Social Media Use and the Pandemic: Increased Social Isolation

Negatively Impacts the Mental Health of Middle School Students

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Abstract

The context for this paper is based on my experience as a teacher of students who are learning to navigate the responsibilities of daily life all while having additional pressure placed on them through the digital world of social media. In recent years, I have observed students utilizing social media platforms with greater frequency and at younger ages. I have also seen a rise in mental health struggles among students during this same time period. Add to this a global pandemic that forced students into social isolation and onto their devices for greater periods of time. In this paper, I argue that the rise in social media use among middle school students during the pandemic has led to the deterioration of their mental health. During the pandemic, students were required to utilize their devices and engage with the digital world as a part of their schooling. After viewing social media posts, however, students tend to compare themselves and their experiences to the ideals seen online, which leads to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. They also judge their experiences based on the number of likes and comments their social media posts receive, creating pressure for them to create content that may include risk taking behaviours in order to increase their viewership. The negative influences of social media are significant within the educational environment because a student's mental health directly impacts their ability to engage in learning opportunities, meaning educators need to address the social emotional needs of the students within the classroom. The implication is that since students became accustomed to using social media as their main form of communication throughout the pandemic, educators must now teach youth to navigate the world of social media in a responsible way so they can maintain a positive state of well-being.

Keywords: adolescents; middle schoolers; social media; mental health; mental well-being; COVID-19 pandemic

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter, I provide the personal context which piqued my interest in the topic of social media use among middle school students during the pandemic and the lasting negative impacts on mental health. Then, I connect the topic with my personal learning journey within the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program. I also show the significance of my topic within the education system. Next, I present my argument and some supporting evidence for the topic. Finally, I provide an overview of what to expect in the upcoming chapters of the paper.

Personal Context

In 2007, while walking down the hall of the elementary school I was teaching at, I heard the ghostly voice of a colleague calling to me, "*Facebook! Facebook!*" This particular colleague had been attempting to get me to join the social media site so that I could become one of his 'friends' on the platform. I had, for some time, avoided joining the platform that so many friends, colleagues, and family members were using because, up until then, I could maintain my relationships in person, through face-to-face interactions. This particular day in the hallway, however, followed a recent announcement I had made regarding moving to a different school the following year. No longer would we be able to connect in person, hence my colleague's new insistence and persistence to get me to join the platform. I ultimately caved to his pressure and thus began my own personal journey with social media.

Since 2007 there have been numerous other social media platforms developed, all of which allow people to stay connected with others across time and space. Something which has become both a blessing and a curse. I absolutely enjoy being able to connect with friends and family who live in other parts of the world, watching them grow and experience new opportunities in their lives that I would not have been witness to without social media. At the

same time, however, I spend valuable time viewing other's experiences, rather than getting out and experiencing them for myself. Making this realization about my own consumption of social media led me to question if others, especially children, were also being negatively impacted by social media, and if so, how?

Developing My Interest in the Topic

I have been a teacher for 16 years, working with students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and from various cultural backgrounds. I have found students in all settings engage in online social media platforms. Over time, this use of social media has continued to increase among students, with children at younger and younger ages utilizing the platforms. In fact, I recently overheard a grade one student asking another student to 'friend' them on Facebook so that they could set up a play date for the weekend.

In the past few years of teaching, I began to see students engage in more conversations around social media use, at ages as young as six years old. Rather than discussing an activity they had participated in or time spent with friends, they were now talking about the videos and pictures they saw online. They were also starting to create their own social media posts and were being highly influenced by the feedback (or lack of feedback) their digital content was receiving. During free play time at school, students would practice dances they had seen online or plan their own TikTok videos that they could create.

Then, in the Spring of 2020, the world was hit by the Coronavirus pandemic, sending all children home and into isolation from their peers. The students went from engaging in face-to-face interactions with their classmates and teachers as their main form of communication, to only being able to interact with others through technology. As an educator, I also began asking my students to engage with others online as a part of their schooling. It was, therefore, no surprise to

me that when we were finally able to return to in-person school, the students returned with an even greater interest in social media content and many new mental health concerns. Seeing the increased negative impacts on student's mental health, I set out to learn more about how I can help educate students around social media safety.

Connecting my Master of Education Learning

One way that I applied my interest in the topic to the M.Ed. program was by taking counselling as the four electives courses. The four counselling courses that I took were Introduction to Counselling Skills, Theories in Counselling, Assessment and Evaluation in Counselling, and Career Counselling and Development. Through these courses, I was able to participate in multiple mock counselling sessions which taught me active listening skills that I can now utilise with my students. I became much more open-minded to other peoples' perspectives and backgrounds, as well as gained knowledge into my own strengths and areas for growth. I also learned about different assessment tools that are available, assessments that show me as a teacher what signs to watch for and that may indicate a student is suffering with their mental health, signalling me to advocate for additional supports. Finally, I learned how to help students identify their different talents, interests, and goals in order to develop a strong self-identity, skills that I feel will also help students develop strategies for how to interact with social media in a way that protects their mental well-being.

Two other courses that allowed me to further explore my chosen topic were the Research Methods and the Diversity: Constructing Social Realities courses. In Research Methods, I did a deep dive into the pre-existing literature on the impacts of social media use, including writing a literature review which I am using as my foundational paper for this paper. For the Diversity: Constructing Social Realities course, I created a blog post based on the documentary, "The

Strength to Resist: Media's Impact on Women and Girls." In this assignment, I looked at the messages media sends to women and girls around body image and the negative impacts these portrayed ideals have on the self-esteem of female viewers. I feel that both of these assignments and courses further strengthened my interest in this topic.

Significance of the Topic

The impacts of social media use during the pandemic are a significant topic because, as students returned to the classroom, their use of and reliance on social media platforms had grown. As more social media sites continue to be developed and be used by students, their mental health continues to be placed in jeopardy. Some mental health struggles that have been associate with social media usage include increased anxiety, depression, body image issues, lowered self-confidence, and suicidal thoughts, all of which influence a students' ability to engage in learning and educational opportunities. The education system has the responsibility to help educate students on how they can maintain their mental well-being while also engaging in the various social media platforms.

Presenting the Argument

In this paper, I argue that the increased use of social media platforms by middle school students during the pandemic has negatively impacts their mental health. I claim this because, as the prevalence of social media use has gone up, and since the return to in-person learning, I have seen a deterioration of students' mental health. There are three points of evidence that support the claim. First, social media usage has significant influence in the lives of students as it has become their main form of communication. Byars et al. (2020) state that teens use social media as their main avenue to express themselves, share their life events, talk about others, interact with love interests, and stay up to date with current events, which aligns with Ofcom's (2021)

findings that 96% of 12–15-year-olds utilized social media sites over the pandemic, with more than half of those children having had a negative experience on social media. Second, students look to social media sites for information about how they should look, behave, and interact with others. According to Tomoniko (2019), when an adolescent views images on social media they will compare the images and people to their own life, which often triggers anxiety, and Savina et al. (2017) illustrates that cyberbullying over social media can cause long-lasting mental health effects, including an increase in stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Third, children's use of social media increased during the pandemic as a way for them to maintain social connections with their peers, meaning they were exposed to more detrimental online content, putting their mental health in further jeopardy of being negatively impacted. In their study, Vaterlaus et al. (2021) found that people who used social media to remain connected with others during the pandemic often had increased feelings of stress and depression.

Paper Overview

The following chapter in my paper is a literature review that presents evidence into the significance of my topic, looking at what social media platforms are being utilized by students and how social media has negatively impacted students' mental health during the pandemic. Chapter Three considers the applications that my topic has on the digital literacy and mental health curriculum currently offered within British Columbia's (B.C.) education system. Lastly, in the fourth chapter, I discuss the implications of the impacts of social media use and the pandemic on the mental health of middle school students, including a final summary of my findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I begin by sharing how and what social media sites students are using, including highlighting some of the benefits that come with utilizing these platforms. Next, I provide details into the various mental health risks associated with social media use, including body image issues; sexualization in media; increased depression, anxiety, and social isolation; and cyberbullying. Then, I share how social media use was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the negative impacts it has had on adolescents' mental health. Finally, I conclude the chapter by summarizing the connection between the literature and my argument.

Social Media Use Among Middle Schoolers

The use and prevalence of social media has been on the rise among youth for years. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic which forced adolescents into their homes with more time to spend on their devices communicating with their peers through text messages, emails, instant messaging, the internet, and various social networks. Byars et al. (2020) define social media as "any web-based form of communication that provides a forum for social engagement and interaction in which users can consume and create content" (p. 318). Next, the literature considers what social media platforms were utilized during the pandemic by adolescents.

Social Media Platforms Utilized

The various social media platforms are continually evolving and changing, offering adolescents more and more ways to stay connected. As I also claim in my argument, Byars et al. (2020) state that teens use social media as their main avenue to express themselves, share their life events, talk about others, interact with love interests, and stay up to date with current events. Vaterlaus et al. (2021) found through their study of social media users' behaviours during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that the convenience of social media, especially during the

stay-at-home orders, made it a key source for people to utilize in order to seek information and stay in touch with loved ones. Helm et al. (2022) also discovered in their examination on how social media relates to people's perceptions of pandemic isolation that "32% of Americans spent more time on social media during the pandemic than they did before," with most visiting social media sites daily (p. 1769). In their qualitative study on media use among children, Ofcom (2021) conducted online surveys with 3,848 parents of children 5-15 years old and with children aged 8-15. Ofcom (2021) found that, during the pandemic, 96% of adolescents aged 12-15 utilized social media functions, up from 87% pre-pandemic, in order to maintain connections and to seek information about the world. Werling et al. (2021), showed that media consumption grew drastically during the pandemic, with smartphone usage of more than 4 hours a day rising from 15% of participants pre-pandemic to 36% during the lockdown. Ofcom's (2021) study also found that among 12-15-year-olds, Instagram (66%) was the social media site most used, followed by Snapchat (58%) and Facebook (54%), while YouTube (86%) was the most popular video streaming site for watching content, followed by TikTok (65%) and Instagram (65%).

Potential Benefits of Social Media Use

Although most literature looks at the risks associated with social media use, there are a number of possible benefits to technology use for adolescents. In their studies into the impacts of technology and social media use, Byars et al. (2020), David-Ferdon and Hertz (2007), Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017), and Savina et al. (2017) all found that with the advances made in technology, especially access to smartphones and the internet, people now have access to information across vast subject areas at the tip of their fingers. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017), Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017), and Savina et al. (2017) also found that this ease of access to information allows adolescents to use social media to anonymously seek out mental health

support through online support groups, such as suicide prevention hotlines, and other agencies.

Savina et al. (2017) also stated that social media can be used by agencies to provide targeted,

specific, and anonymous interventions to adolescents who reach out to them. Educators,

according to Siebert (2019), have the opportunity to include online peer interactions within their

lesson plans, which has been shown to increase student engagement and participation.

Other benefits of social media use are that it allows adolescents to participate in self-

exploration, engage in social connections, and develop their sense of identity through connecting

with like-minded people (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017; Siebert, 2019; Savina et al., 2017;

Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017). In their research looking at social media use both before and during

the pandemic, Maheux et al. (2021) found that "positive engagement with peers on social media

offers benefits, including opportunities to reap social support and engage in self-disclosure" (p.

734). Through social media, youth are now able to engage in more opportunities to connect with

family and friends who may live afar (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007),

which has been shown to increase feelings of happiness, life-satisfaction, and connectedness

(Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017). Social media also has the potential to increase feelings of social

connection and belonging, reducing the impact of social isolation during the pandemic on

feelings of loneliness, through its ability for one to have a direct and instant connection to their

friends (Maheux et al., 2021). Goncalves et al. (2020) conducted a questionnaire in Brazil during

the pandemic to discover that "interpersonal relationships and time spent interacting online are

aspects that seem to prevent psychological symptoms in times of social isolation and favor well-

being" (p. 16). Social media can also be used as an outlet for adolescents who suffer with social

anxiety or poor social skills to successfully interact with their peers when they would otherwise

struggle in face-to-face settings (Savina et al., 2017; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Although a

number of benefits to social media use are highlighted, the literature focuses on the risks and dangers that exist for adolescents who engage in communications online.

Risks Associated with Social Media Use

Social media had the benefit of allowing people to stay connected over the pandemic, however, I argue that there are risks associated with youth using social media sites for information about how they should live their lives. Helm et al. (2022) and Tomoniko (2019) found that browsing social media can be problematic as it often increases one's envy with posts viewed online, which can lead to greater feelings of social loneliness and trigger anxiety. In their study looking at how social media use impacts adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Werling et al. (2021) found that some people have developed problematic online habits including addictive social media use which is when one has "a compulsive need and excessive preoccupation with social media, while other aspects of life such as relationships, school, and mental health related behaviours (sports, eating regularly and balanced, day-night rhythm including adequate sleep duration) are neglected and impaired" (p. 1034). Problematic social media usage can also lead to risky online behaviours, including cyberbullying, and "the inability to control one's usage of the internet, resulting in dysfunctional patterns (e.g., excessive gaming, excessive use of social networks, excessive viewing of video clips etc.) with major negative consequences for interpersonal relationships, academic performance, and emotional well-being" (Werling et al., 2021, p. 1034). Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017), in their research of how social media use impacts adolescents who are already struggling with mental health problems, discovered that depression occurs among youth when they are viewing social media content and see themselves negatively or to have inferior experiences to the posts they view online. A few key risks associated with social media use will be considered next, including body

image issues; sexualization in media; increased depression, anxiety, and social isolation; and cyberbullying.

Body Image Issues

The adolescent years are when young people are trying to establish their identity. According to Gewirtz and Cribb (2009), a person's identity is how they communicate who they think they are and who they want to be. While youth are actively trying to create and establish their identities, which influence their goals and interests in life, they are also being exposed to images in media that are sending them messages about who society thinks they should be (Appiah, 2006). As I claim, youth look to social media during these formative years for information about how they should look, behave, and interact with others. During this sensitive time, Byars et al. (2020), Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017), Opara and Santos (2019), and Tomoniko (2019) state that adolescents, especially females, who view images of beauty ideals portrayed in the media are at risk of developing body image problems, affecting both their self-esteem and eating behaviours.

Self-esteem can be defined as the way people evaluate themselves and the judgements that they ultimately make about themselves from those evaluations (Drummond et al., 2016). Media highly influences and limits the choices that youth believe they have available to them when they are trying to decide who they want to be (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). Drummond et al. (2016) also state that self-esteem is "related to specific personality traits (e.g., shyness), behavior, academic achievement, anxiety and depression" (p. 294). Opara and Santos (2019) examined how social media influences the body image of Latina adolescents, finding that girls and women judge their appearance off media's unrealistic perspectives of average bodies, leading to anxiety, body shaming, drug use, and eating disorders. Although some links have been

made between the negative effects of social media on adolescents' sense of body image when they compare themselves to online images, further research is needed to fully demonstrate the extent of the effects (Opara & Santos, 2019).

Sexualization in Media

The literature has illustrated that comparing one's self to others on social media sites has detrimental effects on all adolescents' mental health, but particularly for females. The pressures adolescents face to both view and produce sexualized images online has been shown to be highly gendered. In their research into the influences of the social media platform "Snapchat," Charteris et al. (2018) discovered that both boys and girls are pressured to produce and post sexualized images, however, when they follow through and make posts, girls are often slut shamed while boys are seen as confident. One reason for this is that it is a way for males in society to keep girls in a lower power position to themselves, ultimately showing that women and girls are vulnerable and subordinate to their male counterparts (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2007).

Girls are highly concerned with their body image, appearance, and sexuality, which shows that they have been internalizing what the images in media are portraying and believe that these images are what one needs to be like in order to be feminine (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2007). Girls believe that being pretty and thin will garner them social acceptance, with the ultimate goal being to reach the top of the social hierarchy where they will be considered sexually desirable to the boys (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2007). Sexualized images can lead youth to compare their bodies with unrealistic and altered images that are seen online, which can lead to pressure among youth to maintain their 'perfect' online portrayal when interacting with others in person (Charteris et al., 2018). Links have also been made between making sexual posts

online and partaking in more risky sexual behaviour offline (Savina et al., 2017), actions which can lead to further mental health issues.

Depression, Anxiety, and Social Isolation

When the pandemic hit, the greatest fear among youth sent into social distancing restrictions was how they were going to be able to maintain their friendships remotely (Maheux et al., 2021). Social media use became a daily activity in the lives of adolescents so they could remain connected. For many adolescents, their self esteem is directly related to the responses they receive for their online content. When a post is made, the comments it garners, or the lack there of, can lead to either an immediate increase or decrease in the poster's self-esteem (Opara & Santos, 2019). Similarly, Savina et al. (2017) illustrate that when an adolescent does not receive support online from their friends it can lead to increased depression symptoms. Ragozzino and Kelly (2011) found that anxiety and stress are at their highest levels when one thinks they may have made a mistake, they may be criticized, or when they meet new people, all likely events that adolescents experience when they interacted on social media sites.

Another part of social media use that has been linked to increased anxiety and depression is the pressure youth face to be available at all times (Siebert, 2019). Adolescents perceive a need to constantly monitor their own sites, along with their friends, despite the negative impacts it has on their sleep and mental well-being (Savina et al., 2017). If a post is not recognized by peers online, such as through receiving likes on Facebook, hearts on Instagram, or views on Snapchat, adolescents feel that they are not socially desirable, creating pressure to make better content in order to receive more recognition on their future posts (Charteris et al., 2018; Tomoniko, 2019). The goal of being seen as popular online can lead to the quest to gather more and more 'friends,'

but Savina et al. (2017) found an association between having too many friends online with an increased amount of stress due to a fear of missing out.

Social media has allowed adolescents to have access to people with many different viewpoints. Unfortunately, the information that youth are exposed to via social media often has negative connotations. In their analysis of mental health problems linked to social media use, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) found that youth were regularly exposed to posts about self-hatred, self-harm, and suicide. Although comments often provide suggestions on how to combat such feelings, many posts provided advice and encouragement for youth to carry out dangerous and harmful acts (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017). Through their research into the mental health risks associated with social media, Tomoniko (2019) found that adolescents should be taught about the risks and recognizing the signs of increased anxiety due to social media use, including being given strategies, such as mindfulness practices, that they can use to help reduce their anxiety.

Cyberbullying

Those victimized by cyberbullying over social media suffer long-lasting mental health effects, including an increase in stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Savina et al., 2017). Cyberbullying is defined as "the intentional act to use electronic communication to embarrass or humiliate another person" (Werling et al., 2021). Cyberbullying has taken traditional bullying into the online realm, meaning a victim now faces bullying behaviour at any time as long as there is access to technology. Following a study into the impacts of cyberbullying on youth in New Brunswick, Canada, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) suggest that cyberbullying has become a public health crisis among adolescents who spend a significant amount of time on social media interacting with others. Bullies now use a variety of online sources to "harass, impersonate, stalk, or sext their victims" (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019, p. 4). A keyboard has

become a weapon used to bully adolescents on public social media networking sites (Elmquist &

McLaughlin, 2017; Betts et al., 2017; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007), leading to a greater sense of

victimization and magnify the negative impacts felt by victims.

The research into the health impacts of adolescent cyberbullying conducted by Betts et al.

(2017), Beyazit et al. (2017), Charteris et al. (2018), and Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019), found

that females are more often victimized through cyberbullying, whereas males are more often the

perpetrators. In their study of American students in grades 6-8, however, Kowalski and Limber

(2007) found that adolescent girls are both more likely to be the victim and the bully over social

media sites, displaying a need for further research on the matter. Elmquist and McLaughlin

(2017) state that cyberbullying is strongly related to suicide and that adolescents who already

have depression symptoms may have greater negative impacts on their mental health when they

are victimized on social media. Bullying conducted over social media has also been found to be

linked to the likelihood of low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, fear, rage, stress, suicide

(Beyazit et al., 2017), depression, substance abuse, poor interpersonal relationships, behaviour

problems (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019), weapon-carrying, and sexual solicitation (David-Ferdon

& Hertz, 2007). Those who perpetrate cyberbullying have also been shown to have previously

been bullied themselves (Beyazit et al., 2017; Tomoniko, 2019) and have increased incidents of

substance abuse, depression, and behaviour problems (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019). Due to the

increase of social media use during the pandemic, the risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of

cyberbullying also increased.

Social Media Use During the Pandemic

For adolescents, during the time when their self-identity is highly dependent on their

social connections with others, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their mental well-being.

Cockerham et al. (2021) conducted a study into the needs and perceptions of adolescents during the pandemic, finding that "[h]igh levels of technology usage have also been associated with mental health issues, withdrawal, and weaker social skills" (p. 7525). COVID-19 has been described "as a potentially traumatic environmental experience challenging individuals' resilience capacities to cope with distress, uncertainty and subversion of previous and consolidated habits" by Cimino and Cerniglia (2021) in their research into social media use during the pandemic (p. 1). According to previous health crises, when one is faced with a pandemic, mental health problems, such as "post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, generalized anxiety, panic, phobias and substance abuse," often see a rise (Lucchetti et al., 2021, p. 672). Cockerham et al. (2021) demonstrated that the pandemic forced adolescents into isolation from their peers and created uncertainty when considering the future, both of which led to increased "fear, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns" (p. 7524), which aligns with my argument that social media use during the pandemic put youth mental health in jeopardy.

Adolescents were motivated to use social media as a way to maintain their relationships with peers throughout the pandemic, however, they often overused social media networks which has been associated with many mental health symptoms, such as over-stimulation, distress, and dysregulation (Cimino & Cerniglia, 2021). Shoshani and Kor (2021), in their study into the influence the pandemic has had on mental health, showed that "excessive digital device usage and limited social activities" during the pandemic have been associated with decreased mental health among youth (p. 7). Maheux et al. (2021) stated that the type of social media use effects its influence on adolescent well-being, with over use of being associated with negative mental

well-being, while online connections with close friends is associated with lower levels of loneliness, thus highlighting the need to further study how youth used social media.

Increased Mental Health Problems in Youth

Although children and youth are believed to be less susceptible to becoming severely ill from COVID-19, they are believed to be highly vulnerable to negative impacts on their mental health and well-being due to the health measures taken throughout the pandemic, such as social distancing and school closures (Shoshani & Kor, 2021). According to Helm et al. (2022), some of the psychological consequences associated with COVID-19 are increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of loss to one's purpose in life. Goncalves et al. (2020) also found that the pandemic lead to "increased depressive and anxious symptoms, as well as high rates of stress," in both those infected and not infected with the virus (p. 11). Similarly, Shoshani and Kor (2021) found their participants studied both before and after the pandemic lockdown measures had fewer positive thoughts, lower life satisfaction, and decreased peer support after being placed in social isolation.

Social distancing during the pandemic also caused other consequences to the normalcy of life youth previously had, such as unemployment, lack of medical care (Lucchetti et al., 2021), financial struggles, and food insecurity within their family support systems. In their study, Vaterlaus et al. (2021) found that, during the early weeks of the pandemic, those who engage in social media use every day "were almost five times as likely to have higher levels of stress…[and] depression compared to those who did not experience social media" (p. 227). Research has also shown that people from lower socioeconomic classes were at greater risk of depression during the pandemic (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). The social isolation caused by the pandemic has created many negative mental health issues within youth, issues that are expected to last long after the pandemic ends (Goncalves et al., 2020).

The Role of Online Schooling and Social Isolation

According to Shoshani and Kor (2021), when students are out of school, such as during holidays and over the summer, they tend to have irregular sleep patterns, get less exercise, eat unhealthy foods, and spend more time on their media devices. During the pandemic, these factors are believed to have been intensified as students were at times confided to their homes for long periods and had very limited, if any, opportunities to engage with their friends (Shoshani & Kor, 2021). In their research, Cockerham et al. (2021) had parents report that, during the time students were learning from home, their children experienced "distractibility, boredom, loneliness, and worry," slept more, and spent more time on their technology (p. 7526). In children with greater risk factors, such as those with ADHD, Werling et al. (2021) found that these youth struggled during the lockdown with online schooling and had worsening behaviour problems at home.

On top of the physical confinement during the lockdown, teachers and other school personnel began utilizing online schooling options, which further increased youth's reliance on technology and digital platforms (Cockerham et al., 2021). At the time, it was believed that online peer connections for students was essential to their mental health, however, in their study, Cimino and Cerniglia (2012) found that encouraging youth to use social media when they are not able to also connect in face-to-face settings can lead to reduced mental well-being. According to Vaterlaus et al. (2021), "limiting time spent on social media during public health crises may be a way to protect mental health" (p. 228). Online schooling allowed for some peer interactions during the pandemic, however, these opportunities were limited and did not satisfy the face-to-face social connection needs and wants of adolescents (Cockerham et al., 2021). Although social media time decreased following the return to in-person schooling, it did not fully return to the

levels before COVID-19, highlighting the need for more research into the impacts of social media use among adolescents (Werling et al., 2021).

Conclusion

During the time you spend reading this paper, the technology and social media sites that are available to today's adolescents have continued to change and evolve. As a result, and because of the significant influence that social media plays in the lives of youth, the research around social media use among middle schoolers will need to continue to develop. Due to the high level of technology use among youth during the pandemic, educators, along with parents and other professionals working with adolescents, have a challenge on their hands to teach youth how to navigate the world of social media in a responsible way that helps them and others maintain a positive state of well-being while interacting and existing in the online world. According to Shoshani and Kor (2021), those working with youth post pandemic need to allow them "to have opportunities to express and regulate their emotions regarding the stressful situation, and [provide] them with coping strategies to reduce stress levels and [increase] their well-being" (p. 7). In the following application chapter, I provide ways for teachers in middle school settings to address the negative mental health impacts that students are facing following their increased social media use during the pandemic.

Chapter 3: Application

In this chapter, I explore how my argument, increased social media use by adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted mental health, influences my role as a classroom teacher in Vernon, B.C., Canada. I discuss the curricular areas that currently address mental health and well-being, providing examples and suggestions to address students' social emotional learning. Next, I demonstrate how using the digital framework from B.C.'s curriculum can help students learn the digital literacy skills necessary for them to safely engage in social media platforms. Finally, I summarize how my argument and the learning obtained from the literature have influenced me as an educator.

Personal Setting

I have been fortunate to work with students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 for more than 16 years. When I first started teaching, social media was also just in its beginning stages. I did not have a single student in my classroom who owned a cell phone or belonged to a social media platform and I only joined social media at the end of my second year of teaching. Since that time, however, the access to technology, the internet, and social media has exploded. Almost all adolescent students now have access to a smartphone that allows them to access their social media at the touch of a button, which was evident in Ofcom's (2021) study that found 96% of adolescents used social media throughout the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic also required youths to socially isolate from their peers, leading to an increase in their reliance on social media to remain connected, which according to Cockerham et al. (2021) increases "fear, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns" among adolescents (p. 7524). Since the return to in-person schooling, I have observed a significant deterioration in the mental health and well-being of students, leading me to take an interest in how the current B.C. curriculum can be used

to help students improve their mental well-being and digital literacy. Cockerham et al. (2021) found that when a student experiences mental well-being, they are more motivated to learn and develop within classroom settings. The challenge now becomes for teachers to aid their students in gaining mental wellness so that they can learn to their full potential.

Curricular Connections to Student Mental Health

The Physical and Health Education (PHE) section of the B.C. curriculum focuses on teaching students how to develop healthy living habits (Province of British Columbia, 2022b), while the Core Competencies section of the curriculum focuses on engaging students in self-development (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). Through interweaving the core competencies into the PHE curriculum, teachers have the opportunity to help students develop strong social emotional skills that they can then apply to other aspects of their lives, such as when engaging in social media. As Shoshani and Kor (2021) state, adults working with adolescents are in a position to provide them with opportunities to express their emotions, teaching them coping strategies to reduce their stress and improve their mental health. When I began recognizing that students were displaying signs of increased stress, anxiety, and depression following the pandemic, I wanted to find ways to support them while also still completing my professional duties of covering the curriculum. As the research of Werling et al. (2021) found, some adolescents developed problematic technology use "resulting in dysfunctional patterns (e.g., excessive gaming, excessive use of social networks, excessive viewing of video clips etc.) with major negative consequences for interpersonal relationships, academic performance, and emotional well-being" (P. 1034). Through the PHE curriculum and core competencies, I found specific outcomes and skills that could be brought into the classroom to help students deal with the negative effects of technology use on their mental health.

Core Competencies

      The B.C. curriculum includes a section on core competencies which are meant to help students evolve into educated citizens with skills beyond just those learned within the traditional subject areas. Core competencies are "sets of intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies that all students need in order to engage in deep, lifelong learning" (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). There are three core competencies, communication, thinking, and personal and social, that teachers are encouraged to weave into their daily lessons across the various subject areas (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). Below I provide a brief description of each core competency and then provide examples of how they can be worked into the PHE curriculum to help students in developing their social emotional learning.

      Communication Core Competency. The communication core competency includes providing students with skills and knowledge around how they can effectively engage in communications and interactions with others (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). The competency is further broken down into two sub-competencies of communicating and collaborating. Communicating is the way in which students learn how to engage with others to share their information, ideas, or thoughts, as well as learning how to interpret the messages they receive from others and the world around them (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). As Byars et al. (2020) state, adolescents utilize social media as their main way to communicate with others, therefore when teaching students communication skills, the ways they use and interact on social media needs to be considered. The collaborating competency teaches students how to use their communication skills to effectively work with others on common projects or to achieve a specific goal (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). For students who struggle with social anxiety or poor social skills, collaboration or group projects can further increase their anxiety,

however, by utilizing social media for classroom projects, they can utilize online means to collaborate effectively with their peers (Savina et al., 2017; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007).

Thinking Core Competency. The thinking core competency involves the skills associated with intellectual development, such as processing information, including emotions and feelings, that are receive from various sources (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). The thinking competency is further broken down into two sub-competencies, creative thinking and critical and reflective thinking. Creative thinking focuses on how students develop new ideas related to their own values, teaching skills such as open-mindedness, flexibility, and curiosity (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). When students are creating online social media content, they are using their creative thinking skills, however, their self-esteem can be damaged when their posts do not garner positive feedback (Opara & Santos, 2019), putting at risk their willingness to express themselves creatively again in the future posts. Tomoniko (2019) suggests that adolescents be taught how to recognize negative feelings associated with social media use and be given strategies, such as mindfulness practices, to help reduce their anxiety. Being openminded when reading others' feedback to your posts and having the confidence to create content that reflects one's own values are skills that adolescents would benefit from.

The critical and reflective thinking competency teaches students how to analyze their own thinking, reflect on what they have observed, and make adjustments to their values and thoughts (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). As depression has been found to increase when adolescents view social media content and negatively compare themselves and their life experiences to online posts (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017), teaching students how to recognize their negative thoughts and provide them with strategies to adjust their thinking is one way to allow for critical and reflective thinking skills to develop. Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017) also

found that using social media to connect with and maintain relationships with family and friends can increase one's feelings of happiness, life-satisfaction, and connectedness. By having students analyze their own social media use (e.g., are they browsing content of strangers or are they communicating with loved ones), considering how it is impacting their thinking and mental health, will allow them to adjust their behaviours to engage in more positive social media use.

Personal and Social Core Competency. The personal and social core competency teaches students how to form and develop their own identities while also recognizing the role they play within their community and society (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). It "encompasses what students need to thrive as individuals, to understand and care about themselves and others, and to find and achieve their purpose in the world" (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). The personal and social competency is further broken down into three sub-competencies: personal awareness and responsibility; positive personal and cultural identity; and, social awareness and responsibility. The personal and social competency teaches students how to make ethical decisions, how to behave in socially responsible ways, and to understand that there are consequences to their actions (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). An example of how social media use can lead to negative consequences was highlighted by Savina et al. (2017), who found that when students engage in posting sexualized content on their social media platforms it often leads to participating in more risky sexual behaviours offline. Using a social media example such as the one above with students will help them understand how their decisions, both online and offline, can lead to negative consequences for their mental well-being.

The positive personal and cultural identity competency focuses on developing one's self-identity, including learning how to be self-aware, self-confident, and to have self-worth, all of which allow students to maintain their well-being and contribute to the well-being of others

(Province of British Columbia, 2022a). As the literature in the previous chapter illustrated, adolescents face many negative pressures via social media that can have negative impacts on their self-esteem and self-confidence. Byars et al. (2020), Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017), Opara and Santos (2019), and Tomoniko (2019) all found that when adolescents, especially females, view images of the beauty ideals portrayed in the media they are at risk of developing body image problems, affecting both their self-esteem and eating behaviours. I believe that strategies and skills taught to adolescents on how to build and maintain their self-worth should also contain information on the false images portrayed in the media so that students learn to appreciate and celebrate realistic bodies and beauty.

Finally, the social awareness and responsibility competency shows students the importance of interacting with others and the environment in respectful and responsible ways (Province of British Columbia, 2022a). In the social media environment, interacting with others in respectful and responsible ways will include not participating in cyberbullying and getting support for victims when they see it occurring. Victims of cyberbullying over social media can suffer from long-lasting mental health problems, such as increased stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Savina et al., 2017). Therefore, it is vital that educators teach students about online safety to protect both themselves and others from falling victim to a cyberbully. I feel that it is the social and emotional competency that provides teachers with the greatest opportunity to aid students in combating the negative impacts to their mental health that they now face after their increased social media use during the pandemic.

Physical and Health Education

The PHE curriculum covers aspects of health including physical wellness, but also mental, social, and intellectual health. The PHE curriculum provides students with skills and

knowledge into how their individual well-being is connected to their physical and mental health, their interpersonal relationships, and their interactions within the community (Province of British Columbia, 2022b). The aim of this curriculum is for students to learn how to maintain their own well-being, while also becoming advocates for the well-being of others. Within the PHE curriculum, there are a number of big ideas that address the mental health of middle school aged students: we experience many changes in our lives that influence how we see ourselves and others; healthy choices influence our physical, emotional, and mental well-being; healthy relationships can help us lead rewarding and fulfilling lives; and advocating for the health and well-being of others connects us to our community (Province of British Columbia, 2022b). Next, I provide practical ideas on how to teach each PHE big idea, with core competency outcomes woven in, to adolescents who are facing mental health challenges due to negative social media influences coming out of the pandemic.

Changes Influence How We See Ourselves and Others. As was shown in the research, adolescence is the time when students are trying to figure out who they want to be and how they want to act (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). It is also the time when youth are heavily influenced by, and reliant on, their social connections to their peers (Appiah, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic greatly hindered students from being able to have the peer interactions that are vital in their social and emotional development, forcing many to turn to social media to maintain their peer connections and to seek out information (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). The literature shows, however, that when students compare themselves to others online, it can often lead to feelings of social loneliness and trigger anxiety (Helm et al., 2022; Tomoniko, 2019). To combat this, using the positive personal and cultural identity core competency, students can be given the opportunity to develop their own identities. This can include learning to recognize their individual strengths,

interests, and characteristics. They also need to learn how their life experiences have shaped their current identity and to recognize that their identity will continue to evolve as they have new experiences. If students are given the freedom to explore who they are and what they value, they are more likely to gain confidence in themselves, giving them the strength to combat various pressures or negative feedback they may face over social media.

Healthy Choices. The PHE curriculum involves students learning what healthy choices are and how these choices can influence their physical, emotional, and mental well-being, which aligns directly with the personal awareness and responsibility core competency. The choices people make are often centered around meeting their own needs and wants. When we have our needs and wants met, it tends to increase our feelings of happiness and joy, ultimately improving our mental well-being (Province of British Columbia, 2022b). For example, Siebert (2019) and Savina et al. (2017) found that adolescents face pressure online to be available at all times through constantly monitoring their own social media platforms, along with those of their friends, despite the negative impacts this behaviour has on their mental well-being. Staying up late to scroll social media instead of getting a good night sleep is a choice with consequences, something that adolescents can learn through the PHE curriculum.

In the classroom, I need to ensure that I am educating students on how to manage their feelings and emotions, both when their choices lead to positive outcomes and also when they may be faced with negative consequences. Students need to learn how to overcome the feelings they may have after a social media post they make receives critical feedback. I often find myself reminding the adolescents in my life that their worth is not tied to the number of likes their online posts receive, knowing that, as both Charteris et al. (2018) and Tomoniko (2019) found, if a post is not recognized by their peers online, such as through receiving likes on Facebook,

hearts on Instagram, or views on Snapchat, adolescents tend to feel that they are not socially desirable. Teachers need to find opportunities to celebrate and validate students for the positive choices they are making as this will increase their well-being and provide them with the confidence to deal with the negativity found on social media.

Healthy Relationships. For adolescents, the social connections that they have to their peers is highly influential on their mental health. Developing healthy relationships can help youth to lead happy and successful lives (Province of British Columbia, 2022b). When covering this part of the PHE curriculum, teachers should weave in the social awareness and responsibility core competency because, at a time when adolescents are undergoing many physical and emotional changes, students can sometimes struggle to make healthy friendship choices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents increased their social media use as a way to maintain their relationships with their peers, however, they often overused social media which has been associated with many mental health symptoms, such as over-stimulation, distress, and dysregulation (Cimino & Cerniglia, 2021). Increasing social awareness and responsibility to others, both in-person and online, will allow youth to maintain relationships should they be faced with further social isolation measures in the future.

Within the classroom, healthy relationships can be facilitated by providing students with opportunities for peer interactions, such as through group activities. In the safe classroom environment, with the guidance of a teacher, this will provide students with a chance to interact with people with different viewpoints, learning how to navigate relationships with respect and understanding. If students form healthy connections with their peers in the classroom, the likelihood of those same students engaging in cyberbullying against one another online is likely to decrease. As Beyazit et al. (2017) state, cyberbullying is linked to the likelihood of low self-

esteem, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, fear, rage, stress, and suicide. Therefore, teachers must do all they can in their classrooms to prevent cyberbully from occurring, and fostering healthy peer relationships is one positive step that can be taken.

The COVID-19 pandemic also showed society how important it is to engage with others in-person. Prior to the pandemic, I heard it said by many that teachers and schools were eventually going to be replaced by computers. Although I have always greatly valued the face-to-face contact with my students and felt that no computer would ever be able to replace that, I think the pandemic showed students, parents, and society how essential schools and relationships are. Online schooling allowed for some peer interactions during the pandemic, however, these opportunities were limited and did not satisfy the face-to-face social connection needs and wants of adolescents (Cockerham et al., 2021). Many students returned to school post-pandemic and needed to relearn how to interact with their peers in healthy and meaningful ways. To combat the social isolation felt by students in the post-pandemic world, I have attempted to build positive peer engagement opportunities into my daily lesson plans.

Advocating for Others. The PHE curriculum big idea of teaching adolescents the importance of advocating for the health and well-being of others aligns with all aspects of the personal and social core competency skills as it connects students to their community. At young ages, students are taught how to stand up for others. For example, students are encouraged to stand up to bullies and get help for victims if they see something inappropriate happening. As students age, much of the negative peer interactions they encounter occurs out of the eyes or ears of the adults in their lives, such as through cyberbullying over social media. As educators, we need to ensure we provide our students with the skills and knowledge to combat negative interactions that occur online, including both when they are victimized or when they see

someone else being targeted. Due to the numerous negative impacts cyberbullying can have on the mental well-being of both the victim and the perpetrator, schools must be proactive in teaching students to advocate for those who may be marginalized by others. In the next section, I provide information on how to teach students digital literacy skills that they can then use to advocate for themselves and others online.

Curricular Connections to Digital Literacy

In order for teachers and school staff to help students combat the negative impacts social media use has had on their mental health, they should start by making connections within the curricular materials around digital literacy. By using the needs of the students as a guide in lesson planning, the teacher has the ability to create activities that will be meaningful and impactful in the students' lives. Within the B.C. curriculum, there is a digital literacy framework for teachers to follow so that they can help their students learn to become responsible digital citizens. This framework includes six key characteristics all students should learn: research and information literacy; critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making; creativity and innovation; digital citizenship; communication and collaboration; and, technology operations and concepts (Province of British Columbia, 2022c). Next, I provide an example for each of the characteristics, including how it can help students maintain their mental well-being while engaging on social media platforms.

Research and Information Literacy

Research and information literacy involves students being taught how to safely and effectively use technology in order to collect, interpret, and use information found online (Province of British Columbia, 2022c). As Byars et al. (2020) stated, teens use social media as their main avenue to express themselves, share their life events, talk about others, interact with

love interests, and stay up to date with current events. If social media platforms are where students are collecting their information, then educators need to work with them so that they can learn how to seek out trustworthy and unbiased information. Through learning how to interpret and compare information found online, students will begin to see that images on social media are often false, lowering the potential negative impacts they have on a student's self-image.

Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making

With this characteristic, students are taught how to use technology to help them identify and solve problems (Province of British Columbia, 2022c). Technology and the internet have given adolescents access to unlimited information. As the research of Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) found, adolescents are often exposed to online posts that encourage self-hatred, self-harm, and suicide, however, there are also opportunities via social media where students can receive anonymous mental health support through online support groups or mental health agencies (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017; Savina et al., 2017; Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017). I, therefore, need to use the digital literacy curriculum to teach students how to find trustworthy information so that they can decipher between genuine support and harmful content online. If a youth is taught how to recognize that they have a mental health problem, they can then use technology to research possible solutions, including learning how to reach out to professionals for support.

Creativity and Innovation

Learning how to create safe and appropriate online material is the goal of the creativity and innovation characteristic (Province of British Columbia, 2022c). Many adolescents create and make posts on their social media platforms daily. According to Ofcom (2021), by the age of 12, 75% of students have a social media platform, continually rising to 95% by the age of 15, and the most popular social media activity for those aged 12-15 was to create and post videos. If

adolescents are using social media frequently to express themselves in creative ways, it is essential that they learn what is and is not appropriate to post. When they are taught how to create safe and responsible material, social media can become an avenue of self-expression and to connect with like-minded people, which was key for the mental health of many adolescents throughout the pandemic.

Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship is broken down into the following categories: internet safety; privacy and security; relationships and communication; cyberbullying; digital footprint and reputation; self-image and identity; creative credit and copyright; legal and ethical aspects; balanced attitude towards technology; and, understanding and awareness of the role of information and communication technology in society (Province of British Columbia, 2022). Here I consider just one aspect of digital citizenship, cyberbullying. Cyberbullying puts adolescents at risk of experiencing problems at school, including attendance issues, lower grades, and a fear of the school environment (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019; Betts et al., 2017; Beyazit et al., 2017). It has been stated that because adolescents are often not aware of the identity of the person or people bullying them online, that victims continue to feel suspicious of others even when interacting in face-to-face settings (Betts et al., 2017; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Educators, therefore, should educate students about the risks of engaging in dangerous online behaviours. Teachers need to watch for warning signs, such as changes in mood or withdrawal from social activities, and seek additional support for students when concerns arise.

Communication and Collaboration

According to the digital framework, adolescents "use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning

and contribute to the learning of others" (Province of British Columbia, 2022c, p. 8). During the pandemic, social media and online schooling became the only ways in which many students were able to maintain their relationships. Although this led to greater technology use, it also aided in limiting students' sense of loneliness and social isolation. According to Siebert (2019), educators have the opportunity to include online peer interactions within their lesson plans, in a safe and monitored classroom setting, which has been shown to increase student engagement and participation. Rather than just focusing on the negative impacts of social media, educators are encouraged to find ways to utilize it to enhance students' learning.

Technology Operations and Concepts

The technology operations and concepts characteristic is broken down into the following categories: general knowledge and functional skills; use in everyday life; informed decision making; seamless use demonstrating self-efficacy; and, learning about and with digital technology (Province of British Columbia, 2022c). For adolescents, integrating technology into their daily lives is already something that they do. What I need to do here is help students create a balance within their life. Adolescents need to learn how to navigate and utilize the various functions and features that the technology world can offer them, while also learning how to manage the amount of time they dedicate to their digital lives. As Werling et al. (2021) found, some people have developed problematic online habits including addictive social media use which is when one has "a compulsive need and excessive preoccupation with social media, while other aspects of life such as relationships, school, and mental health related behaviours (sports, eating regularly and balanced, day-night rhythm including adequate sleep duration) are neglected and impaired" (p. 1034). We need to ensure our students learn the skills essential to navigate life

within a digital world, but also are able to maintain a healthy balance with the other aspects of their life to protect their mental well-being.

Summary

In this paper, I argue that increased social media use through the pandemic has had negative impacts on mental health. Due to these negative impacts, I believe that all people who work with adolescents need to be proactive in educating them about the risks and dangers associated with social media use. By educating youth about the messages being sent to them via media, we are giving them the knowledge they need to create change in how they interpret the messages. I argue that school personnel and other helping professionals can start by teaching students how to be responsible citizens, teaching them how to interpret the information that they see in media, how to protect themselves from online dangers, and to consider the consequences of their online actions.

I also believe that school staff should remind students about the various mental health professional and school support staff that are available to help them should they develop mental health problems. By providing lessons to adolescents around body image, making healthy choices, and learning to evaluate messages received from media around beauty, teachers can help adolescents develop a positive sense of self. In order to better support students, I feel that a first step should be to listen to the students more, hearing their concerns, needs, and wants. Then, I will be in a better place to support them as they create their individual identities and work on their mental well-being within the education and social systems that govern their lives. In the final chapter, I summarize the finding from the previous chapters and share the implications of my argument.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the pandemic led to increased technology and social media use among adolescents, which increased the mental health concerns faced by this population of students. I claim this because, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing restrictions, anxiety, depression, stress, and body image problems have been observed within adolescents since returning to in-person learning. In the final chapter, I explore how my teaching experience, the literature, and the application of my argument are connected. Next, I explain how this paper has demonstrated the success of my argument. Finally, I conclude by providing the implications for the findings of this paper.

Summary

In the first chapter of this paper, I introduce my personal experience working with adolescents and how that work piqued my interest into the negative impacts of social media use during the pandemic. I explain how I recognized that my own social media use was problematic, leading me to spend my limited time viewing online materials rather than getting out and experiencing events in person. I then highlight how, following the pandemic, I was seeing students altering their interactions with their peers, including discussions now being focused around content viewed online and the pursuit to create posts that garner positive feedback via various social media platforms. The rise in mental health issues, such as increased anxiety, depression, body image issues, lowered self-confidence, and suicidal thoughts, that I was seeing in my classroom lead me to the M.Ed. program so that I could better equip myself to support the now prevalent mental health needs of my students.

In the second chapter, I connect my argument to the existing literature about the impacts of social media use and the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes I explore through the research

include how and what social media sites are currently being utilized by adolescents, potential

benefits to social media use, mental health risk factors associated with social media use, and how

social media use during the pandemic has contributed negatively to the mental well-being of

adolescents. My review of the literature demonstrates that social media greatly impacts the lives

of adolescents due to their reliance on the various platforms to remain connected to their peers,

search for information, and as guides on how they should act and behave (Byars et al., 2020).

The research also shows the various risk factors associated with social media use in adolescents,

including an increase in anxiety after comparing themselves to posts viewed online (Tomoniko,

2019) and cyberbullying over social media which was shown to increase many mental health

issues (Savina et al., 2017). The literature reviewed highlights how social media use throughout

the pandemic further increased students' feelings of stress and depression (Vaterlaus et al.,

2021). The literature studied in this paper supports my argument that increased social media

usage by adolescents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased negative mental

health problems.

In the third chapter of this paper, I connect the literature from the second chapter to my

practical application of a teacher using the BC curriculum within the classroom to help educate

students on how to maintain their mental well-being while still participating in the digital world.

I share the various elements of the curriculum that I incorporate in my teaching, including the

PHE curriculum, the core competencies, and the digital framework, to provide students with the

skills that will allow them to combat the negative influences they face online. The PHE

curriculum, when combined with the core competencies, allows students to explore their own

personal identities, including their strengths and interest; how to develop and maintain healthy

relationships; how to make healthy choices, including dealing with both the positive and negative

consequences of their choices; and the importance of becoming an advocate for both their own and other peoples' mental well-being. I also demonstrate how educators can utilize the digital framework to aid students in becoming responsible digital citizens who can use social media in safe ways to express themselves and seek trustworthy information. Finally, I was able to connect my teaching practices, through the use of the curricular outcomes and the literature, to outline the ways in which educators can help support the mental well-being of students following their increased social media use throughout the pandemic.

This paper has successfully advanced my argument that increased social media use during the pandemic has led to negative mental health implications for adolescents. I outline how social media use among middle school aged students negatively impacts their mental health, backing up my claim with evidence from the literature. The literature also further illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic increased mental health struggles for adolescents, increasing the importance of this topic within the educational setting. Through sharing my own personal teaching experience, along with the evidence from the literature, I demonstrate that digital literacy and mental health education are vital to the well-being of adolescent students.

Implications

This paper presents implications to be considered by all adults who interact and work with adolescents. Recognizing the reliance that youth now have on technology and social media, and that this reliance is likely to continually grow and evolve with further advances in technology, the impacts of social media on adolescent mental health is likely to be influential and critical within the education field for years to come. Within the classroom setting, the rise in mental health problems among students will require teachers to develop skills to best support the growing needs of the students. For example, being able to notice and identify warning signs

within students that they may be suffering from a mental health crisis is becoming a necessary skill for educators, especially after coming back to in-person schooling following the pandemic. Most educators do not have the necessary training or counselling skills to effectively support mental health concerns within the student population, indicating that professional development opportunities will need to be provided.

School districts also have a significant role to play in supporting the rise in mental health concerns among students, including providing more funding for support personnel, such as school-based resource teachers, counsellors, and psychologists. It has been my experience that the rise in mental health needs of students has not yet translated into the hiring of more support staff to aid students with these new needs. For example, the school I worked at this past school year, with a population of approximately 450 students ranging from kindergarten to grade seven, only employed one part-time counsellor who was available three afternoons a week. This was not nearly enough to support the needs within the school, meaning only those students who had extreme mental health crises were supported, while the remaining needs of students fell into the hands of under-trained teachers. As the previous research indicates, the mental health needs faced by adolescents coming out of the social isolation measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to last for years to come, therefore the need for mental health supports within the school setting is going to be lasting and requires immediate action to be taken to address these needs.

Parents and guardians also have a role to play in supporting the mental well-being of their child(ren). Through role-modeling safe and responsible social media behaviour, adolescents can learn what is and is not appropriate to post online. Students can also look to their guardians for how to create balance within their life, including allotting an appropriate amount of time to

engaging in online social media platforms and engaging in face-to-face interactions with others. In the same way that teachers are encouraged to receive additional training in how to recognize signs that a student may be suffering from mental health problems, guardians can also increase their knowledge of how to recognize the signs and learn about the various supports available within their community. Finally, monitoring adolescents' social media use, such as having access to their accounts to monitor activity and limiting the time they spend on their devices, is another way that guardians can help support the mental well-being of their child(ren).

Prior to the pandemic, I was already beginning to see the negative impacts of social media use on the mental health of my students. This inspired me to seek further training through the counselling courses offered within the M.Ed. program in order to develop my skills so that I could better support students' mental health needs. Coming out of the pandemic, and now seeing even more students suffering with their mental well-being, I am hoping that this paper will encourage more educators to engage in professional development training in digital literacy and social-emotional learning so that they can better support their students. Although there is a time commitment needed on behalf of teachers to receive additional training, I feel that educators are in a position to make meaningful contributions to the betterment of their students' mental health. Happy and healthy students are able to more effectively engage in the classroom environment and learning opportunities, which in turn will make the job of teaching more enjoyable for educators. The time commitment required to increase training will be rewarded with greater student participation and success. If students are taught to be responsible digital citizens and are given the skills necessary to support their own mental well-being in the face of negative social media feedback, the likelihood of them becoming successful students and productive members of society increases, something which I believe is a goal of education.

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