facebook profile by demonstrating how to use a reverse Google Image search to identify stolen images.

In order to best understand how social media can be utilized by social workers to provide the most beneficial treatment to adolescents, further research must be conducted. It is necessary to research the effects that social networking platforms can have on specific adolescent populations. Research about the impact of social media on adolescents from various communities and backgrounds including, but not limited to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are to date limited and insufficient.

Dedicating research to particular populations can illuminate parallels and/or differences between youth with different backgrounds. Various platforms or their implications may pose particular issues or benefits for a specific group. As the world continues to become more connected via the Internet, additional research into the long-term effects of constant social media use on adolescents' mental and physical health is also necessary. Uncovering ways in which social networking is beneficial for this population's well-being may help address the negative effects for which it provides a platform.

Suggestions for future research include developing a screening tool to determine the extent to which an adolescent's use of social media contributes to their development and mental health—both positively and negatively. The assessment would be created to gain a better understanding of the amount of time adolescents spend on social networking sites per day, how each individual feels emotionally after being on social media, which sites they most frequently visit, and which, if any, groups they follow or subscribe to. This could assist researchers and social workers in better understanding how social networking sites are being utilized by adolescents and the ways in which the sites affect the developing individuals.

Social workers can themselves harness the power of social media in order to better connect with colleagues across the globe to share ideas or interventions, express concerns, and build community. Social

networking sites are constantly changing and updating, making it difficult for anyone to understand each site and its function. Social workers can create and utilize online networks to inform and educate one another about these changes in digital communities, ensuring timely access to information that best supports adolescent clients. In addition to creating an online forum or an online form of communication among social workers, they can engage in various social media platforms themselves to gain a deeper understanding of the platforms' purposes.

CONCLUSION

There is to date limited research and understanding about social media and its immediate and long-term effects on adolescent development. However, it is clear that social media, especially social networking sites, are impacting and dictating the lives of adolescents in many ways. Various studies discuss social media and its effects on depression symptoms, eating disorders, harassment, and bullying. Additionally, our personal experience working with adolescents has further demonstrated social networking sites are creating a culture in which ideal images of what one should look like are constantly available, affecting the self-worth and mood of the youth today. Furthermore, the instances working with adolescents also emphasize the dangers of social networking sites and online communities as a resource for individuals to engage in harmful behaviors. It is necessary for professionals to have an understanding of the cultural implications of these platforms in order to understand the youth who utilize them. Social workers must educate themselves about these platforms in order to best support and build rapport with adolescent clients.

To begin understanding the ever-evolving forms of social media, social workers can develop a screening tool that increases the understanding of the impact social media has on adolescents, establish an online community among social workers, and create continued education courses centered on the varying social media

platforms. As technology continues to advance and change the world we live in, social media will continue to determine communication, networks, and relationships within adolescent culture. Social media and social networking sites will not disappear, they will only become more prevalent throughout our lives and the lives of developing youth. Therefore, we must not only identify its dangers, but encourage positive and effective use of social media to promote and assist healthy development.

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