

Integrating the Impact of Digital Media and Social Networks on Human Communication and Behavior

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Abstract. *This study aimed to investigate the impact of social media and other forms of online communication on individual and group dynamics. The study used a mixed method, where data were collected through a survey of 500 individuals and semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. This methodology allowed the study to gain a comprehensive picture of the impact of digital media on mental health, online activism, digital citizenship, and social media addiction. The results showed that digital media has both positive and negative impacts on users, with the majority of participants acknowledging the importance of online activism as a tool for social change and digital citizenship as an important aspect of safe and ethical use of digital technology. The study also found that social comparison was a significant factor in social media addiction and negative effects on mental health. These findings emphasize the importance of digital literacy and monitoring online behavior in order to use digital media positively.*

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INTRODUCTION

Digital media and social networks have revolutionized how we communicate, access information, and interact with one another. These platforms have become essential components of our daily lives, connecting people across immense distances, facilitating the exchange of ideas and opinions, and shaping our perceptions of the world. However, the influence of digital media and social networks on human communication and behavior is a highly significant and intricate topic. Examining the influence of digital media and social networks on the manner in which we communicate is a crucial component of this analysis. Individuals are now able to communicate their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives on a global scale as a result of these platforms.

We will investigate how digital media has influenced the development of language, discourse, and interpersonal communication, as well as the implications for identity formation, self-presentation, and the formation of social relationships. Moreover, digital media and social networks influence our cognitive processes and decision-making in addition to our communication (Estelami & Florendo, 2021; Cheng et al., 2017). Our beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions can be influenced by the constant flow of data and the algorithms that curate our online experiences. We will investigate the impact of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and information inundation on our worldview, opinion formation, and the potential for polarization and misinformation.

According to O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson (2011) Digital media and social networks have significant societal implications for behavior. These platforms have enabled the mobilization of social movements, facilitated collective action, and provided a forum for the expression of marginalized voices. Nonetheless, they have also raised concerns regarding cyberbullying, online harassment, and the erosion of privacy. The role of public policy and ethical considerations in

addressing these challenges and fostering responsible digital citizenship will be investigated. The internet and social media have become deeply embedded in our modern culture. Researchers are looking into how the proliferation of digital media and social media platforms affects people's ability to connect with one another and share ideas. Many academic disciplines have taken notice of this development, including sociology, psychology, and communication studies (Nocker & Sena, 2019).

According to Gómez-Galán et al. (2020) Multiple elements influence the impact of digital media and social networks on human communication and behavior, as stated. Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020) state that researchers are looking into issues including online activism, digital citizenship, social media addiction, and the effects of social media on mental health. Researchers in this area are interested in how the rise of social media and other forms of online interaction are changing our everyday interactions with one another (Bin Naeem & Kamel Boulos, 2021).

According to Dwivedi et al. (2021) The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the rise of digital technologies like the Internet and social media have altered human interaction. Its goals are to survey the field's previous work on the subject, pinpoint any knowledge gaps that exist, and offer fresh perspectives. The study will collect data using both qualitative interviews and statistical surveys to get a full picture of how digital media and social networks affect people's lives (Popa et al., 2020). This thesis seeks to shed light on the manner in which digital media and social networks are changing our social reality by analyzing their effects on human communication and behavior. Possible policy and intervention implications for fostering healthy and meaningful digital age communication are discussed.

The influence of digital media and social networks on human communication and behavior is a phenomenon that is multidimensional and dynamic. It is essential, as we navigate the digital landscape, to critically evaluate the effects of these platforms on our social interactions, cognitive processes, and societal dynamics. By comprehending the transformative effects of digital media and social networks, we can leverage their potential for positive change while proactively mitigating the risks they pose. We can reach a future in which digital media and social networks enhance human connection, nurture inclusive communities, and promote informed and meaningful communication by balancing the benefits with ethical considerations, privacy protection, and responsible engagement. The aim of this article is to investigate the effects of social media and other forms of online communication on individual and group dynamics.

METHODS

The research strategy for this study was a mixed-methods, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques for gathering and analyzing data. Complex phenomena, such as the influence of digital media and social networks on human communication and behavior, were best studied using this method since it allowed for a more in-depth and nuanced comprehension of the subject. In order to collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with people familiar with digital media and social networks. In-depth interviews probed respondents' thoughts on issues including online activism, digital citizenship, social media addiction, and the potential negative effects of social media on mental health. The interviews were done in person or by a video calling service like Skype or Zoom, depending on the availability and location of the participants.

As part of the study's quantitative arm, online surveys were sent out to a representative sample of the population. Participants' social media usage, digital activism, digital citizenship, social media addiction, and mental health were all evaluated through a combination of open-ended questions and Likert-scale items. The survey was disseminated via email lists and online discussion groups in addition to social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were applied to the information gleaned from the interviews and surveys. The qualitative data analysis used a thematic analysis strategy, in which overarching themes and patterns in the data were extracted and classified.

Quantitative data were analyzed using both descriptive statistics (like mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (like correlation and regression).

This research employed a mixed sample method of random and intentional selection of participants. Participants were sourced from various internet communities, mailing lists, and personal connections. Participants had to be over the age of 18, have some familiarity with computers and the Internet, and be open to taking part in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Data Collection Methods and Participant Numbers

Data Collected	Number of Participants	Data Collection Method
Semi-Structured Interviews	20	In-person or Online Video Conferencing
Online Surveys	500	Online Distribution via Social Media Platforms, Email Lists, and Online Forums

For this study, the participants were interviewed and/or asked to complete the online survey that comprised of 520 participants in total. The interviews were face to face or via online video link with 20 participants using a semi-structure interviewing technique, and this made it possible to gather rich details from the participants' own experiences and beliefs. This research approach allowed the researchers to collect detailed qualitative data at face value without rigidly quantifying the changes which resulted from immigration and refugee policies on the participants. This is due to the fact that semi structured interviews are especially useful for exploring issues which are ambiguous in nature as they allow the researcher to go deeper into the participants' answers and elicit further information which might not be obtainable if more structured approaches were used (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

Besides, structured online questionnaires were also administered to a sample of 500 participants through online social networks and mailing lists, online forums and newsgroups, and websites. This approach was used to help the researchers focus far and wide and reach a large cohort of people as this helped the researchers get a wide range of views. A few reasons why online surveys are beneficial accruing data from a large number of participants fast and inexpensively include when the target client base is dispersed including immigrants and refugees (Borkert et al., 2018). Another advantage of using both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys is that they offer a rich and nuanced picture of the research topic. The interviews offer richness and context while the surveys offer coverage and generalisability to the findings.

Table 2. Participants' Perspectives on Online Activism

Finding	Percentage of Participants
Online activism provides a platform for social change	80%
Online activism is less effective than in-person activism	15%
Online activism is not a legitimate form of activism	5%

The table shows results concerning participants' attitude toward the concept of online activism: an overwhelming majority of the participants (80%) believe that online activism is a powerful tool in achieving social change. This implies a potential universal acceptance of the use of technology platform in appealing for support, creating awareness and advocating for different causes. These are due to reasons such as ease of use, ability to reach out to a large audience and speed at which the information is spread.

Nevertheless, there are less convinced participants that online activism is less powerful than the offline one (15% of participants) and there are those who find such kind of activism illegitimate at all (5 participants). These perspectives raise issues on the effectiveness and legitimacy of online activism as against offline activism (Chon & Park, 2020). The pundits opine that this online activism which is commonly known as slacktivism do not bring about the same result as

the traditional 'kick asses' activism and may in fact not bring about any result. However, the findings that the majority of participants showed their support in online activism in this study also suggests that online activism has evolved as an acceptable and useful method of activism or at least as a complementary or even a replacement of face to face activism in the modern society.

Table. 3. Participants' Perspectives on Digital Citizenship

Finding	Percentage of Participants
Digital citizenship is important for responsible use of digital media	85%
Digital citizenship includes protecting personal information online	70%
Digital citizenship includes engaging in respectful online communication	75%
Schools should provide education on digital citizenship	90%

Participants' responses about digital citizenship and their perceived relevance as well as components is presented in the table below. The participants' perception on the importance of DC demonstrated that 85% of them agreed that, DC was important for the responsible use of digital media. Thus, the fact that so many respondents supported the idea of addressing digital citizenship in order to influence proper behavior refers to the understanding of the need for the corresponding experts' intervention. Moreover, 70% of participants recognise the ability to guard one's information online as a crucial component of being an active citizen of the digital world, thus underlining the increasing awareness of users regarding their privacy and data control in the context of the information society (Distler et al., 2020).

The third behavioural statement is equally important also because that is what 75% of participants believe to be part of being a good digital citizen; meaning and practice of civil and ethical tone in social media. Last but not the least; it emerged that a massive 90% of participants agreed with the proposition that schools should educate people on digital citizenship showing high levels of awareness about the relevance of educational organizations in developing such competencies. Consistent to previous research, these findings underscore the need to introduce and integrate digital citizenship in educational curriculum to enable the learner to learn the appropriate conduct and behaviors that are necessary when engaging in cyber space (Karagiannis & Magkos, 2021).

Table. 4. Participants' Perspectives on Social Media Use

Finding	Percentage of Participants
Social media addiction is a real phenomenon	80%
Participants have experienced negative consequences from social media use	70%
Participants have tried to limit their social media use	60%
Participants feel a sense of FOMO (fear of missing out) when not using social media	50%

The table displays results of survey questions that were asked about social media usage amongst the participants. Another important parameter shows that 80% of respondents acknowledge that one can be addicted to social media, which means that the problem is recognized by a rather large number of people. This is in consonance with prior research that has also established social media as being addictive, with the availability being influenced by design features that enhance the use of these media. Additionally, 70% of the participants indicated that they experienced negative impacts of using social media that could be related to factors such as anxiety, disruption of sleeping pattern or reduced working productivity. This is in support of other works that have established correlation between high levels of use of social media with mental health issues as a signal of risk of the negative impact of overuse of the media platforms (Boer et al., 2021).

Moreover, as concerns 60% of subjects, they have ever tried to reduce their frequency of visiting social networks which is an indicator of the awareness about the negative impact of these sites and the willingness to regain the control. This is still an effort at self regulation and although it is clear that such attempts may have different results based on the strategies used and outside help (Inzlicht et al., 2021). Notably, the participants reported Moderate to High levels of FOMO (fear of missing out) which has been established in the literature to cause compulsive use of social media (Tugtekin et al., 2020). These results point to the ambivalent attitude of users toward social media and their awareness of threats on the one hand and psychological factors that make moderation difficult on the other hand.

Table 5. Participants' Perspectives on the Effects of Social Media Use

Finding	Percentage of Participants
Social media use is associated with increased feelings of anxiety	65%
Social media use is associated with increased feelings of depression	60%
Social media use is associated with decreased self-esteem	50%
Social media use is associated with increased social comparison	70%

The table shows the following conclusion regarding the psychological effects of using the social media social media use and its relation to negative mental health among the participants. For instance, 65% of respondents said that social media use leads to anxiety, whereas 60% said social media use leads to depression. Furthermore, more than half the participants said that their self-esteem reduced, while 70% of the participants said that social media use contributed to social comparison. Thus, the results presented herein highlight the ubiquitous nature of social media and its impact on an individual's psychological health and well-being; this is in light of the fact that the pressure and comparison culture in social media spaces may be responsible for these negative psychological outcomes.

These studies are consistent with prior research which has identified correlations between specific social media usage and negative mental health effect. For instance, researchers have realised that the persistent bombardment of perfect images and lives that are portrayed on social media leads to a rise in social comparison, therefore increasing feelings of insufficiency, anxiety and depression (Prejban, 2021; Chambers, 2021). Furthermore, the decrease in self-esteem found in participants supports the claims that social media points people to have negative effects on body image and self estimation especially those in the youth bracket. These findings suggest a need for programmes to combat psychological effects of social media use, for example raising awareness and education on healthy social media use.

The connection between social media and mental health is one of the emergent topics and focuses of discussions in the recent years. The result emerging from this study, showing that social media has positive correlation with anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and social comparison in large number of participants, contribute to this emerging research. This sensitively discusses these results relative to other studies and underscores the HMA role in comprehending how social media affects mental health, and ideas for future studies and programs.

The result here where 65% of the participants observed that there is a correlation between the use of social media and anxiety in line with other similar research conducted in other institutions. For instance, Varchetta et al. (2020) demonstrated that social networking sites have been linked with heightened levels of anxiety, particularly among the young person, attributed to the need to keep on posting and fear of missing out (FOMO). This feeling which is characterized by the unease that people have of not being included in group activities or activities of groups of people, is made worse by the fact that through social media platform users are constantly exposed to the activities of other people (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Furthermore, through an instant communication service such as social media, they experience live connectivity that makes them more apt to be online, pressured and thereby stress

themselves (Watkins, 2009). This is in tune with the result got in the current study where the participants felt anxious about their social media accounts. It is, however, noteworthy that some of the established research has stated that there is a mutual causation between social media use and anxiety, whereby those who are vulnerable to anxiety are most likely to overuse social media leading to a more of a circle (Primack et al., 2017).

That the percentage of the participants, who said they experienced more depression after using the social media is 60%, confirms other similar studies. Liu & Capambell (2017) in a meta-analysis established that indeed there is a small but significant effect of social media usage on depressive symptoms. This may be as a result of social comparison, cyber bullying or the tendency for people to spend more time online instead of face to face interaction.

Self comparison, especially, was noted to be a major source of depressive symptomatology. People simply show the best side of their lives on the social media sites and this makes others develop a tendency of comparing themselves to the images portrayed thus making them develop low self esteem and depression. The current study also concluded in this regard as 70% participants agreed that they have undergone social comparison due to social media. Moreover, the survey by Fergie et al. (2016) have established that people, who are active on social media, have symptoms of depression in case they spend a lot of time not sharing any content but rather only viewing the content shared by other users. Such passive activities may reinforce the negative image of the self, thus, play an encouraging role in depressive symptoms.

The fourth research question examined whether participants had experienced low self-esteem due to the use of social media, and the overall response rate was 50 % for both male and female participants that have low self-esteem due to social media consistent with previous studies that have explored the effect of social media on the self-image and body image. Tiggemann & Slater (2014) discovered that there exist a correlation between the uses of social media especially image social media such as Instagram and the reduction of self-esteem and increase in body dissatisfaction among the users particularly young women. This is because of the addictive nature of the images that circulate in the social media and also because the more one is exposed to the images, the more one have to look like the images so as to fit into the deemed beauty standards, hence reducing the esteem of the users.

In addition, the effect of number of likes, comments and followers on one's social media self esteem. Some user might develop social comparison and ends up developing poor self esteem whenever they are not pleased with their social interactions through the new media. These conclusions are in line with the current study's results providing evidence of the negative impact of reduced self-esteem, a phenomenon which the external validation achieved via SNS can have.

That 70% of participants responded positively to the statement reflecting association of social media use and social comparison is worrying because social comparison is highly related to adverse mental health. According to Verduyn et al. (2020) social comparison theory that maintain that people have an inherent tendency to carry out self evaluations, often in relation to others, to minimize uncertainty about their opinions and abilities. It has been postulated that individuals use the information coming from other people and compare themselves with them incessantly, to the detriment of one's well-being (Verduyn et al., 2020).

As for the research evidence concerning the negative consequences of social comparison in SNSs, there are quite a few studies that have provided the evidence. For example, Latif et al. (2021) stated that daily users of social media regularly perform upward social comparisons, which involve comparing oneself to others whom one perceives to be superior in some capacity, thus resulting in feelings of envy and lowered self-esteem. This is more evident for the social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram where persons post hues of their lives thus developing a reference with which others measure themselves.

The current study supports this premise of prior studies by establishing that social media use predicts heightened social comparison. This is where the importance of such intervention

approaches that could assist users to use social media more positively, perhaps by encouraging self-compassion and reducing reliance on social comparison is asserted.

These findings are particularly significant on policy and practice implications. Considering the established relations between social media usage and adverse mental health consequences, there is a growing demand for protective strategies. This approach could involve designing and launching awareness campaigns or programs to take the user especially the youngster through potential dangers of social use and how to better handle it. Such programs could focus on issues regarding the critical evaluation of the materials posted on social media and the negative consequences of social comparisons. Also, social media platforms could be incentivized, or even required, to incorporate positive mental health solutions. For instance, platforms could introduce tools that allow users to monitor their time spent on social media and set limits, thereby reducing the potential for excessive use that is linked to anxiety and depression (Primack et al., 2017). Additionally, algorithms could be adjusted to reduce the visibility of content that promotes unhealthy comparisons or body standards, similar to how platforms have begun to tackle misinformation.

Furthermore, mental health professionals should consider incorporating discussions about social media use into their practice, particularly with younger clients who are more likely to be affected by these issues. Therapists could help clients develop strategies for managing social media use in a way that supports rather than undermines their mental health, such as focusing on positive interactions and setting boundaries around social media engagement (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This research have important implications for our understanding of how digital media and social networks affect human interaction and behavior. The results imply that digital media can have both positive and negative effects on users, and that the connection between media and human interaction is nuanced and diverse. The research underlines the necessity for individuals to be cognizant of their online behaviors and to make an effort to utilize digital media in a responsible and useful manner, and highlights the significance of digital literacy and digital citizenship education. The results also indicate the need for additional studies to be conducted in order to fully comprehend the effects of digital media on psychological well-being and addiction and to design efficient measures to counteract them. The results of this study add to the growing body of literature on the effects of digital media on human interaction and behavior. Given the pervasive nature of digital media, research into its effects and the development of methods to encourage positive and healthy consumption are vital. By doing so, we may mitigate the harmful effects of digital media while still reaping the benefits of empowering individuals and fostering constructive societal change.

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