



Gender Disparity in Social Media Usage among Teenagers in Kashmir, India

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Abstract

The Contemporary Social Media era is not just a trend. It is an indispensable part of the fabric of modern society. The everyday life of millions of people has become entwined with social media. They depend on it to disseminate information, peruse their social networking profiles, read messages, update posts, etc. Ease of connectivity and dynamic interface has made Social Media evolve from being limited to as a media for communication to a highly specialised online platform which acts as a medium for breaking immediate news in real-time, a virtual trading place which offers online shopping abode for people, a podium for seeking a job, and a medium for displaying creativity. Though these sites are used globally by millions of people of different age groups, the teenage generation is the massive user of this technology and is very competent in using these technologies. While these digital natives are tech-savvy by virtue of being born in the era of technology and modern gadgetry, they are also a diverse group regarding their attitudes and capacities concerning the practice of digital media use. Against this backdrop, this study intended to delve into social media usage by these teenagers, focusing on possible differences between male and female teenage users. This study was conducted to look at gender-specific behaviours related to social media usage. The study involved eight Focus Group Discussions in which 32 male and 28 female participants were involved. The study provides an enhanced insight into how gender difference plays a role in teenagers' discernment of social media use. This study aimed to research the dissimilarities in the usage of greatly evolving social media platforms and also to provide an advanced perceptive understanding of the role that gender disparity plays in the digital media age.

Keywords: Social Media; Teenagers; Male; Female; Gender; New Media Technology; Social Networking Sites

Introduction

Social media has developed as an essential aspect of teenager's social, personal and creative lives. The vast range of social media tools available gives them more flexibility to interact in the best possible way. They use Social Media to have fun, make and maintain friends, share interests with online global communities, and explore different things about different people living in different parts of the world. With these social media sites, they can increase their social circle to an extended level. In recent years, the popularity of digital media has significantly increased to an amazing point where it has become a central part of the lives of these teenagers as they are the most active users of these sites worldwide.

Adolescence, the most vital phase of human life, is characterised by the

transition from childhood to adulthood. During the teenage years, the child is more inclined to increase their social circle and interact with people. It is a transitional stage in the life of human beings where they undergo various physical and mental developments leading them from childhood to adulthood.

Teenagers are a unique group occupying a middle ground between childhood and adulthood, between work and leisure. Present-day teenagers were perhaps the first to use the internet for communication, interaction, and sharing of content, files, etc., and they were also the first to have regular uninterrupted internet access. Therefore, the usage of these social media sites is especially prevalent among young adolescents born at the age where technological innovations have reached unprecedented levels (**Messina & Iwasaki, 2011**).

Online Social networking websites have fully intermingled with the communication requirements of the present generation as they have espoused this medium for all types of dispatches, whether it is to stay connected with peers, share news, promote products, shop, or engage in various aspects of their lives. A number of studies suggest that most teenagers and youthful grownups use social media regularly (**Kuss & Griffiths, 2011**).

It has also been found that teenagers who use social networking sites have a greater number of online friends (**Pfeil, Arjan & Zaphiris, 2009**). Technological convergence has enabled teenagers to use plenty of sophisticated gadgets and gizmos to conveniently access a variety of social media apps.

Due to such convenient accessibility and innovative technological advancements, social media have exceedingly embedded in the daily lives of teenagers. Research conducted in the past two decades has suggested that gender remains a significant social structure influencing the use and consequences of social media among adolescents. To investigate gender as a factor in teenagers' social media practice, a study by **Manago, Walsh and Barsigian (2023)** explored whether youngsters' identification with traditional gender ideologies helps simplify gender variances in their social media use determinations. Girls indicated a higher use of social media for emotional bonding, appearance validation, and social returns, whereas boys reported a greater focus on competitive activity bonding. The findings suggests that gender plays a key role in understanding the uses and indulgences of social media during adolescence.

A study by **Twenge and Martin (2020)** revealed that teenage males and females engage in different digital media actions, with girls dedicating extra time to social networking while boys are more committed to online gaming. Gender differences were also noticed between digital media time and psychological well-being. The associations between substantial digital

media use and greater health consequences are more pronounced among girls. At the same time, it was found that light, digital media use and higher well-being are stronger among boys. Thus, the study indicates that gender plays a noteworthy role in teenagers' digital activities.

Yet another study by **Ali et al. (2021)** examines gender disparities related to social media usage and its impact on the academic performance of adolescents. Results showed clear variances in social media usage among teenage boys and girls. It was revealed that boys mainly used social media for communiqué and interaction, while girls use it for educational motives. Numerous other studies have identified significant gender dissimilarities in the screen activity of adolescents, a study by **Leonhardt and Overa (2021)** found substantial gender differences in video gaming among 11 to 19 year olds in Norway. The study discovered a high percentage of gamers among boys irrespective of age, while girls exhibited less gaming as they got older. Such studies on how the genders of this generation manoeuvre their social media usage aim to explore the relationship between social media site usage and the gender of these teenagers. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the impact of gender on the use of social media among these teenagers.

Objectives

Social Media is currently used addictively by teenagers worldwide, making it essential to study its usage among the current generation, specifically focusing on gender differences. The study emphases to find out the different ways in which these young adolescents use social media and how the use of this media differs between males and females. The study attempts to discover the gender-specific preferred social media uses of these sites.

Literature Review

Contemporary teenagers are the most prolific users of social media. They live and grow in a setup where digital media mediate most aspects of their life. Hence, there is a probability that their experiences and opportunities in the coming era will be shaped by their engagement with social media.

Boyd (2007) tried to find responses to the queries relating to what drove teenagers to Social Networking Sites, the content they communicate on these sites, and how these websites affect their lives. He asserts that these sites possess four attributes that do not usually exist in face-to-face community setup: perseverance, ability to search, ability to exact copy, and unseen viewers.

To determine the motives behind using social networking sites, **Barker (2009)** recognised that the main aim of adolescents using social networking sites was to connect with peers. This study observed that the

respondents with high positive collective self-esteem were sturdily interested in interacting with peer groups by using social networking sites. Similarly, a study by **Kwiatkowska (2019)** lists numerous reasons for children's internet use, including a fondness for computers, seeking information, leisure purposes, escaping boredom, developing friendships or socialising with older friends. It also suggested that sensible use of digital media tends to be advantageous for children's mental well-being, while no use or excessive use can have a slight adverse impact.

While the use of social media can offer many benefits to adolescents, it can also lead to specific adversarial effects that may incite and augment suicidal thoughts and behaviours. A study by **Balt et al. (2023)** attempted to provide digital suicide prevention strategies and found that teenagers were aided by peer support and recovery stories. The study discussed the detrimental effects of social media, including addiction, activities simulated, etc. It was discovered that a group of girls developed an online identity centred on their suicidal thoughts. The study found that parents faced various challenges discussing social media use with adolescents, including digital technology literacy, online anonymity, and other related issues.

Rousseau and Puttaraju (2014), while exploring the gender difference in the use of these sites in young adults in Bangalore (India), found that men prefer using social media for networking, dating, chatting, and endorsing their preferred brands or actors, while women use these sites to see what others have posted, create and share new content, sharing knowledge, updating their profiles and search for jobs.

Another study by **Saleh, Fallahchai and Griffiths (2023)** aimed to examine the role of attachment styles and gender in various online addictions in adolescents reported that young adults were more engaged in online activities. It was also found that online addiction behaviours increased with age, and online gaming obsession was more dominant among males than females.

The extensive use of social networking among teenagers has also raised apprehensions about its consequences on adolescents' health and well-being. As social media is progressively assimilated into the everyday lives of these adolescents, apprehensions have been raised about the possible detrimental impact of its usage on their mental and emotional well-being. A study by **Boer et al. (2021)** examined whether increased social media usage and the complications associated with social media were linked with low mental well-being. The study also aimed to determine whether these associations were related to decreased school accomplishments and reduced face-to-face communication. Findings revealed a direct link between social media usage and issues associated with mental well-being. Evaluating opportunities and risks offered by social media sites,

Livingstone and Brake (2010), in their study “On the rapid rise of social networking sites: new findings and policy implications”, focused on how the opportunities and risks offered by these media are interdependent. The study also highlighted the significance of introducing safety deliberations in the designing and running these sites.

Methodology

The study attempted to find out the different ways young adolescents use social media and how the use of this media differs between males and females. The qualitative research method was the most appropriate and convenient method for collecting data. The research was conducted through Focus Group discussions (FGDs).

Focus group discussions are instrumental in discovering and investigating people’s perceptions of certain topics or issues under discussion without compelling them to come to any conclusions or reach any agreement. A Focus group is a spontaneous debate between a particular group of people regarding any given topic or issue (**Wilkinson 2004**).

The researcher conducted eight Focus Group Discussions. Each group consisted of 6 to 12 participants. The teenagers were aged between 16 and 19 years. All the participants were undergraduate students of both genders - the respondents included 32 Males and 28 females. The selection criterion was that the participants should be the users of Social Networking Sites. During the FGD, emphasis was placed on interaction between the Focus Group participants.

FGDs were held in mixed groups, and both boys and girls participated. Participants in a group were selected according to their age and the class they were studying in. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality to encourage maximum collaboration and ideal participation.

The primary determination for conducting FGDs was to draw online profiles of young social media users, explore their motives for SNS use and identify the variation between male and female users.

The data as such collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The Focus Group Discussions were transcribed, carefully examined, and finally coded. The transcription was analysed using the content analysis method and then coded. The coded sentences were later used to define the themes. Finally, the researcher collected coded sentences with similar meanings under the same themes.

Discussion

Gender Disparity in the use of Social Media

Frequency of Using of Social Networking

For teenagers who are born and brought up in digital age with all the latest technologies and digital platforms at their disposal the social media

platforms are woven into the fabric of their lives. Teenagers are at present considered to be the most enthusiastic social media users among all age groups as their growth and that of these digital technologies are complementary. Social Media has become the most significant ingredient of their life as it is linked with their craving for attention, reaction, corroboration from peers. It was revealed that both male and female participants were using social media sites with great enthusiasm. The participants revealed that they were spending 5 to 6 hours each day on surfing these sites. It was also found that smart phones are fueling more persistent online behavior of these teenagers as they are aiding convenience and constant access. Though both boys and girls equally likes to spend time on SNS but boys are considerably making extra efforts than girls to spend more on more time on social media.

Usage of Social Media

Study revealed that male members were largely using these sites for communicating with friends, to find old friends or to establish new contacts. While as the female participants revealed that in addition to using this for communication purpose they also use it largely for chatting and gossiping about different people. Hence the data revealed that the female teenagers are frequently chatting and gossiping through social media sites compared to male respondents. It was also revealed from the data that girls participate more in a broader assortment of communication activities compared to boys. It was also found that Kashmiri teenagers have created many pages on Facebook, which are full of gossips. These pages include Hottest Teens of Kashmir, Teenagers of Kashmir, Teenagers of Srinagar, Kashmiri Cute Girls etc. All such pages are created and joined by these teenagers to make confessions about certain things in their life e.g liking a boy, Proposing a girl, family issues etc .

Preferences of Social Media

Digital media provide a broad spectrum of choices pertaining to information retrieval and interconnectivity in the form of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc. In this context, respondents exhibit a varied preference pattern regarding the social media use. The data reveals that Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter are widely used social media sites among the teenagers in Kashmir. It was found that both boys and girls are equally inclined to use Facebook, but the popularity of Instagram is more among girls. Female users were found to largely prefer visual social media platforms, however male teenagers descend extra towards text-oriented platforms. Pinterest and Instagram were found to have a greater female handler base, while male were found to be more engaged with online discussion forums. It was found that girls have a more preference towards using such social media platforms that have more multi-media interactivity. Girls were found more inclined towards using

the social media platforms that are visually oriented as they find it exciting to view the pictures of their favourite celebrities and also come to know about the latest trends in fashion and accessories through the visual medium.

Use of Multiple Social Networking Platform

It is pertinent to mention here that a very interesting pattern was revealed that not one but multiple Social Networking platforms were used by the majority of the teenagers. The easy access to the internet combined with all social networking sites promoting free access has made it easy for teenagers to use multiple social media accounts. The survey revealed that boys were more into having multiple social media accounts than girls. Also, many of the boys were having multiple accounts on a single social media site. Such cases were very less in girls. The teens also revealed that they use multiple social media applications simultaneously.

Ownership of Smart Phones

It was found that Smartphone ownership was nearly universal among the teenagers aged 15 to 17 years, the data also show that there is a gender based disparity regarding the ownership of smart phones between boys and girls. It was revealed that boys are more likely to own a smart phone than girls. Many girls revealed that they did not own any cell phone and were using the cell phones of their elder siblings or their parents to access Social Media, while boys were more independent in their access to the same.

Privacy concerns

These sites are designed to encourage more and more sharing, and teens share extensive information about themselves. Boys and girls had different choices regarding sharing of personal information on these sites. Girls were less likely to share many things about them on their profiles. It was found that girls were more concerned than boys about uploading any personal information online. Teenagers are generally comfortable sharing information like their name, school name, age, email address, gender, and the name of their state or city. However, they were most hesitant to share details that could make it easy for someone to locate them, such as their home address or phone number. Boys were more likely to share their real name, city, town, and cell phone number than girls. This differential pattern in sharing between boys and girls was attributed to the social set-up where the girls generally transmitted messages about their own safety and the need to protect themselves through different rules set up by society or family. Girls were found to be under family compulsions regarding sharing personal things on social media, as in the case of girls, the majority of family members do not allow them to share such stuff. None of the teenage girls were confident about sharing their personal pictures and videos on SNS; instead, their sharing brought on a negative

feeling and fear of the pictures being misused. However, most of the boys do not have such inhibitions when sharing their personal clicks and videos online. A common concern among the girls was that they feared societal pressures or the adult's response and the consequences of uploading such stuff.

Online harassment

Online harassment is a serious issue in the use of SNS by teenagers worldwide. The majority of studies consulted on the topic revealed that online harassment or cyberbullying poses a significant risk to victimised adolescents' mental and physical health. It poses various psychological threats to teenagers like anxiety, depression, isolation and even suicidal tendencies. However, the present study reveals that the cases of online harassment among Kashmiri teenagers are negligible. Most of the teenagers in this study revealed that they had never witnessed any kind of harassment on Social Networking Sites, like identity theft, cyberstalking, cyberbullying or blackmailing on social media. The boys in the study refused to have faced any kind of harassment on social networking sites. Although instances of online harassment involving girls are also quite rare, they are more likely than boys to encounter such situations.

Fake Profiling

Fake profiles are found to be created mainly by female respondents. However, many male respondents also reported creating fake identities on Social Networking Sites. Most of the girls said they create fake profiles to hide their identity because of family pressures, as they are not allowed to join and use social media platforms. They expressed that if they create a genuine profile, their parents or siblings will continuously stalk their Social Media profile, so they won't feel free to express themselves. Hence to escape the prying eyes of adults fake accounts are created.

Online Gaming

Online multiplayer games are becoming very popular among teenagers. These games are becoming an essential part of social media space for these people. Games like Clash of Clans, Warcraft, League of Legends, etc, are the current craze among these youngsters. However, from the Focused Discussion Groups, it was found that the craze of online games was more prevalent in boys than in girls. Though many of the girls also said that they like playing online games.

Age inappropriate content

The respondents of the study viewed the availability of age-inappropriate content on social media as quite appealing to them. However, boys were more likely to look for such content online than girls.

Conclusion

People of all age groups use social media, but adolescents are the most

avid users of this media and use it for various reasons. It was found that certain social aspects, such as family patterns, age and communication among teens, play a significant role in the social media usage of these young individuals. Gender differences are evident in social media usage and the amount of time spent on the sites. The sites most popular among youngsters of both genders are Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, but the admiration for Instagram was discovered to be greater among girls. The data further revealed that girls on average spend less time on these sites and practice them less frequently than boys. Female teenagers were found to chat and gossip more frequently on social media sites than males. They also participate in a broader range of communication activities compared to boys. The survey found that boys were more into having multiple social media accounts than girls. There is a gender-based disparity regarding the ownership of smartphones, it was revealed that boys are more likely to own a smartphone than girls. Further, the girls were less likely to share many things about them on their profile and hence were found to be more concerned about their privacy. The girls were found to be more concerned than boys about the uploading of any personal information online. The cases of online harassment among these teenagers were found to be negligible, but girls were more likely than boys to observe such occurrences. The study revealed that fake profiles are largely created by the female respondents on Social Networking Sites. The data also revealed that the craze of online games was more prevalent in boys than girls.

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