Social Media in a Mental Health Dismissive Society

Social Media in a Mental Health Dismissive Society

Author
Hamza Shahid

Review and Edit
Hija Kamran
Usman Shahid

Design and Layout
Aniqa Haider

MediaMatters
*for***Democracy**
Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

With steadily growing access to the internet, particularly after the coronavirus pandemic, social networking platforms are becoming more of a necessity than avenues for recreation among young people. However, with online users on the rise around the globe, leading tech corporations have seen growing concerns and criticism regarding how they regulate content across their platforms. While challenges such as disinformation and hate speech have sparked intense debates around the world, the lack of effective and inclusive strategies to regulate online content is also sounding the alarm, especially where young users and their wellbeing is concerned.

Unlike countries in the Global North where mental health is not only a mainstream discussion but is also considered of utmost significance for human productivity, a lot needs to be done in the Global South in this regard. In Pakistan, inadequate access to treatment and social stigma attached to seeking professional help are among many factors that contribute to the neglect individuals with mental health issues face in society. Similarly, the rising number of young users on online platforms necessitates the documentation of the risks and challenges posed by tech corporations' negligence.

This study explores, through data and engagement with diverse participants, how lack of accountability of social media corporations plays out in a society like Pakistan where mental health is disregarded at every level and where the government's draconian regulations impede the space for a healthy dialogue and results in failure to ensure a safe online environment for citizens.

The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Assess the situation for content regulation on social media in relation to young people's mental health
2. Examine the impact of tech corporations' certain practices through individual experiences in light of the past and continuing scrutiny of social media platforms and lacking accountability
3. Explore society's failure to acknowledge mental health and its implications on the framework established by the government to regulate content on the internet

The research was developed on a mixed methods methodology. Through a quantitative approach, a questionnaire was developed to gauge the impact of social media content and consumption on respondents. A total of 208 respondents who took part in the survey were between the ages of 11 years and 25 years. A qualitative approach was adopted to gain insights into individual interactions with social media and study the impact of certain kinds of online content against mental health as a neglected field in Pakistan.

The data collected through these research methods were then analysed in direct relation to the possible impact that tech corporations can have on young users' mental health due to their negligence, especially towards communities in the Global South.

Following are the key findings from the research study:

1. The average daily estimated screen time of the respondents was 7 hours. It ranged from 30 minutes to even 17 hours. The average screen time spent on social media was 5.2 hours.
2. 7 in 10 respondents (70%) confirmed that they have been left triggered, disturbed or distressed by specific content on the internet. Majority of such content was reported to be found on Meta-owned Instagram, and Google's YouTube.
3. More than 80% of the respondents stated that they have reported the content they found disturbing to the social media platform, but only 37% confirmed the removal of the reported content.

4. For image-based application Instagram, half of the respondents said that they have been made to feel inferior due to unattainable beauty and living standards promoted on the platform, while nearly 39% suffered from body image issues. A significant majority (86%) held that

5. Instagram promotes unrealistic material standards.
   The lack of conversations around mental health at homes was confirmed by 6 in 10 respondents (65%), while only 3 in 10 said they have mental health awareness at their educational institutions.

6. Nearly 8 in 10 respondents said social media has impacted their mental health. 8 in 10 (84%) confirmed they have never sought professional help for mental health problems.

7. 5 in 10 of the respondents said they considered quitting social media at some point and the reasons included toxic online content, circulation of graphic/violent images, frustration and unrealistic material standards.

8. When asked what participants would like to change about social media, the responses ranged from the removal of graphic, sexually explicit and hateful content to toxicity and material that can instill insecurities in young people.

9. Some interviewees shared in detail how appearance-altering tools on social media made them feel better virtually, but depressed once they logged out of the apps.

10. A few participants also opened up on their experiences with alarming activities on their social media accounts and how they served as catalysts for blackmail, causing constant fear and anxiety particularly after their private messages were breached.

11. The teachers interviewed from various schools maintained that there have been no mental health awareness sessions or discussions on healthier and informed use of the internet at their institutions.

Introduction

The increasing ubiquity of the internet, along with countless bankable avenues it is creating for the masses, has made it an integral part of our lives today. Social media, in particular, has connected communities and shrunk spaces the world over like no medium before.

But with the rapid expansion of these sprawling online communities, an influx of diverse content is pouring into the digital sphere every day from every corner of the world, mounting concerns and calls for effective regulation for social media companies with regard to their handling of potentially harmful content posted and promoted on their platforms.[1]

Over the past decade, with online users crossing the billion-mark threshold globally, the debate around security, privacy, content regulation, and measures to ensure user wellbeing by social networking companies has broadened to include various underlying aspects which major tech corporations are accused of either not taking into account or completely disregarding, prioritising profits over public good in a bid to increase user engagement and gain wider visibility.

Social media's inherent broader tendency to disseminate content and its recreational tools have repeatedly raised concerns with regard to users' mental health. Several studies have established links between social media use and an increased risk for mental health disorders, especially among young people.[2] Simultaneously, tech corporations' failure to devise concrete measures to regulate damaging content on their platforms have also been subjected to intense scrutiny.

These long-standing concerns and allegations regarding the absence of an effective and inclusive mechanism for active moderation were intensely fuelled following the emergence of the Facebook Papers in 2021.[3] Despite earlier claims of its products' positive overall benefits, parent organisation Meta (formerly known as Facebook) was found to be aware of Instagram's negative impact on the mental health of teenage girls while making little efforts to mitigate the sources of harm across the platform.[4]

The explosive leaks, published by The Wall Street Journal, were followed by other major publications bringing forth stories about how Meta was aware of the damages such as worsening mental health problems and violence being caused by its products around the world.[5] The whistleblower and former Meta employee, Frances Haugen, went on to testify before the lawmakers in both US and UK and stressed the need for external regulation.[6] Besides her serious revelations about the inner workings at Meta, Haugen warned Instagram might never be safe for either a 10-year-old or a 14-year-old and that Meta-owned platforms stoked ethnic violence in developing countries. Meta, however, responded by claiming that the company did not do business at the expense of people's safety or wellbeing.

While discussions in the Global North on the performance of social media companies continue to highlight challenges and threats that need to be tackled systematically, lack of accountability and tech corporations' failure to adopt an inclusive approach towards communities in the Global South remain to be addressed.[7]

01. Reisach, U. (2020, May 23). *The responsibility of social media in times of societal and political manipulation.* ScienceDirect. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0377221720308249#bib0088

02. Karim, F., Oyewande, A. A., Abdalla, L. F., Ehsanullah, R. C., & Khan, S. (2020, June 15). *Social media and its connection to mental health: A systematic Review.* National Library of Medicine. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7364393/

03. Milmo, D. (2021, October 25). *Facebook revelations: what is in cache of internal documents?* The Guardian. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/25/facebook-revelations-from-misinformation-to-mental-health

04. Wells, G., Horwitz, J., & Seetharaman, D. (2021, September 14). *Facebook knows Instagram is toxic for teen girls, company documents show.* The Washington Post. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/what-are-the-facebook-papers/

05. Staff, W. S. J. (2021, September 29). The Facebook Files. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039

06. Milmo, D. (2021, October 25). *Facebook revelations: what is in cache of internal documents?* The Guardian. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/25/facebook-revelations-from-misinformation-to-mental-health

07. Takhshid, Z. (2021). *Regulating social media in the Global South.* SSRN Papers. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3836986

In Pakistan, the situation is further exacerbated by society's failure to take mental health seriously and absence of a safe online environment through transparent accountability mechanisms on governmental level.[8]

It is essential to identify and gauge the impact of social media on teenagers and young adults in a society where mental health is widely disregarded, and has yet to become a mainstream discussion. This study aims to gain insights into adverse psychological effects resulting from the lack of accountability of social media corporations and its consequences that young people face in the absence of mental health discussions on various levels in society.

The study, through quantitative data and documentation of individual experiences, aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Assess the situation for content regulation on social media in relation to young people's mental health
2. Examine the impact of tech corporations' certain practices through individual experiences in light of the past and continuing scrutiny of social media platforms and lacking accountability
3. Explore society's failure to acknowledge mental health and its implications on the framework established by the government to regulate content on the internet

8.   Editorial (2022, March 24). *Barriers to seeking psychiatric help.* Dawn. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.dawn.com/news/1663128/barriers-to-seeking-psychiatric-help

Methodology

This research analyses the impact of leading tech corporations' negligence towards young users, particularly in the Global South, against the backdrop of a society's dismissive attitude towards mental health. A mixed methods design, incorporating qualitative and quantitative strategies, has been used to collect the data.

1. Quantitative Data Collection

A survey with both open-ended and closed-ended questions was designed to collect quantitative data for the research. The data gathered through the survey instrument ranged from frequency of social media use and nature of online content to social media platforms' response to reported content and its impact on mental wellbeing of young users.

The combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions provided a clearer understanding of the responses to questions which aimed to elicit the respondents' varied experiences and feelings with regard to social media and issues surrounding mental health. The mixed approach was also effective in determining individual opinions by allowing respondents to share unexpected crucial insights into the subject. In the pretesting, 20 questionnaires were sent out to check the instrument's readability.

The survey was undertaken by a total of 208 respondents from across Karachi.[9] The targeted population was primarily students at three levels of education: school, college and university. The data was collected through personal contacts at educational institutions who used online groups for maximum exposure for the researcher-designed survey.

2. Qualitative Data Collection

Comprehensive interviews were conducted with five participants belonging to various age groups to study and break down the level of impact on mental health resulting from the consumption of social media content. The respondents were identified mainly through personal links, and the study also incorporates past experiences of the researcher within the related field.

Additionally, six teachers and two mental health experts were also brought on board to share their own experiences and insights on relevant cases. Interviews with three mothers of primary school students have also been conducted to study the frequency of social media use and lasting effects from uninformed use of the internet and tech corporations' detrimental business practices with regard to active and timely content regulation.

These conversations were analysed primarily against the revelations from the Facebook Papers to examine the performance of social networking products on which certain practices were found to be negatively impacting young users' mental health.

9.   Karachi is the largest city in Pakistan with an estimated population of over 16 million

Limitations

The researcher encountered a major limitation while conducting this study. The researcher believes that a project of such nature could have provided a more comprehensive analysis if carried out on a larger scale. Due to the majority of participants being limited to educational institutions from one city, a careful generalisation had to be extracted from the findings.

Interviews with five select respondents presented the researcher with significant insights into their personal experiences on social media and its impact on their emotional wellbeing. They were studied against the survey findings to assess major commonalities between responses and the extent to which certain practices of tech corporations on their social networking products can affect young people. However, including experiences and viewpoints of more respondents would have been comprehensive to the study.

The study presents a baseline for further research on the topic in Pakistan and in the Global South.

Survey Findings

Following is the breakdown of data collected through a survey of 208 respondents from different educational institutions from across Karachi. Out of 208 respondents, 99 identified themselves as male and 109 as female. The survey was circulated online in the English language.

Limitations in Data Collection

1. It was noticed during the analysis of the collected data that some respondents did not fully understand the question about screen time. It appears that they could not differentiate between estimated daily screen time and time spent on social media. For instance, in some cases, the time spent on social media exceeded the estimated daily screen time. However, these responses were examined independently of each other.

2. A few respondents reported their screen time to be 24 hours, which is humanly impossible. These responses were omitted while calculating the overall average screen time and time spent on social media.

3. Some vague answers were also noticed in response to open-ended written questions regarding desirable changes on social media platforms.[10]

Demographics

The majority of respondents (53.5%) belonged to the age group of 16-20 years. Those aged between 21 and 25 years comprised 35.6%, while 10.6% of respondents belonged to the age group of 11-15 years.
Most of the respondents (55.9%) were university students, 15.5% enrolled in colleges, and the remaining 28.6% were school students at the time this study was conducted. 60% respondents started using social media between the ages of 11 and 15 years, 29.3% between 16 and 20 years, 8.7% while under the age of 10, and 1.9% were exposed to social media after the age of 20.

Respondent's education level

University (55.9%)   School (28.6%)   College (15.5%)

---
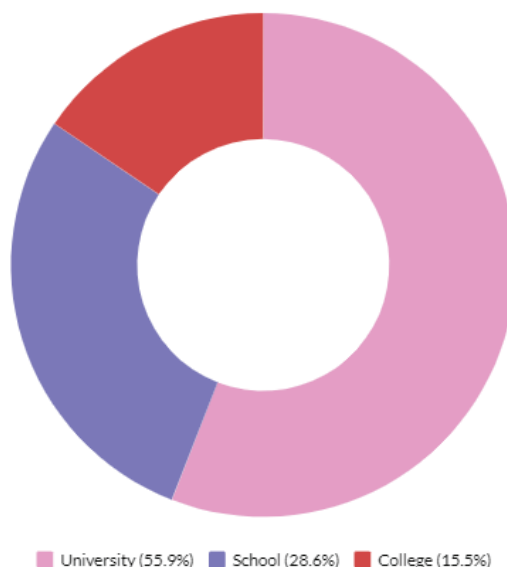
10.   Terms such as 'negative' and 'harmful' limited the interpretation of some responses

Popular Platforms and Screen Time

Instagram emerged as the most popular social networking platform, with 150 respondents using it most actively. Instagram was followed by WhatsApp (137) and YouTube (109). The least actively used platforms among the respondents were Snapchat (52) and TikTok (16). Instagram has the most active usage primarily because of its image-manipulating tools and wide exposure.

Most actively used social media platforms

Legend: YouTube (20.07%) Instagram (27.62%) WhatsApp (25.23%) TikTok (2.95%) Snap chat (9.58%) Facebook (14.55%)
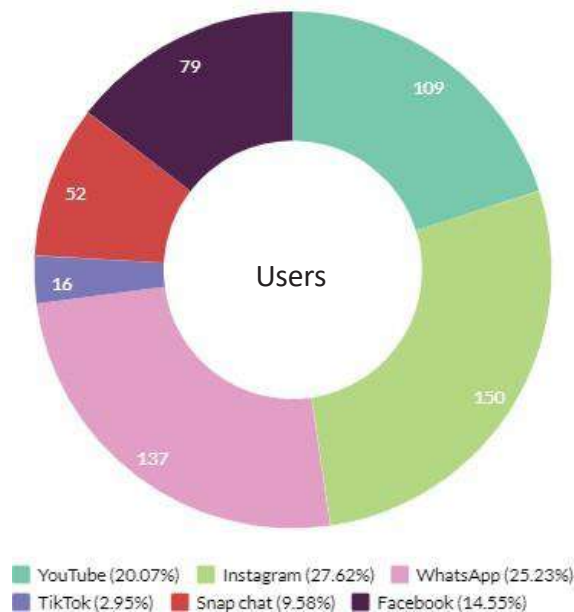
The estimated daily screen time of respondents was 7 hours.[11] The screen time was relatively higher among college students compared to their counterparts from schools and universities. One possible explanation, supported by some students, for this can be long hours that college students have at their disposal since the majority of them take tuitions privately instead of attending regular morning classes. The average time spent on social media was around 5.2 hours.
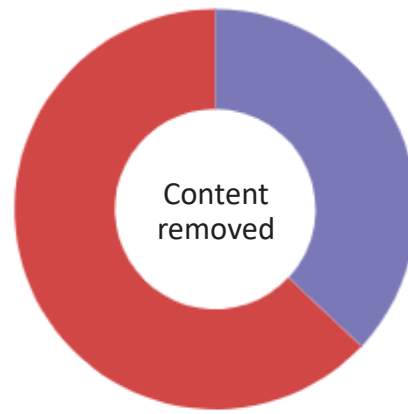
Online Content and Mental Health

Over 7 in 10 (73.1%) respondents stated that they have been left triggered/disturbed/distressed by specific content on social media at some point. 38.9% of respondents found this content on Instagram, 24.5% on Facebook, 13.5% on YouTube, 11.1% on WhatsApp, and 4.3% on TikTok. About 0.5% of respondents said they came across upsetting content on all of the mentioned social media platforms.

Over 8 in 10 respondents said they reported the content that they found disturbing to the social media platform through the platform's reporting tools, but only 37% confirmed the reported content was taken down. 26.4% respondents said they have been victims of malicious activities online.

11.   Shahid, U. (2020, November 19). Screen time affects children's physical, emotional growth. SAMAA English. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://www.samaaenglish.tv/news/2182096

Content reported

Content removed
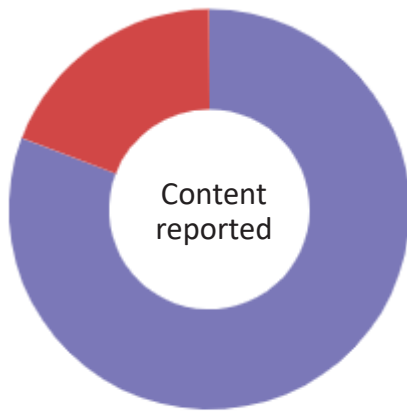
■ Yes (80.8%) ■ No (19.2%)   ■ Yes (37%) ■ No (63%)

38.9% of respondents said they suffered from body image issues because of unattainable material standards promoted on social media. Of these 81 respondents, 49 were girls and young women. Over 8 in 10 respondents agreed that Instagram promotes unrealistic beauty standards. Instagram has been widely studied and scrutinised for its damaging model for users. In 2017, while Instagram had 700 million users worldwide, it was ranked as the worst app for young people's mental health largely because of the unrealistic content that fuels comparisons and instils body image issues in young women.[12]
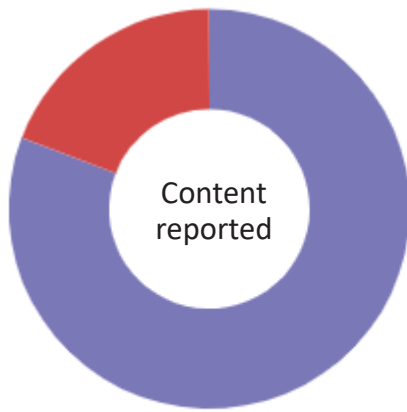
Does Instagram promote unrealistic beauty standards?
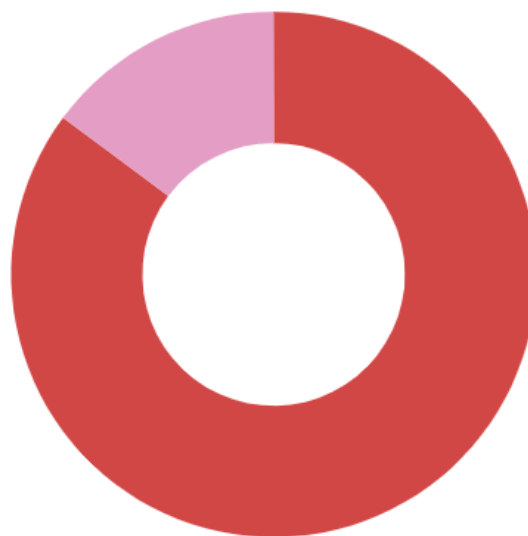
■ Yes (85.2%) ■ No (14.8%)

In terms of mental health, 76.9% of respondents said social media has impacted their mental health, while only 15.9% confirmed seeking professional help for mental health issues. 65.9% respondents said there are no conversations surrounding mental wellbeing at their homes. Similarly, 57.7% said there is no mental health awareness at their educational institutions.

12.   Fox, K. (2017, May 19). Instagram worst social media app for young people's mental health. CNN. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from
       https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/health/instagram-worst-social-network-app-young-people-mental-health/index.html

Content reported — Yes (80.8%), No (19.2%)

Content removed — Yes (37%), No (63%)

38.9% of respondents said they suffered from body image issues because of unattainable material standards promoted on social media. Of these 81 respondents, 49 were girls and young women. Over 8 in 10 respondents agreed that Instagram promotes unrealistic beauty standards. Instagram has been widely studied and scrutinised for its damaging model for users. In 2017, while Instagram had 700 million users worldwide, it was ranked as the worst app for young people's mental health largely because of the unrealistic content that fuels comparisons and instils body image issues in young women.[12]

Individual Experiences

This section lays out the main findings from the interviews conducted with five respondents who agreed to volunteer for the study on the condition of anonymity. Although each respondent's experience with social media varies here, it highlights how lack of accountability of leading platforms can result in continued circulation of unchecked content and its potentially adverse effect on a user's states of mind. All respondents were of the opinion that the experiences they have shared, personal or otherwise, can be prevented if social media companies are held accountable for their practices, and there is a healthy environment that acknowledges mental health issues at home.

Following are the brief curated accounts of Respondents A, B, C, D and E.

Respondent A is a 14-year-old ninth-grader who opened up on how her insecurities were exacerbated by beauty filters on Instagram.

Two years ago, she started imagining herself beneath the sheen of celebrity on Instagram. New to the phenomenon of "influencing", she was intrigued by the staggering numbers of followers social media stars treasure online. Since she was not fond of using social media on her personal computer, a brand new smartphone had suddenly made her dormant Facebook profile all the more interesting, and the newfound glamour of Instagram was hard to resist for her.

"When stress came over, especially during exams, I just fled to these amazing profiles and forgot all my worries," she said. "It was so relaxing. Rich influencers, PR packages, vacations at exotic locations. Instagram was my idea of perfect entertainment."

While she regularly followed the posts of her favourite social media stars, including make-up moguls Huda Kattan and Kylie Jenner, "flawless" faces and "perfect" bodies did not bother her in the least. But things took a turn when she started using Instagram's viral beauty filters and they seemed like an ultimate cure to her biggest insecurity: acne.

"I had hardly any photos of mine on my Facebook account, but these [Instagram] filters instilled a sense of confidence in me," she recalled. "Instagram was where I started uploading my pictures without having to worry about my acne. In a way, beauty filters made me embrace my insecurities and they made me feel so much better."

She admired her "perfect" skin on the screen for a few days until she realised that she could not bear to look at herself in the mirror without these filters any more. Worse was her fear of coming face-to-face with people she knew only on Instagram. The flawless faces and perfect bodies that once did not bother her now made her reject her own appearance.

"I wouldn't be wrong if I said I had grown to hate myself. Now when I look back on it, I realise how young girls, already going through body image issues, can feel worse by beauty filters. It's almost like seeking refuge behind their gloss, only to find that it's all going to fall apart at the end of the day."

Respondent A believes that beauty filters may be one of Instagram's most prominent features, but not everyone is going to view or use them as recreational tools, especially young girls who struggle with various insecurities growing up.

Respondent B is a 24-year-old Media Studies graduate whose experience surrounded online blackmail after a private photo from his phone ended up on Messenger without actually being posted.[13]

"I remember I was posting a picture [on Facebook] I had just downloaded from Google but I ended up selecting a private photo of mine. Luckily, I had discarded the post [before publishing], but I kept scrolling up and down my profile to ensure it wasn't there."

Roughly an hour later, while still sweating and shaking from fear, he received a message from an unknown profile that was apparently not among his friends. To his absolute shock, this message was, in fact, the same photo of him that he had just stopped short of posting. There was no accompanying text. He tried to report the account but to no avail. He said he was not even sure at the time if reporting a post or an account on Facebook helped at all.

"What I feared most was the prospect of my friends receiving that photo, too. If that person, whoever he was, could send it to me like that, he could send it to my entire friends list."

In the days to come, he would check his photo gallery for similar photos repeatedly, eat little, experience severe anxiety, and struggle to leave his bed in the mornings. His parents, who had been noticing their son keeping mostly to his room, tried to talk to him on various occasions. But he would not open up; he was too scared to reveal that a single photo could turn their lives upside down.

"I had all sorts of disturbing thoughts during that troubling phase," he said. "It's been a long time [since 2019] but I still don't know how I made it through, it was horrible."

Though he never received any other message from that mysterious account again, he believed his photo was still circulating somewhere on Facebook. "I felt violated by the very fact that something that had not even gone up on the website landed in the hands of another user and how little I could do to prevent it."

Respondent B has long moved on but sometimes fears his photo can be used to blackmail him.

Respondent C is a 27-year-old Masters student who shared the story of her 13-year-old stepsister whose body image issues were fuelled by beauty-focussed ads on Instagram.

Her sister started using the mobile phone at the age of 10. Like many of her friends at school, her first exposure to social media was through Facebook. Initially, her friends list was quite decent, comprising mainly her classmates and a few other students, either junior or senior. But as it began to grow steadily, her sister's screen time increased too. The respondent said that her sister soon started using other social networking applications, including Snapchat and Instagram, out of curiosity.

"It wasn't long before we found her using social media heavily," she said. "She seemed to be perfectly all right for as long as she was using Facebook, but signs of aggression were evident after her social media use expanded."

She said that aggression was out of character for her sister, who had always exhibited a lively temperament. Since she visited her sister only twice a week, she could not know at first what was troubling her. Their mother often dismissed her sister's behaviour and remarked that "the phone had gone to her head.".

"But I knew it was something else," she said. "It all became clear when my sister came up to us one day and said she needed to 'improve' her lips."

She and her mother laughed at the 11-year-old and asked how exactly she meant to "improve" her lips, and the answer was " fillers". Neither of them was surprised.

"We obviously didn't take her seriously. Nobody takes kids seriously, especially when they talk about things that they know little about."

But as days went by, her sister retreated to one room and spent most of her time on the phone. When the two got to interact, she still insisted on getting the "perfect" lips. According to the respondent, she was sure her sister was mostly watching lip filler techniques on YouTube and rifling through profiles of social media influencers who specialised in make-up.

"She is still so obsessed with lip injections, it's the only thing on her mind," she revealed. "My sister has turned 13 now, but I know fully well she still feels bad about her lips."

Respondent C does not believe that image-based social media platforms such as Instagram should not exist, but because children can easily slip through the age restrictions by using mobile phones of their parents or siblings, or by forging dates while signing up, it becomes difficult to keep them from being exposed to unrealistic content that increases or stokes their insecurities. However, Fareeha Kanwal, a clinical psychologist and professor at the Institute of Professional Psychology (IPP) in Karachi, believes that this is where parents need to step in and ensure that their children's online activities are timely monitored. For this, parents, who are not tech-savvy enough, must familiarise themselves with social media platforms and tools available on computers and mobile phones to keep watch on their child's online engagement and interactions.

Respondent D is a mother of two boys aged 8 and 10, respectively. She voiced concerns regarding unsolicited sexual material on social media platforms.

In 2020, she bought two used phones to prevent the academic loss her children had been facing. Nearly a month had passed since schools moved classes online completely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the family needed more digital devices in order to keep up with the workload and maintain an uninterrupted communication with their school.

"Before the pandemic, I had restricted mobile phone use for my sons to only an hour or so," she said, adding, "and that too in the evenings when I could keep an eye on them after winding up all the chores."

But as online classes necessitated more screen time, she had no choice but to let her sons use phones without her supervision at all times, especially while she was away in the kitchen.

"It didn't just end with online classes," she said. "Mostly the teachers assigned them work that required the internet. I no longer had control over what my kids were consuming online."

One day she discovered a Facebook account (name inspired by cartoon titles "Jaan" and "Oggy and the Cockroaches") on one of the phones. Her sons had always used the phone to watch videos on YouTube; therefore, an account on Facebook was quite surprising.

"They told me that they had signed up on Facebook together," she said. "I only remember wondering how possibly they had done it. But then, of course, you know how sharp kids are these days. And honestly, it came to me as a surprise particularly because I'm not familiar with tech myself, so I thought it was a big deal, when it actually wasn't."

Initially, she did not mind them spending most of their spare time on Facebook. A week later, however, she started noticing that her older son would take the phone and disappear from sight.

"Whenever I entered the room he would look so alarmed," she said. "But he would simply hand over the phone when I demanded it back, so it didn't occur to me what he was really up to."

Because her son could use the phone better, she would not find anything that set off the alarm bells. Then one night, while she was scrolling down their Facebook feed, she came across a bunch of posts inundated with material she termed too mature for her children (such as photos of random semi-nude models). Further inspection revealed that they had 'liked' several pages that were fetching them inappropriate posts. "I was horrified," she said. "Besides these posts, I found advertisements for games which had abundant sexual material too."

Respondent D claimed she never confronted her sons but did ask them to delete the account and uninstall the app. Despite not being a frequent internet user herself, she was aware of its potential to empower people through social media, but her biggest concern was the lack of filters on social media platforms that expose young children to explicit content, which can potentially affect their emotional wellbeing.[14]

14.   The other two mothers contacted for the study also complained about nudity on social media platforms

Respondent E is a 25-year-old Computer Science graduate who developed an addiction for the easily accessible violent and graphic content on Facebook and YouTube.

He had been saving up for months to buy his first smartphone in 2016. He thought it would save him the trouble of logging into his Facebook account through his computer and also allow him to use the internet anywhere and at any time of the day. His presence on social media, which had been limited to only Facebook, expanded to Instagram and Snapchat just days after he received his phone.

"Facebook was my favourite social media platform where I could relax after wrapping up my school work," he said. "But the fact that my own phone allowed me more time on social media and helped me a lot through constant noisy arguments between my parents."

But then he revealed that it was on Facebook that he encountered graphic images of some influencer who had "shattered" his feet in a pool-jumping stunt gone wrong.

"The post was extremely disturbing, yet I realised that I hadn't scrolled past it," he says. "I found those pictures to be oddly mesmerising. Although I had been using Facebook for quite a while, nothing had hit me so strongly."

The post led him to more videos with graphic and violent material on Facebook, YouTube and a few other relatively unpopular video-sharing platforms. A few days later, he found himself addicted heavily to online content frivolously exploring self-injury and slowly began to develop a strong urge to cause harm to himself too.

"That's where things got scary," he said. "It was a feeling I could not put into words. Every day I was restraining myself whenever the idea of self-harm took over me."

He realised that he needed help but he did not have the courage to let his parents in on his addiction to sensitive content. When asked, the respondent admitted that psychological issues were a concept unheard in his household. Over the next few months, his obsession with self-injury reached an alarming level and that there was nothing he could do about it frequently plunged him into deep depressive states. Soon, he ventured beyond social media sites to seek more sensitive content.

Respondent E said that although he has outlived the phase where he found it difficult to resist the urge to consume sensitive content, he believes that this freely circulating sensitive content on social media platforms, especially Facebook, requires responsible handling by the tech companies.

Discussion

The survey findings for this project indicate that young users face serious mental health consequences as a result of their consumption of social media, especially when there is a lack of mental health awareness around them. Social media companies' failure to gauge the impact of their negligence towards young people is also evident from examining these findings against revelations from the Facebook Papers. Responses to questions pertaining to performance of leading social media platforms such Facebook and Instagram, to a large extent, reaffirm how tech giants fail to understand the potential impact of inadequate and inefficient content moderation,[15] which has an increased impact on users in countries like Pakistan where mental health awareness is low.

A significant majority of participants in the study confirmed Meta's inaction towards the content they found disturbing and requested to be taken down from the platform. This supports the claims that Meta's content moderation in developing countries is comparatively weaker because the firm does not ensure provision of adequate resources to reduce the resultant harm. For instance, nearly 87 percent of Meta's global budget focused on misinformation is spent on the United States and the remaining 13 percent on the rest of the world.[16] In addition, for over 3.6 billion users that Meta has worldwide, as of 2021 the company has employed a total of 15,000 human content moderators.[16] It is imperative to acknowledge that while Meta has an automated system of content moderation, it is inadequate to moderate those posts that leave harmful impact on the users, especially young users. So a fewer number of human content moderators who are overworked, underpaid, and exposed to disturbing content all day, for a large amount of content, is already insufficient.[18]

In light of the disproportionate distribution of resources between the Global North and South, it is safe to assume that the number of those moderating content in Pakistan is significantly low. This huge disproportion paints a clear picture of the discrimination shown towards expanding markets in the Global South that need a proper budget allocation to counter interlinked challenges.

In terms of image-based platform Instagram, survey figures and interviews further attest that it promotes unrealistic beauty standards and exacerbates body image issues for young users. According to the Facebook Papers, problems such as "social comparison" are inherent only to Instagram. This was also observed in responses regarding desirable changes in the survey, with most participants calling for the removal of content that sets unattainable beauty and living standards, and feeds young people's insecurities.

The study also brings to light the lack of mental health discussions both at homes and educational institutions, which appears to cause a barrier between young people and their parents in the face of evolving tech and the risks and challenges that it poses, particularly ones this report attempts to explore.

The six teachers contacted separately by the researcher also confirmed that their institutions do not prioritise mental health awareness.

According to Hania Kazmi, another clinical psychologist who has been associated with Al-Murtaza School in Karachi for over two years, parents must learn to create a safe space for their children by understanding and respecting their perspectives.

15. I.S.P. (2020, August 5). Moderate globally, impact locally: A series on content moderation in the Global South. Yale Law School. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://law.yale.edu/isp/initiatives/wikimedia-initiative-intermediaries-and-information/wiii-blog/moderate-globally-impact-locally-series-content-moderation-global-south

16. Popli, N. (2021, October 25). The 5 Most Important Revelations From the "Facebook Papers." TIME. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://time.com/6110234/facebook-papers-testimony-explained/

17. Thomson Reuters Foundation. (2021, December 20). Online content moderation: Can AI clean up social media? https://news.trust.org/item/20211217152644-j0521/

18. Perrigo, B. (2022, February 17). Inside Facebook's African Sweatshop. Time. https://time.com/6147458/facebook-africa-content-moderation-employee-treatment/

"When they start doing so, the child would know, without the fear of retribution or judgement, that their parents are open to discussions. Furthermore, parents must normalise discussions on difficult subjects routinely so the child would confide in them if something worrisome happens. Instead of being in parental mode all the time, they need to switch roles as friends too sometimes."

Fareeha Kanwal, on the other hand, says there is an increased need for conversations around mental health where young people's exposure to social media is concerned. "First and foremost, parents themselves need to be aware of the content that is uploaded to social media platforms. In our society, they really need to bridge the gap between themselves and their children because for the child to be comfortable enough to share these problems with their parents, there needs to be a congenial relationship."

Privacy concerns, hacking, online blackmailing, cyberbullying, and exposure to content with sexual and violent material can lead to harmful effects on a young user's emotional state, as explored in the interviews as well. Kanwal adds that the lack of effective age-restriction policies also contributes to exposure to inappropriate content that can affect behavioural changes in children, and can also lead them to doubt their self-image. She is of the opinion that apps like Instagram, which can influence an individual's view of their appearance, can at least reduce the harm by fixing loopholes that enable young children to dodge age restrictions.[19]

While the debate on social media companies and accountability is vast, the situation can be improved through transparent accountability mechanisms such as in countries that have the power to regulate social media corporations in the Global North. In Pakistan's case, however, repeated attempts by the government to acquire absolute powers without seeking consultation from the public or social media companies to censor any online content and control citizens' fundamental rights impede the space for a healthy dialogue.[20] Such draconian regulations have time and again raised serious concerns over Pakistani citizens' possible isolation from the global internet community instead of them being allowed an online environment that ensures safety, protection of privacy and overall wellbeing. Kanwal agrees that in a country where the government's focus is on controlling citizens' rights in the cybersphere, accountability of social media companies and addressing emotional challenges in the wake of increasing accessibility to digital resources will require extensive awareness, reforms and practical measures.

19.   Lines, F. (2022, May 4). *A Toxic Feed: Social media and teen mental health.* Al Jazeera. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from
       https://www.aljazeera.com/program/fault-lines/2022/5/4/a-toxic-feed-social-media-and-teen-mental-health
20.   Kamran, H. (2021). *A complete timeline of the controversial social media rules.* Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from
       https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/a-complete-timeline-of-the-controversial-social-media-rules/

Conclusion

There is an increased responsibility on social media companies in terms of how they regulate content and devise strategies that ensure wellbeing of young users. The internet's significance, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, cannot be discounted, but tech corporations' negligence towards communities in the Global South cannot be ignored either, given the burdening lack of mental health awareness here.

While the inherent flaws of social media continue to exist, there is a need for fostering an environment that is conducive to genuine and open conversations and which allows individuals to be aware of the risks and challenges in cyberspace.

To hold social media corporations accountable, it is imperative for the government to realise that conversations on issues with far-reaching consequences such as the ones explored in this study can only be initiated if social media, and the internet as a whole, is viewed as an agent of positive change in society. Blocking access to a social media platform for failing to comply with rules or pressuring them into agreeing to arbitrary demands shall not be adopted as a measure to contain harm as it will only raise questions on the country's credibility in the global digital community.

To address and tackle challenges posed by social media companies and to ensure productive digital reforms, the existing regulatory bodies can be equipped with proper oversight and participation from all relevant stakeholders.

References

Reisach, U. (2020, May 23). *The responsibility of social media in times of societal and political manipulation.* ScienceDirect. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0377221720308249#bib0088

Karim, F., Oyewande, A. A., Abdalla, L. F., Ehsanullah, R. C., & Khan, S. (2020, June 15). *Social media and its connection to mental health: A systematic Review.* National Library of Medicine. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7364393/

Milmo, D. (2021, October 25). *Facebook revelations: what is in cache of internal documents?* The Guardian. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/25/facebook-revelations-from-misinformation-to-mental-health

Wells, G., Horwitz, J., & Seetharaman, D. (2021, September 14). *Facebook knows Instagram is toxic for teen girls, company documents show.* The Washington Post. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/what-are-the-facebook-papers/

Staff, W. S. J. (2021, September 29). The Facebook Files. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039

Milmo, D. (2021, October 25). *Facebook revelations: what is in cache of internal documents?* The Guardian. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/25/facebook-revelations-from-misinformation-to-mental-health

Takhshid, Z. (2021). *Regulating social media in the Global South.* SSRN Papers. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3836986

Editorial (2022, March 24). *Barriers to seeking psychiatric help.* Dawn. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.dawn.com/news/1663128/barriers-to-seeking-psychiatric-help

Shahid, U. (2020, November 19). Screen time affects children's physical, emotional growth. SAMAA English. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://www.samaaenglish.tv/news/2182096

Fox, K. (2017, May 19). Instagram worst social media app for young people's mental health. CNN. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/health/instagram-worst-social-network-app-young-people-mental-health/index.html

I.S.P. (2020, August 5). Moderate globally, impact locally: A series on content moderation in the Global South. Yale Law School. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from https://law.yale.edu/isp/initiatives/wikimedia-initiative-intermediaries-and-information/wiii-blog/moderate-globally-impact-locally-series-content-moderation-global-south

Popli, N. (2021, October 25). *The 5 Most Important Revelations From the "Facebook Papers."* TIME. 0Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://time.com/6110234/facebook-papers-testimony-explained/

Thomson Reuters Foundation. (2021, December 20). Online content moderation: Can AI clean up social media? https://news.trust.org/item/20211217152644-j0521/

Perrigo, B. (2022, February 17). Inside Facebook's African Sweatshop. Time. https://time.com/6147458/facebook-africa-content-moderation-employee-treatment/

Lines, F. (2022, May 4). *A Toxic Feed: Social media and teen mental health.* Al Jazeera. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from
https://www.aljazeera.com/program/fault-lines/2022/5/4/a-toxic-feed-social-media-and-teen-mental-health

Kamran, H. (2021). *A complete timeline of the controversial social media rules.* Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from
https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/a-complete-timeline-of-the-controversial-social-media-rules/

Social Media in a Mental Health Dismissive Society

A short survey to assess content regulation in relation to young people's mental health

1) Age *
   - 11 - 15 years
   - 16 - 20 years
   - 21 - 25 years

2) Gender *
   _____

3) Currently enrolled in *
   - School
   - College
   - University

4) How old were you when you started using social media? *
   - Under 10 years
   - 11 - 15 years
   - 16 - 20 years
   - 21 - 25 years

5) Which social media applications do you most actively use? *
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - WhatsApp
   - TikTok
   - Snapchat
   - YouTube

6) How many hours constitute your estimated daily screen time? *
   _____

7) How much of your total screen time do you spend on social media? *
   _____

8) Has anything on the internet made you feel triggered/disturbed/distressed? *
   - Yes
   - No

9) Which social media platform(s) did you experience this content on? *
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - WhatsApp

- TikTok
- Snapchat
- YouTube

10) Have you ever reported content you found disturbing to the social media platform? *
- Yes
- No

11) Did the content you reported get removed? *
- Yes
- No

12) Have you ever been a victim of any malicious activity on social media? *
- Yes
- No

13) Have you ever felt inferior due to certain kind of content on social media platforms? *
- Yes
- No

14) Have you ever suffered from body image issues because of your presence on social media? *
- Yes
- No

15) Do you think Instagram promotes unrealistic beauty standards? *
- Yes
- No

16) Do you have mental health conversations at home? *
- Yes
- No

17) Do you have mental health conversations at school/college/university? *
- Yes
- No

18) Do you think social media has ever impacted your mental health? *
- Yes
- No

19) Have you ever sought professional help for your mental health? *
- Yes
- No

20) Have you ever considered quitting social media? *
- Yes

- No

21) If yes, what made you want to quit social media? *

    _____

22) What kind of content do you think should not exist on social media? *

    _____

23) If you could change one thing about social media, what would it be? *

    _____

About MMfD

Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) works to defend the freedom of expression, media, Internet, and communications in Pakistan. The main premise of our work is to push for a truly independent and inclusive media and cyberspace where citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We undertake various initiatives, including but not limited to training, policy research, movement building and strategic litigation to further our organisational goals. We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies, and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MMfD recognises diversity and inclusion as a core value of democracy and thus all our programs have a strong focus on fostering values and skills that enable and empower women, minority communities, and other marginalised groups.

MediaMatters
forDemocracy
Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative