

Forum: Youth and Health Committee

Issue #YH-02: Social Media and Mental Health: Regulation of social media for under 18

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Introduction

Social media has become a dangerous platform. Although it is incredible to learn about different topics, shop online or even to communicate with friends, which seem rather innocent, it is also an unsafe place. Many acts such as cyberbullying, sexting and scam, as well as the presence of child predators are a threat not only to adults but mainly to children. Children and teenagers are the most vulnerable when using social media since they are oblivious and, predominantly, do not share what is happening to them. This is the reason why the regulation of social media for people under eighteen was brought to the attention of adults.

Every act mentioned before, has a terrible psychological effect on the youth and it gets even worse when they can not communicate the harm to others either because they do not realise the act is harmful or because they are too ashamed of what had happened. Moreover, it is brought to people's attention that children and teens, under the age of 18, cannot live without social media which raises countless issues that frequently affect these people's mental health. Although it is true that social media is an excellent source to communicate and find interesting information, among other things, it has to be acknowledged that it usually has a bad impact on these adolescents and children.

Definition of Key Terms

Social media

Different interactive platforms used for communication and creating content.

Mental health

A state of wellbeing (psychological, emotional, and social).

Cyberbullying

A type of bullying practised through online means.

Youth

Period of time when we are young, meaning between childhood and adulthood.

Issue Overview

Addressing the issue of regulating social media for under eighteen, due to mental health issues, is vital to foster development in society and help those who are suffering from a mental disorder.

Historical Background

Social media has grown throughout the years. Now, these platforms are more accessible since you can connect through phones, laptops, tablets and computers. Social media offers numerous benefits and advantages. A user can do things such as, but not limited to, research, play games, share content and communicate with other users. Adolescents mainly use Tiktok, Instagram and Snapchat, and throughout the years the risk of inadequate acts has increased.

Moreover, because of the advancement in technology and the development of new applications, more people use these platforms and even more people create content. This content may influence the young audience to do certain things. Indeed they can be shared with good intentions and be beneficial to the person. However, in many cases that is not what happens. So called influencers can play a key role in the proliferation of negative ideas that increase the rate of risk in regards to mental health issues. “Cyber victimisation, or being the subject of online bullying, is frequently associated with increased rates of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and other internalising and externalising problems. In addition, social media peer pressure, such as

rejection from peers, online fights, and drama or conflict, may place young people in jeopardy” (Gupta, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the usage of social media grew considerably. Therefore, the rate of risk increased simultaneously. Work and school could not be paused so electronic devices were the key to continue these areas. Everything became online, even medical appointments. This is the reason why everybody boosted their screen time. In addition, social media was the only source of communication for most, that's how teenagers maintained contact with their friends. Nonetheless, new trends arose such as making Tik Toks and the youth started to use social media even more. In platforms such as Tiktok and Instagram, people can comment and some of these are not respectful at all, in fact they are part of cyberbullying and cause deep harm to the creators.

Latest Events

Tiktok's screen time restrictions

Tiktok posted an article stating that they will set screen time restrictions for those under eighteen years old. In attempts to focus on the youth's wellbeing, they will provide those adolescents under the age of eighteen with a limit of sixty minutes per day, and will need to add a passcode to continue watching tiktok. But for those who are under thirteen years of age, parents or legal guardians should enter the password for thirty more minutes. Tiktok's plan is to promote a safer and peaceful environment on tiktok since they believe that “digital experiences should bring joy and play a positive role in how people express themselves, discover ideas, and connect” (Keenan, 2023)

Apple's screen time for applications.

Apple product owners have the advantage of setting screen times for any application on their iPhones, Ipads and even Mac computers. These can be supervised by a parent or legal guardian, if talking about teenagers and children. The user can pick the time limit and will be able to turn it off with the use of a password which can be held by adults. Its aim is to reduce the amount of time people use their devices and discourage the increase of risk factors regarding mental health.

Major Parties Involved

Tiktok

This big platform is one of the biggest social media which involves numerous users who are minors. It is supposed to be a safe platform. However, there is a lot of negativity involved, explicit content and videos expressing sensitive information. In this social media platform a user has the possibility to disable the comment section or restrict certain words. Even though Tiktok seeks to foster safety for minors, their objective is not succeeding.

Instagram

Instagram is a platform where people can find unrealistic content which usually trigger mental health issues in the youth. Again, this is a platform which allows commenting and interacting with other users. Due to this, this social media application is a place where a lot of cyberbullying occurs as well as scam and adolescents and children may face hidden child predators. Instagram is working to tackle this issue by creating settings for teens which can be monitored by parents, but for clear reasons, this does not work for every case.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
February, 2004	Facebook goes live, with the purpose of connecting people through a social media platform. This first intention to connect Harvard students with one another began to trigger student's mental health issues.
Between 2006 and 2016	Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Tiktok were launched; incentivizing teenagers to become part of this new social era.

January, 2020

Due to the global Pandemic, adolescents were more propense to use their social media much more time, boosting their likeability to have mental health issues.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

Consequently to the large-scale proliferation of social media, the United Nations has had to adapt. The United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI) was originally established in 1946, and now boasts a News and Media division which represents the organisation on television, social media, and on the internet.

The coronavirus pandemic shook the world like a storm. The United Nations immediately began to assess the risks of excess exposure to social media and its consequences during widespread lockdowns. In April 2020, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that “Social media companies have a responsibility to protect the vulnerable”, citing the risk of “online violence, abuse and exploitation” against teenagers. He went on to state that a “mechanism” should be created with a “regulatory framework”.

However, up to date, the United Nations has not succeeded in producing legally-binding resolutions or agreements with regards to the difficulties posed by social media. In many cases, it lacks the authority to do so.

Past Action

If there have been previous attempts to solve the issue at hand, please state and evaluate them briefly. If necessary, you can also make use of subheadings. Eg. ICC, UN, International Community, etc.

Possible Solutions

In order to attain any effective solution, member states must come to a comprehensive agreement regarding the risks posed by social media to children. Initially, it is of the essence to define these risks, and standardise their perception.

Once these risks have been defined, member states can attempt to implement universal regulations on social media companies and involved stakeholders. It is important to ensure that any such regulations are of a broad enough scale to be able to be relevant on a global level, and that they are universally applicable. They can range from requiring parental permission to access certain social media websites, to investigations regarding social media algorithms which may potentially induce political or social bias.

It is also of relevance to note the importance of education. If a universal standard of education can be agreed upon, the risks associated with social media use can be largely mitigated. However, this is a long-term goal and significant amounts of lobbying would be necessary to ensure that all member states can agree.

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