
How Much of an Effect Does Social Media Have on Insomnia and Depression?

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PASS WITH MERIT

Research Paper based on lectures at the
Medlink or Workshop Conferences
at Nottingham University
in April 2014

Date:

19 July 2014

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research paper is to study the effects of social media on insomnia and depression. This study draws upon the literature and publications from academic and specialist sources on this topic. This topic was selected for its relevance to society at this point in time. The main problem this paper addresses is whether the use of social media has a negative impact on the mental well being of the users and whether there is a link between the extent of the usage and the user's mental state. This research paper concludes that social media does in fact have an effect on insomnia and depression in particular when used extensively. The most severe impacts are occurring when users are combining the use of social media with other factors such as emotional, psychological, environmental, biological, and genetic factors. People with these characteristics should restrict their use of social media, in particular in the last hour before going to bed.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a way of life for most of the current young generations all over the world. Social media allows all kinds of nations to connect in ways that only a few years before seemed unthinkable to even the most advanced scientists. Yet now it has more influence on our lives than we could possibly imagine. Children as young as three years old have their own iPads and can even manage iTunes accounts, whilst teenagers on average reportedly spend up to 7.5 hours on social media per day, according to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2013). Teenagers are even referred to nowadays as the 'Facebook generation', implying that they use this social media website excessively- it's suggested that the average amount of time a person uses Facebook per month is 15 hours 33 minutes. However the damage this social media usage is having on our health is greater than we have thought. Many people are suffering more from both depression and insomnia due to abusing the use of social media. In this article, we are going to explore the range of ways in which social media effects the risk of developing insomnia and depression, and how much of an influence it has on them.

DISCUSSION

Firstly, we are going to look at the impact that social media has on insomnia. But to begin with, what is insomnia? It is defined as being the difficulty in initiating or maintaining sleep, even when that person has the chance to do so. People suffering from insomnia can experience one (or some) of the following: fatigue, low energy levels, concentration difficulties, mood disturbances, and decreased performance in academic study/general work. There are two types of insomnia, based on their duration. There is acute insomnia, which is brief and mostly happens due to life circumstances e.g. stress before an exam. The other type of insomnia is chronic insomnia, which is disrupted sleep that occurs for at least 3 nights per week and lasts for a minimum of 3 months: this can have many causes e.g. environmental changes, unhealthy sleep habits, shift work, other clinical disorders, and certain medication. People with chronic insomnia may benefit from some form of treatment to help them get back to healthy sleep patterns. Chronic insomnia can be comorbid (it's linked to another medical/psychiatric issue). The treatment for insomnia can include: behavioural, psychological, medical components or any combination of the three.

One of the largest issues with social media (e.g. Facebook), is that it's possible to remain in contact with your friends from all over the world at all times of the day- these websites never shut down. Therefore, you can stay on your mobile phone and contact everyone you want to, whenever and wherever. Using a mobile phone in bed for messaging has been proven to increase chances of struggling to sleep- it takes longer for the brain to relax after concentrating on messaging. It's been reported that the UK's 30 million Facebook members spend a week each year on the social media site whilst in bed, which is 21 minutes per person per day and 72% of adults in the UK spend time before going to sleep on Facebook. This results in an increased risk of suffering from a sleep disorder such as insomnia. A study conducted by the West Virginia University Sleep Centre (2012) showed that a staggering 95% of us surf the web and use social media right before going to sleep. On average, Britons spend 9 minutes every night texting before falling asleep, and 40% of adults said they have regular text communication with friends in bed every night.

These social media websites allow people to stay at home and go out less to meet with friends, because they can simply chat to them online. Studies have shown that staying indoors in your home all day makes people too relaxed, which creates difficulty in initiating sleep at night. Many users of social media leave their mobile phones switched on at night; 25% of Facebook users claim to be woken up by smartphone alerts from Facebook. Social networking, according to a survey by 'Tempur' (a mattress company)(2010) affects 2 in 5 people's sleeping patterns.

A survey was recently conducted at a high school in Cheshire, UK, (2014) where it was revealed that the teenagers spend an average of 3 to 4 hours on social media each night, in fear of 'missing out on something'. Social media was admitted as being the main reason why students were tired when attending school. Advice was given that students should switch off all their technology about an hour before going to bed, and that getting a better night's sleep would reduce negative effects like lack of concentration in classes.

Travelodge (2013) surveyed 6000 adults to explore what the UK do before going to sleep. It was discovered that 70% of adults send a tweet each night to their followers and 20% catch up on their friends and favourite celebrities' tweets whilst in bed. 16 minutes a night in bed, on average, are spent on social media sites, and this is affecting people's sleep patterns- they're

only getting 6 hours and 21 minutes sleep. This is 1 hour and 39 minutes short of the recommended 8 hours. Dr. Hastings (2012), an expert in sleep patterns and a research scientist for the Medical Research Council at Addenbrooke's Hospital (Cambridge University Hospitals) said: 'From a sleep point of view, this news isn't good at all as it's having a huge negative effect on people's sleep. Adults don't realise what impact using computers, mobile phones and other gadgets before falling sleep is having on their night's sleep. Being exposed to bright light from computer and mobile phone screens while in bed completely delays the brain and body's ability to get to sleep. As a result, people aren't able to get to sleep as quickly as they should...A lot of people think that when they go to sleep their brain is turned off...The brain simply engages in a different activity where it stores memories and gets rid of information that's not needed. If people aren't getting enough sleep each night, their long term memory is most definitely being affected and using social networking sites and technology before they go to bed is worsening this.'

Corinne Sweet, a Psychologist, commented on research findings about links between social media and insomnia: 'This addiction for social networking supports Maslow's theory of humans having three basic needs. One of these being the need for love, affection, belonging and self-worth and Facebook provides the perfect solution to fulfil this requirement...By texting, tweeting, surfing and writing on our walls in bed we are nodding off with a busy mind which impacts upon our quality of sleep during the night...Bedtime should be associated with calming down and chilling out with a good book...Make time earlier in the evening for social networking as it'll help you distress after a hard day and prepare you for bedtime.'

Harshal Patel, a senior engineering major at West Virginia University, says that when going to sleep, his smartphone is kept next to him, not only to act as an alarm clock, but also so that he can answer important messages or calls in the night. Patel isn't alone in doing this- according to one survey, 50% of people who sleep with their phones wake up in the middle of the night to check their messages- this causes sleep deprivation. A recent study by researchers at The Miriam Hospital's Centre for Behavioural and Preventative Medicine in Providence, RI (2013), shows that the use of technology and social media results in lower academic performance, especially if the social media usage reduces the amount of sleep that we have. 483 women were surveyed in their first college year and it was found they were spending 12 hours a day texting, using social media and listening to music online e.g. on YouTube. Women using over 12 hours were more likely to have worse grades, and social networking is associated with bad academic performance.

The study previously mentioned, by the West Virginia University Sleep Centre, also showed that young people who depend on technology to fall asleep are at risk of insomnia, and are less likely to fall into a deep sleep involving REM (a time when the brain processes memories and learns from the previous day); people deprived of REM don't function so well the next day, and it's been proven that it's more difficult to fall into a deep REM sleep when using technology. Dr. Young says that looking at a lit screen in the middle of the night is likely to result to in insomnia, because light exposes the brain to certain chemicals which are counterproductive to sleep, triggering your brain to stay awake.

Next, we shall study the impact that social media use has on our mental well-being and its effect on depression. Depression is a longer-term feeling of despondency, which has daily impacts on not only the person, but also on the people around them. It is a severe illness,

usually treatable, and there are a variety of types of depression. The most common type is major depression, also known as clinical depression. Major depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2011), is a combination of symptoms that interfere with the abilities of a person to sleep, work, study, eat, and just generally enjoy life. Depression has diverse symptoms that can vary from person to person- these might include: feelings of sadness, pessimism or signs like irritability, fatigue or overeating, insomnia and many others. The NIMH also states that depression is mostly caused by a combination of: biological, environmental, psychological, and genetic factors. Depression can also be caused by other illnesses, for example, a result of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Facebook is one of the most commonly used forms of social media. Studies about Facebook users and their moods, conducted by the University of Michigan (2013), have shown that the longer people spend on Facebook, the more their happiness decreases. As the person spends more and more of their day on Facebook, their attitude worsens and depression symptoms increase. This is commonly a result of receiving negative comments, seeing other people post pictures of good times or new purchases, and facing a reduction of self-esteem. Over time this can build up, and eventually can lead to depression.

The Verge (2013) claims that Facebook itself is not the source of depression. There is a bigger picture that one must consider whilst doing research, for example other social media on the Internet. The University of Canterbury did a study of the impact of the Internet on users, and their conclusions were thought-provoking. They found that the amount of online friends, and the closeness of their relationship to the user, most certainly has an impact on the users feelings. This can be in a positive way with college students, for example, when they have nurtured their long-term friendship and online networking is also a way of adjusting socially. The negative effects on the same group can also be when they connect with lots of people but do not have close friendships with them, or their activities on social media do not stimulate them academically. The Humboldt University and Darmstadt Technical University also found out that Facebook itself is not the cause of worsening moods, but a specific aspect of the social media is. The viewing of your friends pictures on vacation or hanging out, causes the feeling of loneliness which can lead to depression, as they feel like they are forgotten. Facebook is just a part of the bigger source that can make people depressed, the Internet. It is the combination of not receiving messages, the comparison the user makes between them and others, the negative comments and many other aspects that can lead to depression.

A study done in Serbia by Pantic (2012), including high school students, shows that the use of social media/ networking sites can cause depression in different severities. It is said that about 16% of the general population suffers from major depression at least once in their lives. The results of the research show that out of the students surveyed, 65% have minimal depression, 29% have mild depression, and 6% have moderate depression. It was found that there was, “A positive correlation between the BDI-II score (used to measure the severity of the depression) and the time spent on social networking.” Additionally it was found that: “The BDI-II score increased as the time spent on social networks increased.” Concluding, in high school students, the time spent on social networking sites influences the level of depression a student has.

Depression nowadays had lost its true meaning, by the overuse of the word and people confusing negative feelings with being depressed. Social media, like Tumblr, are places where people can freely post whatever they like and tag the images and posts. Through these sites,

people can connect and communicate with other users, forming communities between groups of people with the same interests. An example of a community could be with people who feel lonely and sad, and post about it. These communities feel as if the others in it understand them and know how they are feeling, and therefore keep connecting with them. By surrounding themselves with other people that also feel the same way, they believe they are truly depressed, whilst there is actually a big difference between being clinically depressed and simply feeling depressed. According to the adolescent psychiatrist expert, Dr. Stan Kutcher (2013), sometimes the reason that someone thinks they are depressed comes from them being misinformed, as they are not getting the information from reliable sources.

Psychologist Dr. Mark Reinecke (2013) does say that: “When you look at secular trends and epidemiological research completed over the last several decades, there seems to be a slow and fairly consistent increase in levels of depression for each succeeding generation of teenagers.” Research also shows that girls are three times more likely of suffering from depression than boys are. Reinecke believes this is because “boys are socialized to take action, and girls are pushed to dwell on their experiences.” Girls ‘dwelling on their experience’ can do this through the communities on social media sites, where their feelings of depression are reinforced, according to Reinecke. Eric Meyers from the University of British Columbia, calls these communities: “Silver Bubble Problem.” Meyers thinks that the sites “don’t challenge your world-view.” Furthermore he thinks that because of the social media, “You don’t get in contact with other ideas.” He also believes that there are both empowering and challenging aspects to social media.

More and more people are using social media networks and replacing their social lives with online ones. This minimises the amount of contact with others in person. To get the attention on social networks, you need to exaggerate your experiences, as you miss several elements of interaction, like facial expression and tone of voice that you can use in personal contacts. In addition, the sites allow one to compare themselves with others all around the world. They compare their pictures, friend lists, likes and other aspects of social media that attracts users. Dr. Van Hoose (2014) thinks that, “If you mix isolation with feelings of negative self-worth, then you've got the recipe for depression.” As a solution for these problems, doctors believe that just logging off from your computer and going out into the real world can solve a lot.

Dr. Paula Durlofsky (2014), a psychologist, found that there are both positive and negative effects of social media influence. Studies have shown that these sites can have a very positive influence on people with specific problems, such as social anxiety. Dr. Durlofsky also thinks that: “Although social media relationships can have a positive effect on us emotionally, numerous studies have been conducted linking social networking to depression, social isolation, eliciting feelings of envy, insecurity and poor self-esteem.” Furthermore, Dr. Durlofsky believes that a balance of using these networking sites and having real life contact is the best option.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media has a definite effect on insomnia and depression. It evidently influences the occurrence and severity of all types of depression. Even though there are definitely other factors that influence types of depression, social media can be a cause of them and is even increasing as a more main cause, due to an increase in usage of social media. Other factors, such as biological, environmental, psychological, and genetic factors, combined with social media, can make a person clinically depressed. Looking at the research provided related to social media use and insomnia, the only solution according to many professionals is to turn off all technology and to not use social media at least 30 minutes before intending to go to sleep. Professionals (such as Daniel Brewster, a professor of sociology at West Virginia University) claim that social media use on technology is affecting our sleep patterns, which affects both our moods and productivity. Social media is definitely having an effect on the development of insomnia and is a large factor in causing the suffering of this sleep disorder. Perhaps the next time you go to check your phone for Facebook notifications in the middle of the night, you should have a rethink- not only is this disturbing your sleeping pattern, it could also lead to clinical depression. Maybe you should wait until the morning.

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