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ARGUMENT REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA IS AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS INTERACTION

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Summary

- Valuable communities that provide social support and help users build their identities operate and emerge on social media.
- While the positive and negative impacts that time spent on social media has on wellbeing largely cancel each other out, the social benefits of social media persist even with high social media use.

In which area is there still a lack of knowledge?

- Social media is not the same for everyone, and the relation between the various ways of using social media and wellbeing may vary between individuals. However, this topic has not yet been sufficiently studied.

Recommendation

- There is a need for more versatile research that pays attention to the differences in both social media and the people using it.

THE FOCUS of discussions and psychological research on social media has largely been on disadvantages, particularly mental health effects, depression and anxiety. Even though spending high amounts of time on social media appears to be linked with mental anguish or slightly lower psychological wellbeing, summaries compiled based on dozens of reviews also indicate that positive effects also emerge in relation to social media use. These include higher social wellbeing and wider social capital, i.e. confidential social networks¹. On av-

erage, the positive and negative impacts that time spent on social media has on wellbeing largely cancel each other out, but the social benefits persist even with high social media use.

Finns use social media in various ways and for a variety of purposes depending on their gender, age and educational background². At the individual level, social benefits and harms are divided unevenly according to individual differences, and the ways and purposes of media use. Active content creation and

1 Appel, Marker & Gnambs, 2019; Orben, 2020

2 Ertiö et al., 2020; Koironen et al., 2019

interaction, and passive content consumption, can be distinguished as separate entities in social media use. It appears that a negative effect on wellbeing occurs in the context of passive use, while more positive phenomena are reported in relation to active use³. An extensive study conducted in Finland revealed that media forms a social arena for young people, at the core of which lie recreation, enjoyment and social interactions⁴. In fact, instead of looking at the time spent on social media, we should examine social media as a social phenomenon. For instance, the same basic factors that constitute friendships are present on social media as in face-to-face interactions⁵. Young people have active agency on social media instead of being merely a passive object of media influence. In fact, we should examine the impacts of media as consequences of active agency and interacting, as the benefits and harms of social media reflect the interactive situations in which people engage in on social media.

Social media is transforming social interaction. According to an extensive scientific review⁶, this transformation includes the following:

1. The number of encounters has increased and the threshold for interacting has lowered.
2. Social pressures and expectations (e.g. being constantly available and getting comments or likes) have become more pronounced.
3. Interactive situations have changed: there has been an increase in different forms of interaction, such as commenting and liking posts, while there are fewer non-verbal messages related to body language and tone of voice.
4. Forming friendships and connecting with others has also become possible between people who would not otherwise meet and who may struggle with face-to-face social situations.
5. New forms of peer behaviour have emerged, including various viral video challenges, and quan-

titative measurement and valuing of interactions (e.g. a Snapchat *streak*, where the goal is for two users to send a Snap to each other every day without interruptions). Some young people go as far as to even modify their own behaviour in face-to-face situations to maintain a certain online identity, which may negatively or positively affect their interactions.

COMMUNITIES PROVIDE SUPPORT

The experience created by social media is influenced by the ways in which people use social media, which can be divided as follows⁷:

1. consuming content alone and passively,
2. producing content actively and socially without a specific goal or target; and
3. active interaction with a clear purpose, such as engaging in a certain community.

This division can be used to examine the possible impacts of the content shared on social media and interactions with peers on shaping the users' identity and self-image as well as their wellbeing. It can be presumed that the effect of passive media consumption of a person's self-image or wellbeing differs from the impacts of active social media use related to maintaining friendships or developing personal interests⁸.

The potential impacts of passive or aimless social media use on the users' self-image are indirect and weak. By contrast, active communities built around a common interest appear to be particularly characteristic to social media. They provide nearly unlimited opportunities for learning skills, for instance⁹. On the other hand, these communities have considerable potential for also influencing their users in other ways—for instance, homogenous communities related to appearances, weight and eating may have a major positive or negative impact on the users' body image¹⁰. Young people with more active than average social media use are slightly more

3 Verduyn et al., 2017

4 Kaarakainen & Saikkonen, 2019

5 Yau & Reich, 2018

6 Nesi et al. 2018a, 2018b

7 Rodgers et al., 2016a; 2016b

8 Orben, 2020

9 Ito et al., 2020

10 Rodgers et al. 2016

likely to participate in such communities than the average user¹¹. These communities can be considered to form a so-called third space¹², where members meet their friends and spend their leisure time in a way that involves social interactions that are just as genuine and relaxing as face-to-face encounters¹³. Social media communities also emerge around more serious topics. In the worst case, these can turn into an echo chamber or an identity bubble, which accentuate certain opinions of views shared by the members. Conceptions related to self-harm or a pathological self-image may also become normalised¹⁴. Nevertheless, even in these communities, the impacts are not solely negative. Young people struggling with various problems also get friends, support and help from social media communities¹⁵.

Social media appears to be more clearly related to the users' body image compared to its effects on wellbeing¹⁶. Feeling a pressure to look a certain way because of social media is particularly common among young women and especially the users of platforms whose focus is on visuality, such as Instagram. The more followers a user has, the higher the experienced pressure.¹⁷

Identity-building and self-expression are an essential part of social media use. Interactions between peers on social media play a key role in the way young people perceive their identity and future prospects¹⁸. Meanwhile, some may feel pressure related to how they present themselves on social media. According to one prevalent norm, people should present themselves as authentically as possible, as their genuine selves, on social media¹⁹. At the same time, presenting oneself more authentically on Facebook appears to be related to a better self-esteem²⁰.

Social media has made sexting, or sharing sexually explicit content, a part of young people's sexual behaviour. This is not merely a case of innocent young people unwillingly encountering sexual content produced by adults. Sexual content and messaging are also part of the active interactions with peers of Finnish youths²¹. It is more common among more sexually active young people and a normal part of the sexual behaviour between young people and their growth and development²². However, in this context, it is essential to make a distinction between consensual sexting and non-consensual provocation, sexual harassment or internet-facilitated sexual offences²³ (see also the evidence summary *Perils of the Internet*, p. 60).

In conclusion, social media has facilitated new forms of interaction, and research reviews indicate that above-average social media use is strongly related to wider than average social capital²⁴. Long research series have shown that interactions on social media and the internet may be just as socially regulated as their face-to-face counterparts²⁵. Social identity, i.e. the group identity emerging among users, is an essential explanatory factor. This may, then, also emerge online, enabling a positive group experience and interactions.

In summary, previous research indicates that social media is an environment supporting social interaction and wellbeing in multiple ways. Valuable communities that, among other things, provide social support and help users build their identities emerge and operate on social media. This is an important perspective supported by clear research evidence. Nevertheless, we cannot declare the disadvantages of social media as debunked, as the dark side of human interaction is also present on social

11 Kaakinen et al., 2020

12 1st space: the same physical space, 2nd space: a different physical space, 3rd space: for example, an online community where the place and time may differ (see e.g. Kaarakainen & Saikkonen, 2019)

13 Kaarakainen & Saikkonen, 2019

14 Dyson et al., 2016; Rodgers et al., 2016

15 Dyson et al., 2016; Nesi et al., 2018a

16 Appel, Marker & Gnams, 2019

17 Åberg et al., 2020

18 Mannerström et al., 2018

19 Uski et al., 2016

20 Orben, 2020

21 Spišák & Paasonen, 2017

22 Mori et al., 2019

23 Krieger, 2017

24 Appel, Marker & Gnams, 2019

25 Spears & Postmes 2015

media. This is a complex issue and the data available on the topic are fragmented and inaccurate. Indeed, research should be harnessed in an aim to specify the understand-

ing of what sorts of activities on social media generate positive or negative outcomes, and in which groups do these benefits or disadvantages accumulate. ■

This argument review is based on the strongest research evidence, but is selectively focused on forming an argument. The argument is a synthesis by the authors. The evidence synthesis method has been described in more detail on page 17.

This evidence synthesis is based on a list of international systematic reviews compiled by an information specialist based on a systematic information search and Finnish case studies on the effects of digital media on young people (more detailed description of the information search on p. 20–21). For this synthesis, reviews and studies concerning themes related to social interactions on social media and their relation to human wellbeing or behaviour were systematically selected from the list based on their title and abstract. No sources concerning problematic media use or other media use were selected. A criterion for selecting reviews providing evidence included a low risk of bias. In other words, the reviews had to include assessment of the level of evidence in original studies, and the methodological level of Finnish original studies had to be at least acceptable (for the assessment criteria, see p. 15). Moreover, this synthesis refers to theoretical discussion papers and selectively to the latest high-quality international studies.

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