Social Media's Impact on Teenagers

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Abstract. McLuhan's "media is the message" has never been more relevant than in the age of the ubiquitous digital media. The social influences by the peer group and access to information of all kinds leaves the door open to influences that may or may not necessarily be positive. The access to communicate to large groups of people relatively easily and quickly has the impact of impacting social dynamics, by reducing social inhibitions, and redefining normative actions. More importantly there are potential short-term and long-term implications for these actions. This paper explores some of these influences and consequences as well as actions that adults can potentially take to sensitize and curb potentially damaging behaviors among teenagers.

Keywords: Social networking, digital media, Internet, mobile phones, chats, facebook, twitter, SMS, instant messenger, Tumblr, email.

1 Introduction

The wide proliferation of digital media with its versatile functionality that enables wide outreach to people is fundamentally changing the way teenagers communicate. With the proliferation of information, teenagers have access to a wealth of information that can enrich their academic lives and provide tools that promote collaboration and group work.

However, the negative unintended consequences of social media can be extremely severe. Fundamental social norms are being redefined. The socio-psychological impact of these actions can be extreme, leading to irreversible consequences in some cases. While change is inevitable, when it is rapid and disruptive, it raises questions about protecting the youth from itself.

Social media is redefining social norms of communication among teenagers and potentially increasing the impact of peer groups as a source of influence compared to that of authority figures such as parents, teachers, and other elders. This paper examines various factors that enhance or control the effect of social media, both positive and negative.

2 Methodology

Insights were derived from in-depth interviews of 10 teenagers, four women and six men between the ages of 13-19 years. Most of these interviews were conducted in the

homes of the participants. They were encouraged to demonstrate the use of social media through various devices. All the participants had access to a mobile phone and a laptop.

The criteria for the selection of these participants was that they should be teenagers with access to a Smart Phone and have the consent of their parent/guardian to participate in the study. The insights from the participants were extremely personal in nature in the case of some of the participants. These may potentially be attributed to a selection bias. Nevertheless, the insights are relevant for the situational contingencies.

3   Digital Experience

According to Pew Internet & American Life Project, fully 95% of all teens ages 12-17 are now online and 80% of those online teens are users of social media sites. 70% of these go to the Internet daily and about 46% visited multiple times a day in 2011 which was doubled since November 2004. About 80% of the teenagers go to social networking site such as Facebook and Twitter. Girls tend to use the Internet significantly more than boys and teens from families with less than $50,000 annual income tend to use the social media sites about 11% more than teens from families with more than $50,000 annual income (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcel, Zickuhr, Rainie, 2011).

In this qualitative study, in the case of half of the participants, their household also had a desktop computer that they had access to but they used it rarely. The sample may be biased because they were from the San Francisco Bay area which is the hub of the Silicon Valley with significant adopters of technology with high use.

Participants demonstrated that they had a seamless digital experience across devices. Their digital lives took a significant proportion of their time.

4   Parental/Adult Control

The influence of the peer groups was significant even outside the school and within the home environment. Several teens checked their social networking sites including Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, SMS, and email multiple times. There appears to be an addictive effect of the digital experience for some of the teens. For instance, one of the parents of a teenager who took part in the study imposed strict controls on access to the Internet through various devices including a Smart Phone. When the teenager was given access to the Smart Phone during the duration of the study when the researchers visited his home, he divided his attention between responding to the questions of the researchers and playing an interactive game with his friend. His explanation was that he needed to maximize all the time he could have with the device to play and win the game with his friend. He admitted that he often cheated and took the phone surreptitiously from his parent's hiding place to connect with his friends digitally despite having dedicated face time with his friends provided by his parents.

Another teenager reported that his parents had blocked access to the Internet on his phone over the weekdays when he was home and they required all the children to do their work in a common area to ensure transparency. He reported that he had hacked the password and often texted his friends without the knowledge of his parents. The desire to remain connected constantly appears to be a combination of a need for satisfaction experienced from social connectedness to the peer group as well as peer pressure of being able to communicate with his friends at all times. Often this connectedness did not translate into a higher quantity of participation. However, it appears to be important to some of the teens to be in the know as the communication unfolded. Most of the communication appears not to have much depth in thought. In some ways, this need for constant connectedness with one's peer group appears to come at the cost of the strength of relationship within one's family.

One of the teens explained that if he did not participate in real time to the *events* as he termed his friends' communication, then he would feel that he missed out from the experience. A few of the teens reported being adept at subterfuge where they appeared to be engaged in the academic work but were in fact multi-tasking by interacting with multiple groups.

Research has demonstrated that when individuals multitask, the quality of their work is deeply impacted negatively (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). The disruptive influence of these facilitated social media appears to impact the amount of learning and the depth of understanding of academic material when their concentration is repeatedly interrupted by messages by the social group they belong to either through primary membership or secondary membership.

4.1   Parental Boundaries

The family structure and the strength of family ties also appeared to have a strong impact on the teenagers' academic performance. Teens from homes with strong parental involvement and controls tended to be high achievers compared to teens from families where parents were either extremely liberal in their parenting styles and allowed the teens the freedom to engage with digital media, did not have the time to monitor them, or had a dysfunctional relationship with each other.

Although this is a qualitative research, teens with lax parental controls tended to have relatively lower grades. Both the parents and teens from such household tended to have lower aspirations for advanced academic career compared to families where parents tended to provide more restrictions (whether completely successfully or not) on the time their children spent on the Internet in social media sites. Interestingly, this also seemed to correlate with the socio-economic status of the parents. When parents did not have a college education, they tended to be more relaxed about their children's media usage.

Weak Parental Boundaries
In one of the families, the mother found the word monitoring her children's time as being offensive. She said that her children were good and did not require being

monitored. She said that she aspired to be a friend to her children and wanted a trusting relationship and not one where she dictated how much time and when her children used the Internet or spent time on social media.

In the case of another teenager, one of the parents had abandoned the mother and the mother aspired to create a close bond between herself and her children. As a consequence, she not only provided them with all the digital devices they asked for, but did not set any firm responsibilities or schedules. She claimed that her children were her best friends and therefore her responsibility was to keep them safe, well-fed, and driven to school on time. Other than that, they were responsible individuals who should portion their time as they saw fit.

When parents had a dysfunctional relationship with each other, the influence of the peer group tended to be significantly higher. In the case of one of the teenage participants, she sided with one parent and blamed the other parent for the difficult relationship between her parents. As a consequence, she deliberately disregarded the controls placed on the amount of Internet time and openly flouted the rules of the parent she blamed. The other parent supported the disrespectful behavior of his child in the game of one-upmanship. This often resulted in significant and loud arguments between the parents. As a consequence, the teen relied more on the support and advice of his peer group (which consisted of other members of similar age group that lacked the maturity to provide sound advice). This over reliance on the peer group also became a substitute for peaceful productive interactions she lacked in her home environment.

In the case of one of the families, the young adult son tended to stay out at all hours of the night and came home whenever he felt like it to sleep. His education at a community college was interrupted because of his party schedule that he said was facilitated by the social media. His peer group texted each other and planned party events on social media sites. However, he demonstrated more concern for his teenage siblings than he did for himself. He did not want his brother and sister to follow his footsteps and tried to impose rules on them. The father on the other hand did not connect his young adult son's behaviors with his own lack of parental rules and appeared frustrated that despite his giving his son all the freedom to do the right thing, he was choosing the wrong path. He also did not set any rules for his younger children and instead expressed hope that they would demonstrate more sense compared to his elder son.

With most of these interactions with other teens happening in group chats or comments on social media sites such as Facebook, private situations often become public spectacles with a permanent record in the ether world. For instance, one of the participants reported that someone on his Facebook friends group used cuss words to describe her parents because they insisted on her completing her household chores. Although he felt it was an inappropriate forum, he was also understanding about her frustration. In another instance, students employed the social media as an acceptable venue to criticize the teaching skills of their teachers.

Strong Parental Boundaries

In the case of one of the families, although both the parents worked outside home, one of the parents was home by 6 in the evening. In the case of two other families, the mother was a stay at home parent. In one of the families, the mother worked part-time and was also studying towards a professional degree.

In the case of all these families, the dominant expectation was that the academic performance of the children should be strong. There was a spoken expectation of attending a four-year college and potentially obtaining a higher degree. The children were required to work in the common area to complete their homework and there was an expectation of transparency.

Although the children tended to be creative to cheat and visited social networking sites through their tablets or phones or in some cases openly went to these sites professedly for academic collaboration, they had to be surreptitious about the amount of time and degree of non-academic related interactions. They also tended to feel that they were missing out while their friends had relatively more freedom to interact with each other without as much parental interference. However, the academic grades of these children tended to be significantly higher and they also tended to participate and achieve distinction in an extra-curricular activity.

While the link between parental supervision and academic performance is well documented and not surprising, it is interesting to note that the teenagers from families with high supervision and expectations tended to feel left out (there was one exception).

Not all parents were equally strict. One of the parents in the strong parental control group allowed her daughter to use Chat for academic purposes but understood that the daughter did not use it strictly for that purpose. She however required her daughter to give her access to her account but did not realize that her daughter had created an alternative account for her exclusive use. All *these behaviors underscore the power of the social ties of the peer group that appear to be taking precedence or are at least more influential in the age of the digital media* than in earlier generations.
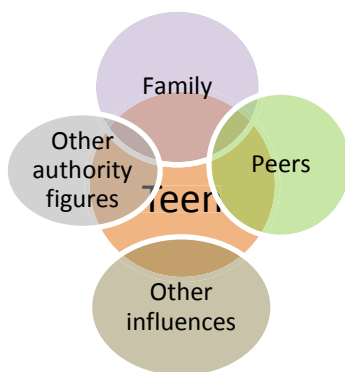
Fig. 1. Influence of Peers increasing pre Social Media (representation not statistical)
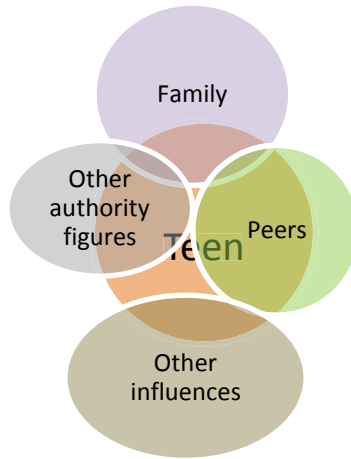
Fig. 2. Influence of Peers Post Social Media (representation not statistical)

5   Social Media and Health Implications

5.1   Cyber Bullying

The social media is a powerful tool to target and bully specific individuals. The social networking group of these individuals ranged from about 600 to 1350 connections. None of the participants had employed any controls over who could view their page or content. Therefore, any post could be viewed by all their contacts and therefore a powerful tool for bullies to intimidate victims.

Bullies have the ability to harness the power of the social group through social media tools to tag and besmirch the reputations of individuals. In extreme cases, such bullying has driven impressionable individuals to commit suicide as well (Kim, 2008). The power to inflict significant pain is magnified with social media. While our study did not find such extreme outcomes, there were two instances where individuals reported discussing a girl in a derogatory language because she was involved in a relationship and the couple had broken up with each other.

In the case of another instance, one of the classmates apparently had body odor. Instead of speaking to him directly, his classmates turned this into a discussion on the social media site thereby turning an embarrassing incident into a potentially mortifying one. The manifold impact of these discussions is potentially extremely painful psychologically for the targeted individuals (Sebastian et al., 2010). At the time when teenagers are crystallizing a sense of self, social isolation through ostracism can deeply impact how they view themselves at least in relation to others.

5.2   Sleep Deprivation

Multiple participants reported being active well into the night beyond their normal sleeping hours either actively participating or lurking in social media sites through mobile phones and computers (Rasmussen, 2012). Some of the participants were

inseparable from a digital device at almost all times. Access to text message was almost constant for at least half of the participants. The parent of one of the participants could hear the pinging sound of messages received well into the night. Sometimes the teenage participants woke up in the middle of the night to check the text messages received through SMS. Prevalence of sleep interruption reported tended to be much more among older teenagers than among younger teenagers. Lack of sufficient sleep has been correlated with depression among teenagers.

5.3   Gaming

The amount of time spent on the Internet playing games online either through their mobile devices or the computer was significant. This had the impact of negatively affecting the amount of time they spent on academics resulting in lower quality of classwork and homework or delay in submissions of schoolwork.

5.4   Sexting

The prevalence of camera feature on computers as well as mobile phones and easy access to adult sites appears to correlate with the increase in sexting. In the MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey (2011), defined sexting as the act of "using the Internet, cell phones, or other electronic devices to send or forward nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit photos or videos of someone you know."

Two of the participants reported that their friends engaged extensively in sexting. This appears to be in line with the third person effect - it is generally easier to attribute non-normative behaviors to others rather than to oneself. The research on sexting is difficult as it is a challenging topic to discuss and generally requires long-term interaction with participants.

The potential for abusing the capability of sexted materials is immense where the recipients sometimes mass mail these materials to others either in a bid to increase their own social capital or to punish the sender when she or he breaks up with the recipient. This victimization of the senders of sexting material renders them vulnerable and violated. This has even led to the sender of sexting to commit suicide in some instances as reported by other sources (Celizic, 2009) although none of the participants in this study reported any drastic outcomes.

6   Social Media as Collaborative Tools

The power of the social media is not only dysfunctional disruptive, but it is also sometimes harnessed positively for significant and meaningful achievement. Some of the teenagers employed it to plan events and activities that had a positive impact both on an individual level as well as at a group and community level.

When there was a hate group that planned to come to the school and demonstrate loudly with their message, some of the teenagers in the in the community communicated a plan to blunt the impact. They planned to hold a solidarity bonding singing songs promoting peace as a way to disrupt the impact of the hate group.

This rapid response could not have been achieved without the ability to connect to large groups of people rapidly through social connectivity facilitated through the social media.

In another instance, one of the teenagers was an office holder of the Speech and Debate club in his high school and used the Chat and Facebook group to ensure that there was a meaningful exchange of ideas. He employed the social media tools to ensure those who could not meet physically to practice nevertheless shared the experience digitally.

Two of the articipants employed the social media to place a video of their choreography for the benefit of their group for a group dance performance.

Academic achievement is facilitated and enhanced when goal directed high achieving teenagers collaborate through social media. A meta analyses of 12 studies that examined various styles of learning concluded that cooperative learning that the social media enables, improves the learning of gifted and high achieving children (Neber, Finsterwald, & Urban, 2010). Almost all the teenagers employed the social media at one time or another to interact with their peer group to help or receive academic assistance and for positive learning experiences.

7   Conclusions and Future Directions

Clearly, social media have helped redefine social dynamics. While social media have tremendous power in affecting positive changes, they also appear to have a significant negative impact. These changes are more severe as they impact the fundamental normative behaviors in the impressionable minds of teenagers and young adults.

The social media sites have taken the flavor of a town crier and reduced the boundaries of inhibition. With their peer groups not judging inappropriate behaviors and comments harshly, the social rudeness tends to become more acceptable. More troubling is the addictive need for remaining connected with peer groups at all times which appears to also lessen the impact of parental and other authority figures' impact. In addition, it also has the tendency to affect both the physical and mental health of teenagers who use social media excessively.

Parents and pedagogues may have to explore venues such as employing security features to limit the amount of time teens interact on social media as well as monitor the quality and content of interaction when it transgresses social norms and legal rules.

When technology outpaces and dictates social change, the adults may have to explore ways of saving teenagers from themselves.

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