A Cross-Comparative Study of Adolescent Mental Health and Social Media Use in South Korea and Canada

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly digital world, the mental health of adolescents is reflected in their interactions on social networking sites (SNS). As adolescence represents a pivotal transitional period characterized by an increase in social relationships, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its transferal of in-person interactions to online spheres is a crucial component of adolescent mental health in 2022. Where excessive social media using during the lockdowns led to an increase in cyberbullying (highlighted in Canada's updated criminal code) and eating disorders (explored through *mukbang*, or 'escapist eating' in South Korea), the type of SNS interactions adolescents engage in—comparative social media use and more passive, autonomous enjoyment—are critical to distinguishing between the positive and negative effects of social media on adolescent health. To identify the link between pre, during, and post-pandemic adolescent mental health, this study utilizes a comparative analysis of surveillance and harm within social media consumption in South Korea and Canada. For South Korean and Canadian adolescents, the distinction between active and passive social media use and the degree of online autonomy can define the level of harm to mental stability, emphasizing the importance of autonomous social media consumption in 'safe digital spaces.'

Introduction

In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia of an unknown origin was reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (Ciotti et al., 2021). The World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 12, 2020, due to the airborne nature of SARS-CoV-2, its high level of worldwide transmission, and the thousands of deaths brought on by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic included closing public recreation sites, shutting down schools and universities, implementing a period of quarantine, and strictly enforcing "social distancing" to prevent any in-person interactions (Andrews et al., 2020). In addition to physical, economic, and social implications, the still-pervasive psychological impacts of the pandemic remain key sociological factors. Given the large number of adolescents impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns, this study utilizes youths ages 10 to 19 years old as a case study, examining the implications of "social distancing" on adolescent mental health.

Adolescent mental health is shaped by its transitional period between late childhood and the beginnings of adulthood. As adolescence is characterized by an increase in group interactions and social relationships, and a decrease in parental control (Lerner and Steinberg, 2004), the independent social connections adolescents form during this time period become highly important. Generation Z, or 'digital natives,' do not remember a time before the Internet existed (Illaria et al., 2021), increasing the relevance of digital consumption in their lives. Moreover, recent studies show that the brain goes through a remodeling process that facilitates the development of social cognitive skills during the period of adolescence (Choudhury et al., 2006). In 2020, "social

distancing" challenged pre-existing structures of adolescent development, resulting in an explosion of an already-escalating adolescent social media use. Figure 1 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019) depicts the social media landscape just before the pandemic.
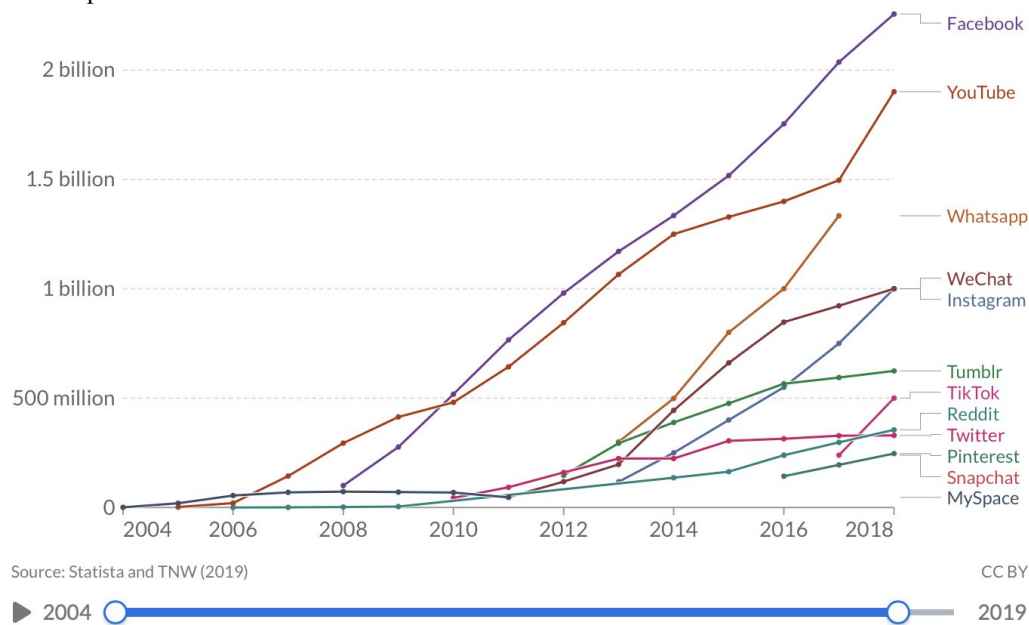

Figure 1. Number of People Using Social Media From 2004 Until the End of 2019 (2019).

To South Korean and Canadian adolescents, mental illnesses were highly prevalent, even before COVID-19. Hong (2011) observed that in 2011, 35.8% of South Korean adolescents experienced mental health issues, while Gallson (2019) revealed that pre-pandemic, 18% of Canadian adolescents suffered from a mental illness or substance abuse problem. Where the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a period of "emotional crisis" (Lee et al., 2021, para. 19), recent studies find that by replacing in-person interactions with social media use during the lockdowns, adolescents experienced an increase in cyberbullying, eating disorders, and resultantly, depression and anxiety (Kee, Al-Anesi, and Al-Anesi, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Magson et al., 2020). As COVID-19 occurred simultaneously within period of critical identity formation, the differentiation between active, comparative social media use (obsessively counting likes, comparing profiles, and determining personal worth) and more passive, autonomous enjoyment (reviewing pleasing content, connecting with friends) is critical to distinguishing between positive and negative effects on adolescents.

To identify the link between pre, during, and post-pandemic adolescent mental health, this study utilizes a comparative analysis of surveillance and harm within social media consumption in South Korea and Canada. For South Korean and Canadian adolescents, the distinction between active and passive social media use and the degree of online autonomy can define the level of harm to mental stability, emphasizing the importance of autonomous social media consumption in 'safe digital spaces.'

Body Perception

Body Perception and Social Media

Adolescents often face a disconnect between their self-image and actual image—this discrepancy is exacerbated on apps such as Instagram. According to Lupu (2012), society and its cultural offsets define a set criteria that differentiates an "ideal" body from a "not ideal" body (p. 771). Where adolescents often turn to social media to

survey such criteria, their body perception is often convoluted by Instagram filters and editing that create impossible standards. Moreover, pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia content exists on social media platforms, such as Twitter (although hidden in cryptic hashtags) (Ilaria et al., 2021), and can increase eating disordered behaviors via likeminded communities. Through social media use, the line between surveillance and self-harm amongst adolescents blurs, particularly when triggering existing eating disorders or eating disordered thoughts. Varying experiences surrounding body perception in social media, however, can differ from adolescent to adolescent, depending on their initial mental health state—a critical factor in pandemic research.

Body Image in South Korea

In South Korea, adolescent body standards are often shaped by media consumption. According to Yassin (2021), 10% of adolescents in Asia have eating disorders. As Korean teens who develop eating disorders are often active on the Korean social media app, Kakao, examining Kakao-specific eating-disordered trends, such as *mukbang*, is critical to understanding the intersection between *voyeurism* and negative content consumption patterns. According to Kircabun et al. (2021), *mukbang* depicts individuals eating massive quantities of food on film, creating an experience of "vicarious eating" (Kircabun et al., 2021, para 5) for viewers that became wildly popular during the pandemic. Where *mukbang* can lead to eating disordered behaviors such as binge eating, purging, or even restricting, the concept of 'escapist eating' plays a crucial role in shaping Korean adolescent media behaviors. For adolescents who have eating disorders, *mukbang* can be triggering, while for those who engage in the content simply for viewing pleasure, the harms are far less extreme.

Body Perception in Canada

Amongst Canadian adolescents, comparative viewing on social networking sites (SNS) can increase negative body perceptions. According to Santarossa and Woodruff (2017), social comparisons on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook increase body image dissatisfaction; body image construction is also linked to social media activities, such as commenting on other profiles or engaging with content. Where the *type* of interactions on SNS (comparing profiles, likes, or comments, etc.) can shape their effect on adolescent body images, studies find that interactive social media use can be more harmful than passive use (Santarossa and Woodruff, 2017). Yet as Alberga et al. (2018) find, prior to the pandemic, *fitspiration*, or positive, inspirational messages and/or images surrounding health and fitness became popular, as well. Within some Canadian adolescents, the type of content adolescents consume can be just as important as the kinds of interactions (passive or comparative) that adolescents practice. On SNS, the distinction between obsessive and more passive consumption defined the mental health experiences of Canadian adolescents during lockdowns.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying and Social Media

Cross-culturally, cyberbullying is defined as online harassment using communication technologies such as electronic mail, smartphones, short message devices, and/or social media platforms. Unlike content engagement, which can be active or passive, cyberbullying is recipient-based. Chatzakou et al. (2019) find that over half of adolescent social media users have experienced online harassment at some point. As cyberbullying removes autonomy and choice from its victims, it can have especially detrimental impacts on adolescents. Moreover, Hamm et al. (2015) find that anonymity within cyberbullying can intensify its impact. While cyberbullying can come from a known or unknown username on social media apps, the harmful nature of the comments can

escalate into depression and/or anxiety based on victims not knowing who their bully is. By violating safe online spaces—SNS—adolescents experiencing cyberbullying during the pandemic may have suffered more extreme consequences due to an inability to separate their online and offline spheres.

Cyberbullying in South Korea

In South Korea, cyberbullying narratives often focus on the offline experiences of victims. According to Lee (2016, cyberbullying can be broken down into variations: "cyber*moyok/bibang* (insults); cyber*myungye-hweson* (defamation); cyberstalking*; cyber*sungpokryuk* (sexting); *gaeinjungbo-youchul* (personal information drain); cyber*gangyo* (coercion); and cyber*ttadolim* (exclusion), cyber*gorophim* (harassment), or cyber *wang-ta*" (p. 151) in order to better highlight the varying experiences victims undergo. Where cyberbullying in South Korea is most common in the form of "cyber*sungpokryuk* (sexting)" (Lee, 2016, p. 155), the connection between users reviewing their chosen content (via SNS) and receiving unwanted content (through cyberbullying) highlights the importance of autonomy within social media use. Furthermore, Shin and Choi (2021) find that in South Korea, cyberbullying is only increasing with the COVID-19 pandemic's transition into online spaces. To protect the mental health of adolescent students, teachers should look towards protecting the autonomous interactions of students online and keeping online spaces 'safe spaces.'

Cyberbullying in Canada

Canada's Criminal Code, updated in 2021, attaches legal consequences to cyberbullying that violates online spaces. According to Espelage and Hong (2016), the suicides of two teenagers, Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons, in 2013 sparked attention to cyberbullying as a public health issue. As both cases were linked to sexual assault and sexual abuse, Canada's stance against cyberbullying speaks to a decision to separate the overlap between online and in-person harassment. In her Canadian study, Beran et al. (2017) finds that cyber-relationships parallel the dynamics of in-school peer interactions. Although Canada's cyberbullying rates are comparable to the rest of the world (Beran et al., 2017), the criminalization of cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the necessity of viewing online interactions as reflections of large sociological trends. And with increased anti-cyberbullying campaigns during the lockdowns, Canada acknowledges the intersection between online and offline dimensions during COVID-19.

Global Positive Aspects of Social Media Use

Given the risks associated with adolescent use of digital media, it is critical to examine aspects of SNS that contribute to adolescent mental health. Social media use can serve as humor and entertainment, identity exploration, and creative expression, while social connections are also crucial advantages of SNS; in Clark et al.'s (2018) international survey, 77% of adolescents reported that social media was at least partly important for keeping up with friends, and 69% stated that social media allowed them to have meaningful conversations with close friends. While acknowledging the harmful associations between body image and SNS (Santarossa and Woodruff, 2017), it is also relevant to note that #ProRecovery hashtags dominate platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. While cyberbullying can exacerbate depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies, digital media algorithms can detect social media-based signals of mental illness, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even suicidal thoughts. To global adolescents, social media can be harmful or helpful—the degree of harm involved is dependent on varying ways adolescents engage in content; either from a lens of comparison and indirect self-harm or the desire to connect.

Conclusion

According to Uhls, Ellison, and Subrahmanyam (2017), "Identity exploration, or the search for a coherent sense of self, takes place online as well as offline" (p. 68). Where the adolescent social media landscapes in South Korea and Canada reflect crucial stages of cross-cultural identity formation, the nature of the online interactions remains a global commonality within social media use. Where obsessive, unwanted, or comparative behavior on SNS can lead to negative impacts on adolescent mental health, utilizing SNS to engage in meaningful content or social relationships can lead to the construction of positive, 'safe online spaces' during the instability of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this study examines the overlap between online and offline spheres through the lens of body image and cyberbullying, future researchers should further explore the intersection between mental illness and recovery on SNS. Where social media often mediates the space between isolation and in-person interactions, the nuances of adolescent mental health are becoming more and more visible through their imprints online.

Acknowledgments

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