



Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review



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ABSTRACT

Background: Much debate and polarisation exist regarding the impact of online social technologies on the mental wellbeing of young people.

Objective: To systematically review and synthesise current empirical research on this topic, identifying both the beneficial and harmful effects of online communication and social media technology amongst young people.

Methods: A systematic narrative review of research published between January 2003 and April 2013, retrieved using rigorous searching on eight bibliographic databases. Results were then subject to review using a quality appraisal tool and a narrative synthesis methodology. A theoretical framework was developed for the synthesis using concepts from mental health and communication studies literature.

Results: Systematic searching retrieved 43 original research papers investigating or exploring the effects of online technologies on adolescent mental well-being or related concept(s). The benefits of using online technologies were reported as increased self-esteem, perceived social support, increased social capital, safe identity experimentation and increased opportunity for self-disclosure. Harmful effects were reported as increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression and cyber-bullying. The majority of studies reported either mixed or no effect(s) of online social technologies on adolescent wellbeing.

Conclusions: This systematic narrative review has revealed contradictory evidence while revealing an absence of robust causal research regarding the impact of social media on mental wellbeing of young people. Online technologies are increasingly being used for health and social care purposes, but further research is required to give confidence that these are appropriately designed to promote the mental health care and support of young people.

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1. Introduction

The ‘science of networks’ (Watts, 2007) has evolved significantly over the course of the last decade spurred by the popularity of online communication through social media technology. One group to fully embrace this new medium are young people, with some international data suggesting that 83% of those aged 18–29 years use social networking sites (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Data from the ‘EU Kids Online’ survey estimates that an average 15–16 year old spends 118 min per day online (O’Neill, Livingstone, & McLaughlin, 2011). In recognition of the extent of this exposure one must consider the impact of online social media technology is having on young people’s psycho-social well-

being. Following an advanced systematic database search method, this paper presents a ‘narrative review’ of research relating to the effects of social media technology (SMT) on adolescent wellbeing to provide a much needed synthesis of current knowledge and a clear direction for future research.

2. Context

2.1. Social media technology

Increasingly, academic research has focused on the potential benefits and pitfalls of current technologies, not the least in regard to SMT. Of particular interest are social networking sites (SNS) which are defined as “websites which make it possible to form online communities and share user created content” (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010).

This technology allows for immediate, low cost, private and hidden communication, making it difficult to monitor. Furthermore, it provides the opportunity for both synchronous (immediate) and asynchronous (delayed) communication (Barak, 2007; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen,

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2011). Positive mental health benefits using SNS such as increases in social capital via wider social networks have been reported (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), although some studies have highlighted online risks such as cyber-bullying, social isolation and exploitation (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kraut et al., 1998; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Milani, Osualdella, & Di Blasio, 2009). Other researchers have avoided this dichotomy between the positives and negatives and have perceived the reality to lie “somewhere between these two extremes” (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006).

SNS however, are only one form of SMT (Moorhead et al., 2013). This distinction is important as individual SMTs have unique features and may influence wellbeing differently. This is illustrated when one examines the literature on personality types and online communication whereby both introverts and extraverts may benefit from using SMTs – yet they made choose to use different platforms e.g. introverts may prefer chat rooms (increased anonymity) whereas extraverts may prefer Facebook (Orchard & Fullwood, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

2.2. Adolescence

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that there are over 1.8 billion young people aged 10–24 in the world today (UN-DESA, 2010), many of whom are facing significant new pressures and challenges due to the increasing demands of modern society (Stengård & Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, 2010). In addition, it has been suggested that children today require more support, training and coping skills to prepare them for a “more complex and technologically advanced society” (Mathur & Freeman, 2002: 695–696). In the midst of such technological advances one must consider the developmental influences these new technologies are having on young people.

The creation and maintenance of friendship networks is considered an important and developmentally significant process during adolescence (Hartup, 1996; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). During this life stage the peer group often assumes key importance and displaces parental relationships as the principal source of social support for the young person (Boyd & Bee, 2012; Coleman, 1974). Current popular SNS were launched post 2003 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) with the result that today's generation of adolescents are the first cohort to have ‘grown up’ with online social networking. To date, academic attention in this area appears skewed towards young adult populations, namely older college students (Ellison et al., 2007; Manago et al., 2012). The apparent dearth of research relating to the adolescent age group provided the impetus for the current study and was used to focus on sample populations with a mean age below 20.

2.3. Wellbeing

The term wellbeing (WB) may be viewed as an abstract and wholly individualised concept whose meaning appears in constant flux. Consequently, it is difficult to operationalize and measure. Research in this field has divided wellbeing into two areas: (1) hedonic and (2) eudaimonic. Hedonic theorists tend to view wellbeing in a pleasure vs. displeasure paradigm (Ryan & Deci, 2001), with research investigating hedonic wellbeing employing subjective well-being (SWB) as an assessment measure, consisting of the components of life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect. Eudaimonic psychologists distinguish themselves from the hedonic notion of ‘happiness’ and measure WB by how one lives and fulfils one's life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2000).

Regardless of WB measure, there appears a strong link between social support and WB. Past studies by both Argyle (1987) and DeNeve (1999) have shown association between wellbeing and high ‘relatedness’ provided by social networks (Argyle, 1987; DeNeve, 1999). A research review by Nezlek (2000) also concluded that in general those who have greater intimacy and higher quality relationships also have higher

wellbeing. The importance of social support networks is further emphasised when one considers the psychological costs associated with the suppression of emotions caused by limited social support (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; King & Pennebaker, 1998). Cohen and Ashby Wills (1985) also found evidence of a buffering hypothesis whereby social support mitigates against the full harm of negative life events.

It can be viewed as imperative that the wellbeing consequences of migration towards online social networking (OSN) by the developmentally vulnerable adolescent population are fully investigated and understood. As there is an over-representation of adult sample populations within current research (e.g. undergraduates), the umbrella label of WB, under which a variety of related concept fall, allowed for the inclusion of a sufficient number of studies to warrant a narrative review.

3. Materials and methods

This study reviews the evidence regarding the effects of SMT on adolescent wellbeing. The methodological principles upon which this study was developed are influenced by systematic reviewing techniques (McFadden, Taylor, Campbell, & McQuilkin, 2012; Taylor, Wylie, Dempster, & Donnelly, 2007) and include seeking transparent and rigorous approaches to identification, quality appraisal and synthesis of studies. At its simplest, systematic reviews are “designed to provide a reliable picture of ‘current best evidence’ relevant to a particular question” (MacDonald, 2003). While great emphasis is placed on the rigour of selection and appraisal methods within such reviews, of equal importance is the methodical quality of data synthesis (Killick & Taylor, 2009). Campbell et al. (2003: 5) describe ‘synthesis’ as “a process of extracting data from individual research studies and interpreting and representing them in a collective form”.

In most cases the final product of such reviews is the presentation of a statistical (quantitative) or narrative (qualitative) summary of findings (Rodgers et al., 2009). Due to the nature of the research question and research designs involved within this review a statistical meta-analysis of data was not possible so a narrative review approach to synthesise was used. Narrative reviews may be used to explore studies that investigate: the effects of interventions; the factors shaping the implementation of interventions; the needs and/or preferences of particular population groups; and the causes of particular social and/or health problem (Popay et al., 2006). The methodology of narrative synthesis was informed by the work of Popay et al. (2006: 11) who developed an approach involving four specific elements or steps: (1) developing a theory of how the intervention works, why and for whom; (2) developing a preliminary synthesis of findings of included studies; (3) exploring relationships in the data; and (4) assessing the robustness of the synthesis. The method was further validated in work by Rodgers et al. (2009) citing how rigorous narrative synthesis approaches added “meaning to quantitative findings”. This framework was adopted to reduce bias and to enhance the transparency of the review.

3.1. Search strategy

This study utilised systematic searching techniques to retrieve relevant research studies pertaining to the search topic (McFadden et al., 2012). This was defined as the ‘influence of social networking sites on the mental wellbeing of adolescents’. Searches were performed on the following eight bibliographic databases: (1) Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA); (2) Communication Abstracts; (3) Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL); (4) Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) (5) Medline (Ovid); (6) PsycINFO; (7) Scopus and (8) Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) (see Fig. 1).

All searches took place within a one week period (11th–18th April, 2013), each involving up to 41 key words across three concept groups and a pre-defined ‘published within’ range of 1st January 2003–11th April 2013. The concept groups used to create the search structure were: (1) online social networking; (2) mental-wellbeing

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