

Social Media and the Psychosocial Well-Being of Youths in the Amathole District Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

The use of social media in the rural areas of South Africa is growing, with the youth being the prominent users. The growth of social media has incited a growing knowledge about impending forthcoming social events. However, there are concerns about mental illness, such as depression, owing to the increase in social comparison. There is a lack of literature on the use of social media in rural areas. The aim of this study was thus to investigate the effects of social media on the psychosocial well-being of the youth in selected rural areas of the Eastern Cape. The study was conducted in the Amathole District Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Using a qualitative research approach, 30 youths from the Amathole District Municipality were purposively sampled. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using a thematic analysis. The findings revealed that using social media has a negative bearing on the psychosocial well-being of the youth owing to the discrepancies between appearance, reality and expectations. Some youths use social media as a means of recreation whereas some use social media as a networking method. The study concluded that the extensive use of social media among the youth can lead to comparison and ultimately depression and, therefore, recommended awareness campaigns on the good use of social media so the youth benefit rather than become victims.

Keywords: social media, youth, rural areas, psychosocial well-being

Introduction

“The rise of social media has provoked both optimism about potential societal benefits and concern about harm such as addiction and depression” (Allcott et al. 2020, 1). Scheinbaum (2017) shares the same perspective when he affirms that social media have



the aptitude to alter and consistently reinforce life experiences, both positively and negatively. In the wake of this reality, the youth are the most affected by social media, as Scheinbaum (2017) shows they are frequent and popular users. Singh, Amiri and Sabbarwal (2017, 97) further postulate that youths are the defining users of social media. For the purpose of this study, youths are categorised as individuals in the age group 18 to 35 years (Rugimbana and Oseifuah 2010). Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) support this assertion when they posit that the youth adapt to information communication technology more than what any other population cohort does. With the youths' massive use of social media, issues of habit and addiction arise and can affect their psychosocial well-being.

Social media forms part of an array of tech-enabled activities. These activities comprise “photo-sharing, blogging, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, business networks, virtual worlds, reviews and much more” (Stevens et al. 2017, 950). Even governments use social media to lobby for constituents. Social media have many positive and negative benefits for the youth. Some positive benefits include sharing of information about employment, politics and healthy lifestyle tips.

However, Stevens et al. (2017) argue that despite the positive social benefits of social media, issues of anxiety can rise. Anxiety and negative emotional consequences as noted by Meeus (2016) adversely affect the psychosocial well-being of the youth. An obsessive sense of self-expression for self-validation among the youth on social media is risky and entails dreadful consequences when this attention-seeking behaviour results in social rejection (Hawk et al. 2019).

Considering the negative aspects associated with social media, it was essential to conduct this study to learn of the positive and negative effects of social media on the youth. Through awareness, the youth are equipped with knowledge to make better decisions on how best to use social media without seeking validation. There is a lack of research on the use of social media in rural areas, which is a concern considering that social media can affect the psychosocial well-being of the youth. Therefore, a study on the effects of social media on the psychosocial well-being of youths in South Africa, focusing on the rural communities is pertinent. The research objectives that guided the study were thus to:

- identify the type of social media mostly used by the youth; and
- explore the purposes of the use of social media by the youth in rural areas.

The Effects of Social Media on the Youth in Rural Areas

The youth in rural areas, similar to any other peculiarity, experience social media in terms of positive effects such as connecting with acquaintances in various regions and negative effects such as comparing their appearance with that of others and becoming depressed (Shah et al. 2019). The youth and social media have become almost

synonymous and the impact of social media on their lives is a point of concern (Shah et al. 2019). Makhubu and Budree (2019, 536) explored the influence and effects that social media had on students during the “Rhodes-must-fall” and “fees-must-fall” campaigns that swept across South African universities in 2015. These events showed the significant effects social media have on the youth. Positively, social media provide the youth with a platform to voice out and engage in civil and political movements freely, sharing their views and becoming active participants without fear of judgement (Lowry 2016). But sharing violent video recordings incites violent behaviour that can cause the vandalism of property (Luescher, Loader, and Mugume 2017) as was evident by these events. Using social media goes hand in glove with peer pressure; evidence of this is the widespread campaigns and the subsequent rowdy behaviour displayed which can be ascribed to issues of peer influence.

Cherry (2018, 208) explains that Erick Erickson’s psychosocial stages of development denote that “social experiences have an influence on one’s psychosocial development”, therefore social media influences the psychosocial development of the youth. One of the main elements of Erickson’s psychosocial theory is the augmentation of the self, a sense of distinctiveness, which is developed through social interaction (Dunkel and Harbke 2017). Social media has a significant influence on youths’ psychosocial development, as its use has become a common social experience (Bosch and Mutsvairo 2017). Drawing from Cherry (2018) and Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017, 87), it is acknowledged that using social media can affect the psychosocial development of the youth. Stevens et al. (2017, 951) postulate, “the widespread adoption of social media has led to investigations of its effects on social relationships.” Several studies indicate that social media are frequently used to preserve and enhance rather than displace offline relationships (Watkins 2009).

The responsible use of social media platforms enables both “identity expression and relationship formation and conservation” (Dumas et al. 2017, 5). In addition, Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) established that using social media is affiliated with social expectation, political partaking and civic engagement among university students. Findings by Watkins (2009) bear a positive testament to the way in which social media contributes to social capital, an attribute beneficial for psychosocial well-being. The negative effects of social media, which are termed “social media drama”, can hurt one’s ego hence negatively affecting one’s psychosocial well-being (Stevens et al. 2017, 952).

The use of social media has become common to most societies. However, rural populations are still not abreast of social media exploitation as compared to their urban counterparts. Lee and Ma (2012) found that people in rural areas fall behind regarding access to and development of information communication technology. Lekhanya (2013a) further postulates that the reasons for this inaccessibility include illiteracy, lack of computer skills, and the quality and costs above the affordability of rural people. Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) found that using social media in rural areas in South Africa is not yet established. Van Rijswijck (2013) states that on the contrary, “in South

Africa, social media use has become mainstream and has crossed the urban–rural divide.” The growth of social media use, according to UNICEF (2012), owes much to South Africa being a primary leader in social networking and microblogging in Africa. Although statistically urban areas remain on top, the significant spread and subsequent rise of the access to and use of social media in rural areas should not be overlooked.

Lekhanya (2013b, 2) identified that “in some rural areas, social media is used as a tool to promote entrepreneurial ventures by means of networking”. However, Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) recommend more workshops to educate the rural population on the best ways to use social media. This indicates that the rural populace lack the required knowledge needed to use social media to full capacity. According to Stevens et al. (2017, 952), “the novice use of social media can be risky especially amongst the youth.” The growth of social media use in rural areas at the backdrop of illiteracy and the lack of adequate knowledge becomes a concern, more so among the youth who are still at a critical stage of their psychosocial development (Hawk et al. 2019).

Although numerous studies are conducted on the effects of social media on the youth, there seems to be a paucity of literature that centres on the youth and social media in the rural areas of South Africa. This is supported by Lee and Ma (2012) who assert that there is diminutive understanding of the use of social media in rural communities in South Africa.

Theoretical Framework Adopted for the Study

This study adopted Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which highlights social origins of behaviour adding to cognitive thought processes that stimulate human behaviour. Bandura’s social cognitive approach represents a halt from customary theories by suggesting that cognitive factors are fundamental to human operatives, and knowledge acquisition can transpire in the absence of direct reinforcement. According to Bandura (1997, 267), “learning can occur simply through the observation of behavioural models and in the absence of reinforcement.” People’s successes often encourage other people to make positive choices and to pursue their dreams or careers; this forms part of observed behaviour (Bandura 1986).

In relation to the use of social media by the youth in rural areas, Lekhanya (2013a) states that when compared to urban areas, rural areas still lag behind in terms of social media technology. This ascertains that social media are a moderately new phenomenon in the rural areas. Therefore, the youth have engaged in adopting new information communication technology more than any other population cohort (Shava and Chinyamurindi 2018). The youth are the most literately fit population cohort to use social media as they understand it better than older people and children. Subsequently, social media are useful to the youth more than any other age group as it meets their youthful needs for entertainment, recreation, networking and sharing knowledge (Shava and Chinyamurindi 2018).

A vital fact of social cognition is that behaviour is predisposed to outside influences in the absence of countervailing self-approval. “People who are not devoted to personal standards implement a more pragmatic orientation, adapting their behaviour to fit the situation” (Snyder and Campbell 1982, 190). Berezan et al. (2018) assert that the massive use of social media by the youth can have a significant impact on their psychosocial well-being owing to the increase in social comparison that may cause envy, low self-esteem, lack of self-content, and depression.

Methodology

This section of the article briefly describes the methodology employed by the study.

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was employed for the purpose of this study. The qualitative research approach is an inquiry into a human problem that provides an opportunity for researchers to gain first-hand holistic information from the participants (Srivastava and Thomson 2009). Owing to the nature of the study, an exploratory research design was employed as it focuses on in-depth analysis, which provides comprehensive experiences and perceptions of the youth in rural areas regarding the use of social media.

Research Population, Sample and Sampling Method

The population of the study consisted of all youths aged 18 to 35 from the Amathole District Municipality in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The sample for the study was 30 youths from selected rural areas in the Amathole District Municipality with internet access and social media accounts. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique which, according to De Vos et al. (2011), gives the researcher the liberty to select a smaller portion of participants who fit the objectives of the study. The researchers purposefully selected participants who were youths, had access to the internet and were conversant in English so that they can speak about their experiences and views concerning the use of social media.

The participants were located at three community centres based in the three chief municipalities of the Amathole District Municipality. Ten participants were selected from each centre in the Amathole District, namely, the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, the Great Kei Local Municipality and the Mnquma Local Municipality. In the three centres, there are computers with internet access available for the youth aged between 18 and 35 to learn basic computer skills. The youth partaking in this study were the 10 individuals who visited the centres in each municipality the most according to the sign-in register, who were aged between 18 and 35 and conversant in English, and who attained grade 12 or engaged in post matric qualifications. The educational level of the participants ranges from grade 12 (20 participants) to national diploma (10 participants). The participants consisted of 12 males and 18 females.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

The two researchers conducted 30 face-to-face in-depth interviews to gather information from the participants. All 30 interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. After the interviews, the data gathered were transcribed to identify similarities and differences. These interviews made it possible for the researchers to probe into the participants' experiences and perceptions. This resonates with Corbin and Strauss (2014, 120) who state, "a face-to-face meeting with participants makes it easier to comprehend participants' perspectives on their lives, experience or circumstances as expressed in their own words."

For the final step of analysing the data, the thematic method of data analysis was used. With thematic analysis, the researchers identified, analysed and interpreted patterns of meaning of the data collected. Corbin and Strauss (2014) state that thematic analysis investigates data in detail and deals with diversity. This data analysis technique was therefore appropriate for this study, as the data collected dealt with the diverse experiences and perceptions of the youth regarding social media.

Ethical Aspects

An important ethical aspect adopted for the purpose of this study was confidentiality where the participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. The researchers ensured that the participants understood and signed the consent forms, before the interviews started. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, the researcher used numbers to identify the participants and to keep their identities anonymous. Another ethical aspect that played a major role in this study was avoidance of harm since the topic of this study was sensitive. The researcher explained to the participants that there would be no harm caused to them during this study and that they are not forced to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable. Lastly, the researchers received ethical clearance from Fort Hare University to conduct the research. The ethical clearance number was TAN051SHEN01.

Findings and Discussion

A deliberation on the findings and discussion of the study derived from the interviews conducted with the participants in thematic order follows below. The main themes identified were expectations and appearance versus reality (the illusion of social media), social media as a form of recreation, and Facebook as a connecting and networking site.

Expectations and Appearance Versus Reality: The Illusion of Social Media

All 30 youths agreed that using social media has given rise to the youth living conflicted lives because of the discrepancies between appearance and reality. All female participants identified falsifying their appearance on social media to fit in.

People are no longer real out there. We are now leading fake lives. It is all about fitting in and catching up with the new trends in town. No one wants to be left behind. (Participant 1)

We are living to impress, shying away from ourselves. (Participant 3)

There is a lot of peer pressure that comes from celebrity influence and people end up lacking self-content when they do not live according to the desired expectations. (Participant 24)

Another factor identified by all males aged 18 to 24 was idealising hooligans as role models for their money and cars.

The thing is we also want to do what our favourite artists do. We want their vibe. We want their style. At the end, we end up doing erroneous things such as stealing and land up in conflict with the law. (Participant 29)

We live in rural areas and have no shops that sell name brand clothing like some of the rich dealers in the city wear. A dealer comes to my village ever so often every time with a different car. I always admire his posts on Facebook and I imagine myself being just like him later in life even though I know he does immoral things to get money, I want to be admired too. (Participant 27)

Young people in the village are easy targets to intimidate into sex work, stealing, becoming drug dealers and many other illegal activities simply because most youngsters in the village become side-tracked and envious by the glamorous lives people post on social media. (Participant 20)

All the participants from the Great Kei Municipality identified depression as a factor stemming from the illusion of social media.

I would like to believe many people are sad, especially youth, because sometimes they do not get the attention they seek on social media. When your favourite picture, say on Facebook or Instagram does not get any likes, that hits your self-confidence hard. We have become a sad generation with happy pictures. (Participants 14)

People seek validation on social media but when things do not turn right, the consequences are dangerous. (Participant 16)

I had to delete my Facebook account in 2018 because I received nasty comments on my photographs for not having nice clothes like other students in my college. I isolated myself and nearly dropped out of college because I could not bear being the poor boy from the village. I spoke to a friend of mine about the teasing and he advised me to delete my Facebook account for a while and focus on my studies instead. (Participant 13)

Corroborating the findings of this study, Berezan et al. (2018, 460) state, “happiness can be a never-ending and often inexorable goal for individuals in society.” The use of social media has validated this claim. Among the youth, pursuing happiness has become almost an obsession, pretending to be happy at any cost (Freitas 2017) and this resonates with one participant who expressed that we have become a sad generation with happy pictures. The happiness illusion on social media gives the youth pressure to go out of their way to create impressions and appearances that are not in accord with reality. This resonates with Verduyn et al. (2017) who assert, “social media platforms allow people to portray themselves in a more idyllic manner than their reality depicts.”

Appearance versus reality dilemma has become a normal for the youth on social media where they dress up as celebrities and pretend to be bourgeois, which is a cause for concern. Social media users, especially the youth, feel the constant pressure of creating impressions since their happiness is derived from excitement and the desire to belong (Berezan et al. 2018). However, when impressions do not complement expectations, feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem manifest. Those that seem to attract the desired attention are not spared from the appearance-versus-reality conflict, as they become victims of imposter syndrome, a condition defined by Breeze (2018, 201) as a psychological habit where persons doubt their achievements and live in constant distress of being uncovered as a fraud. This stems largely from the lack of self-regulation where the youth are relentlessly active on social media with no measure to control their habitual use. Lacking self-regulation undermines one’s ability to practice self-control. As Bandura (2001, 22) argued, “people possess the ability to control their choices, feelings, and behaviours through self-regulation processes.” When one fails to practice self-control efficiently, precarious behaviours may arise, such as addictions and mental health issues. Challenging uses of communication technologies, such as the internet, cellular phones, computers and social media, stem largely from the user’s deficiency of self-control, which this study identifies as lack of self-control.

Appearance and impression creation by the youth is a technique to compensate for the inadequacies that come from social comparison, a phenomenon defined by Festinger (as cited in Park and Baek 2018) as a condition whereby one sees and evaluates oneself based on the abilities and beliefs of others. However, Appel, Gerlach and Crusius (2016) argue that social media commonly surges social comparison and resentment, leading to negative effects such as depression. Perpetual comparison with others becomes a major threat to identity formation. Doster (2013) highlights that social media have a substantial influence on identity formation among the growing youth. There is a considerable possibility of youths comparing themselves with significant others in the society (Kawakami et al. 2012). Therefore, they cease to develop naturally as themselves but succumb to desires brought by peer pressure leading to identity crises. However, in conclusion, the social cognitive theory is a learning theory asserting that people acquire knowledge through observation and duplicating behaviours and positive reinforcement. Thus, the youth in rural areas who identify positive role models such as successful

entrepreneurs and university graduates from rural areas who attained success, could achieve positive attitudes and outcomes.

Social Media as a Form of Recreation

The absence of adequate recreational infrastructure in South African rural areas coupled by the need of the youth to occupy and own their space has made social media an immediate and accessible form of recreation among the youth across all age groups. This is validated in the declarations below.

There is so much fun on social media. It is just a click away. The memes, the jokes and the beautiful stories shared are worthwhile. (Participant 17)

When I feel bored, I take my phone and go on social media. Here we do not have enough recreational facilities and social media has been a good option. (Participant 8)

Social media helps me a lot. Sometimes you are in a group of people and you feel unwelcome. When that happens, I resort to my phone. It has always been my refuge. (Participant 29)

Some people are introverts. They are not comfortable with hanging around with many people in public, for instance going with friends to watch a rugby match or a soccer match since they are the common sports here. Social media becomes their world where they get all sorts of entertainment. (Participant 10)

We have taken to the social media partly because there is freedom there, free from adult monitoring. This is why I like to spend my time on social media more than any other space. (Participant 5)

Social media are an environment in which the youth are exposed to influences on how they think, feel and behave in many instances. According to the study findings by Mbat (2013), the majority of youths in urban areas similar to the youth in rural areas spent most of their day on their cellular phones browsing through social media platforms. Social media have become a major part of the social environment for the youth and influence their behaviour. Mbat (2013) explains that online social media include “collective podiums such as wikis, blogs, and discussion boards that can be used to form virtual communities”. Online social media are communiqués and cooperation tools found in wide-ranging fields including educational institutions. The potential for the promotion of practical and factual learning has improved. Bandura (2001) further explains that humans possess infinite prospectives that can be moulded from unambiguous and observational understanding. In observational scholarship, a sole prototypical can propagate new ways of intellect and acting synchronously to countless people in dispersed locales. The social cognitive theory also postulates that persons function within socio-structural systems of which they are products and producers. Human nature is shaped by direct observable experiences through many processes,

which are essentially human, signifying aptitudes, self-regulatory aptitudes, self-reflective aptitudes, and displaced aptitudes.

“Since, familiarity of social media increases with experience, users tend to form habitual use as a daily routine” (Diddi and LaRose 2006, 196). According to the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1997, 267), users’ behaviours may be idiosyncratic to previous involvement and self-reflection (Bandura 1997; LaRose 2009). Some studies suggest that previous internet experiences assist users in mastering multifaceted tasks and in developing the acuity of self-efficacy.

Social media platforms provide the youth with control over who they interact with and many have taken advantage of this. The youth enjoy and own their space on social media, and according to Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018), they are the largest social media population cohort. In South African rural areas, the number of adults on social media is so insignificant that rural adults do not have the motivation to use social media as to them it is difficult owing to their technology illiteracy and inaptitude. In this regard, social media provide the youth with what Jack (2010) terms peace and quietness, for relaxation and retreat, which in the view of these writers, is free from adult surveillance, hence it serves as a significant, alternative form of recreation. In summary, self-efficacy is the degree of strength of one’s confidence in one’s own preparedness and aptitude to complete responsibilities (Bandura 2001). Although the youth in rural areas use social media as a form of recreation, they could also join business ventures such as becoming representatives of brands such as Epoch Cosmetics that are advertised on social media. By joining business opportunities, the youth learn skills and ultimately gain economic freedom.

Facebook as a Connecting and Networking Site

Social media enable both empowerment activities and social interactions (Berezan et al. 2018). In line with this, all 30 participants highlighted that contrary to the negative effects of social media that have largely been identified, social media, particularly Facebook, has been a significant connecting and networking site for the youth in rural areas.

Social media is not always bad. I mostly use my Facebook account for job and scholarship opportunities. (Participant 12)

There is a lot of information you can find on Facebook through networking. Facebook is not just a platform to share jokes and pictures. If one is wise enough, they can find job opportunities there. (Participant 23)

Social media connects people. Some have been able to find their relatives on social media, particularly Facebook. (Participant 13)

With Facebook, I know I have the whole world in my palm. I stay connected and get updates on what is happening regarding my interests and things I like. (Participant 5)

My cousin introduced me to Twitter saying it is one of the best platforms to stay connected. I opened an account, but I can say I prefer Facebook to Twitter because, I think Twitter is for high profiled people. For us in the rural areas, Facebook is the best, it is easier to use and that is where most of our friends and relatives are anyway. (Participant 26)

Facebook is a good platform for networking and tracking long-lost friends and family. It also serves as a form of encouragement to some youths when they see what other youths their age with similar backgrounds and challenges managed to achieve. This coincides with Bandura (2001) who wrote that “users’ outcome expectations act as cognitively significant stimuluses guiding the ways in which individuals take action, such as embracing advanced communication technologies”. Individuals’ predictions principally rely on their intended or unintended understanding of the behaviour being reflected (Bandura 1986). Equally, persons assimilate the use of media, which is judiciously enabled by the predicted outcomes they aim to attain. Therefore, possible results are significant interpreters of internet use (Khang, Han, and Ki 2014). Facebook is the most frequently used form of social networking worldwide (WebIndex 2014), no wonder it has emerged as an important connecting and networking site among the youth even in the remotest of areas, including in South African rural areas. Social networking, according to Berezan et al. (2018), involves the sharing and consumption of knowledge, information and ideas. Results of the study indicate that Facebook has assisted youngsters in promoting their local businesses, advertising job opportunities and recruitment of the youth (Anderson et al. 2014). Lekhanya (2013b) found that in villages in rural KwaZulu-Natal, some youths have started successful companies manufacturing clothing and shoes of local brands through Facebook advertising. Also, with the multitude of the social issues South Africans face, the youth in the most remote areas use Facebook to become social activists campaigning for social justice and equity by sharing their stories of injustice.

Sharing important information such as job vacancies and scholarship opportunities, promoting small businesses and in some instances connecting with long-lost friends and relatives have been the most critical areas for which rural youths use Facebook. Perhaps Facebook is the most accessible source of information to the rural youth owing to the paucity of other sources of information such as newspapers owing to the remoteness of rural areas to towns and cities. Using Facebook for networking is what Verduyn et al. (2017) refer to as the active use of social media, which they suggest is healthy and beneficial as compared to passive use, which, they say, can make us unhappy and depressed owing to social comparison. Finally, through promoting the positive benefits of using Facebook such as job opportunities and scholarship opportunities, self-efficacy could be endorsed.

Limitations of this Study

One of the study limitations was travelling as driving to the rural areas was deemed problematic owing to state of the gravel roads. Another limitation was that the participants requested elaborative explanations to the questions posed which resulted in the data collection consuming more time than what was planned initially.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the social media platform mostly used by the youth in rural areas is Facebook. These youths use social media as a form of recreation as there is a lack of recreational activities in rural areas. The youth use social media for networking, sharing information and locating long-lost friends and family. The negative side of the use of social media in rural areas is that the youth idealise immoral role models that land them in conflict with the law. Many youths, especially females, in rural areas compare themselves to others more fortunate than them and when they do not gain, the expected popularity often leads to mental disorders such as depression.

Recommendations

As the use of social media is on the increase in rural areas, the youth should be educated by social workers in nearby towns on using social media platforms in a positive manner such as connecting with friends and family and advertising small business ventures. The passive and active use of social media are key areas for which the youth require education. Awareness campaigns on the implications of the use of social media on the mental health of the youth would serve a worthwhile venture. A further suggested topic is the dangers of social media and online dating of learners in rural areas.

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