An Investigation Into the Experiences of adolescents Using Social Media Technology

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Abstract
Social media technology (SMT), for example Facebook / Instagram / Snapchat, has become central to adolescent life with 96% of teenagers having a SMT profile (Coughlan, 2016). Previous literature has either investigated the discretely positive or negative implications for adolescent development or adopted a broad, quantitative approach lacking depth and quality. This qualitative study examined the experiences of adolescents who use SMT in a balanced, yet rich and detailed way. A constructivist-interpretive approach was adopted and 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted using a sample of 14-18 year olds and analysed through the 6-stage process of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings present a balanced, yet complex interaction between positive (e.g. feeling connected to friends and able to express true/ideal self) and negative (e.g. destruction of self-esteem/self-image and long-lasting feelings of distress) implications for adolescent wellbeing and development and offer a nuanced perspective on the use of SMT within this demographic, with suggestions for holistic support and intervention.

Methodology
Research Design:

Participants:
Twelve 14-18 year-old participants were purposively sampled (Richie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014), in order to:
• Promote an equal spread of ages and the self and negative (e.g. destruction of both gender).
• Provide a somewhat proportionate representation of special educational needs (SEN).
• Ensure participants were regular users of SMT platforms.
• Enable participants to be recruited from two contrasting secondary schools (one rural and one urban) within the UK.

Data collection and analysis:
One-to-one semi-structured interviews were used in order to report the detailed views of the participants and create an intricate representation of their subjective realities (Cresswell, 2013). Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phase process for thematic analysis and data was analysed in an inductive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results - Thematic Map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Connected</td>
<td>Expression of Self</td>
<td>Cyberbullying</td>
<td>Emotional Influencer</td>
<td>Construction of self-esteem and identity and feeling anxious</td>
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Overview of Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Feeling Connected
"...if I didn’t have social media I wouldn’t really have many friends as I would have now..." Theme 1 indicated that SMT may promote an increased sense of social connectedness suggesting positive affects on SEWBMH (Lambert et al., 2013).

Theme 2: 24/7 "I always check it for like an hour in the morning, usually at school break times and lunch then basically all night when I get home..."

Theme 2 reflected the ritualised and incessant SMT activity the participants reported. Risk factors for addiction, such as leisure boredom (Leung, 2008), and implications for SEWBMH caused by pathological SMT-use, were discussed.

Theme 3: Expression of Self
"[I prefer] my online self... because I’m more confident in myself"

Theme 3 suggested a complex picture for identity development. SMT appears to saturate a unique and valuable benefit through its ability to facilitate expression of self (Seidman, 2014), ideal self (Chua & Chang, 2016; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010) and social comparison and feedback-seeking behaviour (Harter et al., 1996).

Theme 4: Cyberbullying
"...people kind of think that they can put anything on there because they are behind the screen..."

Theme 4 suggested a range of emotion described by participants as a result of their SMT activity, from feelings of love and belonging to anxiety and despair. Notably, the subtheme of deconstruction of the ideal self participants wished to convey online, with possible implications for SEWBMH.

Theme 5: Emotional Influencer
"...I dunno if you are having a conversation and maybe they don’t reply it kind of makes you feel sort of down because you think maybe I’ve done something wrong or maybe they don’t want to reply to me...

Theme 5 reflects the considerable range of emotion described by participants as a result of their SMT activity, from feelings of love and belonging to anxiety and despair. On reflection, the adoption of participatory techniques may have minimised demand characteristics within the study and ensured the participants’ specific realities were accurately conveyed.

Strengths
• Sample size of twelve and saturation of themes within the 12 interviews, supporting the strength of the findings as suggested by Gest et al. (2006).
• Valid and unique contribution to research-base as the study addresses gaps in the literature by gaining a balanced, yet rich and detailed perspective on adolescents’ experiences and the suggested impact on SEWBMH and identity development.

Limitations
• An experimenter effect may have been present due to a perceived power imbalance between researcher and participant, exacerbated by the interviews being conducted in the school setting.
• On reflection, the adoption of participatory techniques may have minimised demand characteristics within the study and ensured the participants’ specific realities were accurately conveyed.

Implications for EP Practice
• Improved knowledge of the nuanced and complex implications of SMT-use on adolescents SEWBMH.
• Harnessing findings to support therapeutic approaches such as CBT, mindfulness and positive psychology in order to support SEWBMH and promote adaptive SMT behaviour.
• Systems work within schools/community settings to promote awareness of the positive and negative implications of SMT for adolescents and empower staff to address these issues at a strategic level.
• Working with schools and parents to promote an awareness of risk factors for pathological SMT-use, e.g. increased levels of leisure boredom.

References


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