

Reasons for Adolescents' Social Media Use: Relations With Mental Health and Self-Perception

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has documented a relation between social media use and adolescent well-being. However, little is known about whether this connection is based on the reasons why adolescents use social media. Adolescent uses of social media, along with how such factors correlate with parent-reported mental health concerns and adolescent-reported self-perception, were assessed in 202 parent-adolescent dyads (with adolescents ranging in age from 14-17). Higher reported social media engagement (i.e., higher number of accounts, greater frequency of checking) were associated with parent-reported mental health concerns, as well as adolescent-reported loneliness, fear of missing out (FoMO), narcissism, and lower self-esteem. However, these relations were most applicable to using social media to cope with stress or to express emotions. These findings are further discussed in terms of ways in which social media use may be adaptive or maladaptive for youth.

KEYWORDS

adolescent, coping, FOMO, loneliness, mental health, self-perception, social capital, social media

REASONS FOR ADOLESCENTS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: RELATIONS TO PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING AND SELF-PERCEPTION

Social media may serve several functions for adolescents, among them are communicating/connecting with others, sharing aspects of one's life, identity expression, accessing information (e.g., regarding news events, celebrities/areas of interest, friends' lives), and to pass time (cf., Young et al., 2017). Early research suggested that the most common reason that adolescents use social media is to connect with peers (Barker, 2009), and these virtual platforms provide a convenient means to do so. However, as this type of peer communication became more commonplace, increased pressure for adolescents to maintain availability for peers on social media became apparent (Fox & Moreland, 2015). Furthermore, although social media may serve some positive functions (e.g., connection with others), interference with daily activities or using social media to help cope with stress, to regulate

DOI: 10.4018/IJSMOC.312180

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emotions, and/or to seek reassurance from others may be problematic in terms of greater distress or possible addiction (Marino et al., 2018). The primary aim of the present study was to expand on this growing area of research by incorporating parent and adolescent reports of adolescents' reasons for social media use and investigating the associations of social media functions with adolescent mental health difficulties and self-perception. As described below, various social media uses may represent ways in which present-day adolescents obtain social capital and may have relevance for well-being.

Rather than focusing on explicitly positive or negative engagement, such as forming meaningful connections or cyberbullying, respectively, the current study emphasized uses that were directly related to the functionality of social media applications. The reasons for social media use investigated were a) to post photo/video content; b) to express emotion; c) to connect with others; d) to relieve stress; and e) to keep up with news/celebrities. The rationale for this approach is that it allowed for more direct considerations of the *actions and intentions* of adolescents in their social media use rather than the *perceived consequences* of social media use.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA USES

From a social capital perspective, social media may represent an important way that individuals, particularly present-day adolescents, communicate with others and gather socially relevant information (Neves et al., 2018). Social media and other digital technologies appear to provide a convenient way of gaining social capital (Bajaj et al., 2021; Tillecze & Rimer, 2019), which is an important byproduct of one's interpersonal relationships (Coleman, 1988). Further, in terms of how individuals go about gaining social capital, social media applications can serve manifest (i.e., intended) and latent (i.e., unintended) social functions (see Merton, 1968 for an original description of these functions in broader social contexts). Direct actions such as posting or actively reading social media content may serve manifest functions, whereas personal intention or motivations for this engagement may align with the theoretical notion of latent functions.

Therefore, the present study was designed to assess reasons for social media use that appear to capture both manifest (e.g., posting photos/videos, getting news/information, connecting with others) and latent (e.g., expressing emotions, stress relief) functions. From a social capital perspective, actions that are aligned with social media functionality may not clearly point to an adolescent having the types of behavioral, emotional, or self-perception issues investigated in the present study. More specifically, manifest functions may describe common uses of social media for youth that do not signal maladjustment. Latent functions (e.g., stress relief, expression of emotions), on the other hand, may be related to adjustment difficulties in that adolescents who are more likely to use social media for such purposes may also experience more difficulties such as internalizing problems, loneliness, and low self-esteem. Although it is possible that seeking out social media platforms for such reasons is atypical and perhaps a maladaptive coping strategy, this issue has not been directly addressed in previous research.

Alternatively, one of the first theoretical frameworks for understanding social media use is known as Uses and Gratifications Theory (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). From this perspective, social media is used to fulfill psychosocial needs. However, because these needs may differ based on a user's adjustment, the reasons for using social media may concomitantly follow suit. In other words, individuals experiencing internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, may be relatively likely to use social media to relieve stress or as an emotional outlet. Indeed, emotion regulation as a motive for social media use is associated with internalizing problems in adolescents (Marino et al., 2018).

Further, if social media are useful in increasing social capital through fostering a sense of connectedness, this function may be adaptive; however, if an adolescent is lacking social connections (e.g., experiencing loneliness) and uses social media to fulfill such needs, such use may signal maladjustment. The psychosocial correlates of this more manifest function were also investigated in

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