

Social Media as the Socializing Agent: A Study of Adolescent Students in Coimbatore

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ABSTRACT

An adolescent daily spends a substantial amount of his or her time on social media, it becomes important to understand the role of social media as a socializing agent. The present article attempts to understand the role of social media as a socializing agent among adolescent students in the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu, India. This paper focuses on the role of social media as a socializing agent in three major areas i.e., in inculcating family norms, health-related information, and education. In 2023, 155 adolescent students aged 13 to 19 years from the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu were interviewed regarding their usage of social media and its significance in instilling family norms, health, and education-related information among them. It was observed that social media has started to act as the socializing agent in the educational sphere, whereas when it comes to family norms and health-related information, the family continues to act as the primary socializing agent.

Keywords: *Adolescents, Media Socialization, Socializing Agent, Socialization, Social Media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are by nature social animals. Socialization is the social education a person receives throughout their lifetime. Through the process of socialization, humans learn social behaviors which help them to integrate into society. Simultaneously, socialization helps society preserve its socio-cultural existence by passing on the culture to the next generation. In India, the year 2016 left an important imprint on the history of India. This year can be seen as the initial stage of the internet boom. With the introduction of 4G plans free of cost and later at nominal rates by Reliance Jio and the availability of budget Android smartphones, India sees its social media explosion in subsequent years to come. Over the past 20 years, social media has become increasingly popular, many researchers are now interested in learning more about these social platforms and their impacts on society. Further, it is observed that youth and teenagers are the most ardent and active users of these platforms. In 2022, around three-fourths (76%) of India's adolescents aged 15 to 17 years were found using social media¹. Further, most of them had access to more than two social media platforms. Another survey conducted in 2022 by Local Circles² observed that on average 84 percent of adolescents aged 13 to 17 years spend at least one hour on social media. Further, 62 percent of them are found to be using social media platforms for more than three hours, and in some cases (24 percent), social media usage among Indian adolescents goes up to 6 hours. Since adolescents daily spend a substantial amount of

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1388571/india-social-media-usage-by-age-group/> (Accessed on 10/12/24).

² <https://www.localcircles.com/a/press/page/children-internet-usage-survey> (Accessed on 10/12/24).

their time on social media, it becomes important to understand the role of social media as a socializing agent.

Most of the research conducted in the field of social media focuses on its positive and negative impacts on society or its importance during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited research has been conducted to understand the role of social media as a socializing agent among adolescents. Due to the omnipresence of social media in adolescent's everyday life, it becomes crucial to understand the role of social media in the socialization process. There are various socializing agents such as parents, peers, educational institutions, youth centres, etc. With the increased usage of social media, social media has been added to this list of socializing agents. Further, instead of separately influencing the adolescent, these different socializing agents collectively influence the adolescents. Our daily life is deeply mediatized (Livingstone, 2014). According to Carr and Hayes (2015), social media infers various internet-based networks through which a person can interact with others, visually and verbally. The present article aims to understand the role of social media as a socializing agent among adolescents. It tries to explore whether social media has replaced family as the socializing agent in transferring family values, and health and education-related information. For this, 155 adolescent students from the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu were interviewed in 2023. They were asked about their usage of social media and the significance of social media in instilling family norms, health, and education-related information.

As social media is omnipresent in our everyday lives, it influences the lives of adolescents. From the very early years, we have had access to social media devices such as mobile phones and social media contents through YouTube videos, Instagram reels, etc. Socialization is considered as the process through which a person's abilities, standards, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors change in order to match to those behaviors, abilities, etc. which are considered desirable and appropriate for his or her current and future role in a given culture or society. Socialization is a continuous process that teaches people how to connect with others and what is expected of them in society. Almost all of the behaviors that are thought to be part of human nature are learned through socialization, which also teaches people about social standards that enable them to blend with society and how to walk, talk, and feed themselves. Social connection is a prerequisite for the fundamental process of socialization.

Adolescents are those who are between the childhood and adulthood stages. Approximately, adolescents belonged to the age group of 10 to 19 years. Scholars argue that adolescents grow quickly in terms of their emotional, cognitive, and physical development. This has an impact on their emotions, thoughts, decisions, and interactions with others and their environment. In some countries, the stage of adolescence is often associated with puberty and the development of bodily changes that lead to reproductive maturity. Whereas in some other cultures, the adolescent stage is associated with not just the physical development of the body, but also the maturity in moral, social, and psychological spheres. The transition of a person from childhood to maturity occurs throughout the adolescent stage, which is also a critical time for socialization and the transmission of norms and values that help shape one's personality.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Prot et. al. (2015), in the West, the initial years of the 1950s marked the usage of electronic and mass media at a large-scale level. This transformed the social milieu in which the young generation is raised. Now, there are many sources of information from which a child can learn. The process of socialization is no longer the sole responsibility of peers, family members, and other people surrounding a person. Along with family, community, peers, and educational institutes, digital platforms have started to play an important role in the socialization process (McLeod, 2000).

Family and family members such as father, mother, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins etc. are child's primary socializing agents. It is the first environment that a youngster is exposed to. A child acquires cultural knowledge and socially acceptable behavior through their families. Moreover, families impart linguistic and communication skills, interpersonal skills, and knowledge of how society functions. Children learn through their families the distinction between peers and strangers and between reality and imagination, blood bond and social bond, etc. Children's socialization is influenced by the experiences of families and other cultural elements such as race, class, and religion. Families from different cultures may socialize for uniqueness and creativity, while those from other cultures may do so for obedience and uniformity. Families belonging to different social strata could lead disparate lifestyles and offer their children distinct educational possibilities. Family socialization is also influenced by class-related behaviors, gender conventions, and racial attitudes.

With the ability to instantly connect to the digital world, mobile devices and a fast Internet connection have made it simple for people to communicate with one another. While keeping tabs on the majority of their friends, people can write messages, post images, and share videos. The ease and comfort of communicating with others has greatly increased. Today's youth frequently use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram to connect and converse with each other. Teenagers today are more reliant on digital platforms since they give them access to a wide range of information and allow them to make social connections with social groups located far away more easily.

Kalogeraki and Papadaki (2015) argued that mobile phones have become indispensable means of communication. Mobile phone accessibility contributes to the sense of permanent availability. Purchasing a cell phone for their child comes naturally to parents. Parents typically offer their kids cell phones so that the kids can call them whenever they want. Morwe et. al. (2015) observed that the young respondents used technology to establish and maintain relationships, explore the latest trends, and discuss school issues to an extent.

Brignall et. al. (2005) argued that the Internet is becoming an essential tool for business communication and popular culture in many parts of the world. The Internet has revolutionized social interaction. It is also seen as an educational tool that will change the way education is imparted. However, it can also lead to loss of privacy, impersonal communication, and isolation. Holloway and Valentine (2014) observed the negative implications of the online world on children such as dangerous websites, anxiety, etc. According to Bryant (2018), the internet influences an individual's behavior. Sometimes people use Facebook to feel better, however, they feel even worse after using it. This low mood is caused by feelings of wasting time and not doing anything useful. Gill and Cull (2023) mentioned the importance of social

media in keeping children updated about the necessary skills required in the present digital world. At the same time, the authors discussed the risk of using social media.

Social media disseminates information to a large audience through radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet. The various channels that help message senders and recipients communicate with one another are known as the mass media. It is crucial to a child's socialization process. There is a wide variety of media available, such as radio, newspapers, magazines, CDs, television, films, and the Internet. These media, particularly television, have distinct effects on the behavior of adults and children. It could be highly detrimental to modern society for the mass media to be one of the main forces behind socialization. The widespread distribution of information has a significant impact on social norms. In addition to teaching people about fashion, current affairs, and material goods, the media also upholds nonmaterial culture, such as standards, values, and beliefs. Additionally, it teaches people how to respond to and consider political events like elections. It also gives information about global events, cultural norms, and how members of one community should see those in other societies.

Educational institutes serve as a secondary socialization tool. Most students spend most of the day in class, where they become fully engaged in academic material as well as social skills including working in teams, adhering to a schedule, and using textbooks. What society expects of children is reinforced by these school rituals. Certain educational institutions cultivate a competitive atmosphere in the grading system and the teacher-student assessment methods. Children learn that they have to be better than others in order to achieve when they compete in races or arithmetic competitions. In a capitalist society where pursuing one's own interests is expected, this is a crucial value. As a means of achieving the common good, however, schools might also place more of a focus on collaboration and teamwork. On the other hand, youngsters are supposed to follow group rules and not challenge teachers in other nations. All schools instruct students on the fundamentals of their own civilizations as well as how to deal with rules, bureaucracy, waiting their turn, and prolonged periods of inactivity.

Peers teach people how to dress, act, and communicate. Peers are people who are comparable in age and social standing to themselves. Individuals also pick up knowledge about what matters and doesn't matter to their peer group. Peers have an even more significant role in adolescence as socialization facilitators. This is a result of teenagers discovering who they are and where they belong in the world through identity exploration. During this period, peers offer support and direction and teach people about cultural norms and values, as well as what to wear, eat, watch, and where to hang out. On the negative side, underage drinking, drug usage, delinquency, and hate crimes have all been attributed to the influence of teenage peers. Peer groups become less significant as people become older, especially in their 20s and 30s. This is a result of people's increased likelihood of employment and decreased leisure time. Furthermore, the likelihood of being married or in a committed relationship is higher. As a result, they interact more with members of their own family and spend less time with friends.

3. METHODOLOGY

As the focus of the present article is on understanding the role of social media as the socializing agent among adolescents, the adolescents who belonged to the age cohort of 13 to 19 years in

the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu are the population for the present study. In 2023, a total of 155 respondents from this age cohort are selected using the convenience sampling method. All the respondents were either school or college-going students. They were interviewed using an interview schedule which included both open and closed-ended questions. The interview with the respondents usually lasted for up to 30 minutes. The interview schedule attempts to collect information regarding their socio-demographic profile, how much time the respondents spend on social media and its role in the field of education, health, and transferring family norms and culture.

4. RESULTS

In this section, we will analyze the primary data gathered (see Table 1). With respect to the access of social media, it was observed that most of the respondents (90 percent) owned a mobile phone. Further, most of them (83.2 percent) had mobile phones with internet access (83.23%). When these adolescents were enquired about the importance of mobile phones in their lives, almost half of the respondents (56 percent) stated that they can survive without a mobile phone. While, an equal percentage of the respondents (43 percent) mentioned that they cannot survive without a mobile phone.

Table 1. Distribution of the respondents based on their mobile phone usage.

Mobile Phone Usage	Responses	Percentage (%)
Own a Mobile Phone	Yes	90
	No	10
Access to Internet	Yes	83
	No	17
Survive without mobile phone	Yes	56
	No	44
Social Media Accounts	Yes	89
	No	11
Reason to use mobile phone	Communication	18
	Education	20

Note: Total Number of Respondents (N)=150

With respect to social media consumption, it is observed that the respondents spent around one to five hours per day on social media. Adding to this, most of the respondents argue that their parents often complain about their children's overuse of social media. Interestingly, almost two-thirds of the respondents do not use mobile phones to communicate with their parents (fathers and mothers). The respondents use different social media apps such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and other music-related apps. Further, most of them (89 percent) have

acknowledged having accounts on these social media apps. It was observed that they use social media mainly for entertainment purposes. Some of the respondents mentioned that they use social media for educational purposes or communication purposes (see Table 1).

Now let's discuss the role of social media in transferring family norms among these adolescents. It was observed that the respondents learned about their family and cultural norms such as their behavior, respecting others, festivals, religious beliefs, and superstitions from their primary kin. It was interesting to note that none of the respondents mentioned social media teaching them their family's norms. Whereas when it comes to their dressing skills, social media starts to play an important role but only in a few cases (14 percent, see Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents based on the source of acquiring cultural norms, education, and health-related information.

Source of Information			Percentage (%)
Culture	Source of Acquiring Cultural Norms	Family Members	98
		Peers	1
		Social Media	1
Education	Source of Knowledge	Books	75
		Online Websites	25
	Clarifying doubts	Online tools	85
		Peers, siblings and others	15
	Prefer physical classes over online classes	Yes	69
		no	31
	Knowledge about future educational opportunities	Online sources	77
		Others	23
Health	Knowledge regarding first-aid tips	Family members	78
		Online sources	22

Note: Total Number of Respondents (N)=150

Books are considered an important source of knowledge by most of the respondents. However, when it comes to getting help in education or clarifying doubts, the respondents mentioned the importance of online tools. More than half of the respondents believed that the information given on the internet was over textbook. Around two-thirds of the students prefer off-line classes over on-line classes and the knowledge gained through it is more valuable and interesting. The internet plays an important role in gaining knowledge about future educational

opportunities among these respondents. Most of the respondents argued that social media plays an important role in remaining updated about their surroundings. Nearly half of the respondents argued that social media played an important role in picking up new hobbies such as drawing, yoga, gym, reading, dance, music, photography, cooking, gardening, performing stunts, etc. Most of the respondents argued that social media plays an important role in their learning, developing new skills, knowledge building, and enhancing their creativity. However, almost half of them argued that social media does not make them self-reliant (see Table 2).

Most of the respondents gained knowledge about first-aid, maintaining physical health, home remedies, taking care of health problems, and healthcare products from their family members. While only a few, gained it from the internet. When it comes to cosmetic products, social media plays an important role. Most of them gained knowledge about COVID-19 from social media. They still prefer offline or phone calls for consulting a doctor to using other online modes (see Table 2).

5. DISCUSSION

The present study findings denote that it is challenging to survive without phones in the present-day world, as mobile phones enable a person to access the social media platforms, concurs with the study findings of Patil et.al. (2019). Social media increases social well-being despite the absence of family members and builds a sense of community through group chats. Beyond the communicational mode of socialization, individuals have new information and update the information through social media. This finding is contradictory to Sinha (2024) that social media is turning out to be a mode of de-socialization. It may be plausible due to the interaction between man and machine where no emotional tone is realized. The other way around, in contemporary society, life is inevitable without social media as it provides a quantum of local, national, and international information in a fraction of a second to the palm. However, the role of e-socialization is bilateral both positive and negative (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

6. CONCLUSION

A child learns about its surrounding environment through the socialization process. This socialization process starts from the day we are born and ends on the day of our deaths. Throughout our life, we keep on learning new things. In the initial stage of one's life, it is the family which plays an important role in making the child aware about his or her surroundings, make them aware of the different social roles one has to play, teach them how to behave in different social settings, the different societal expectations etc. As the child grows, education, peers, neighbors etc. adds up to this list of socializing agents and helps an individual in successfully becoming a part of the society. Due to the increased consumption of social media by an individual, social media has been added to this list of social agents. The present article attempts to understand the role of social media as the socializing agents among adolescents. It was observed that social media has started to act as a socializing agent only in the field of education, whereas when it comes to learning about one's family culture and norms, adolescents found that social media is not of much use. They are dependent on their family to learn about their family culture and norms. Likewise, health is another area where adolescents prefer family over social media in teaching them about basic health care information.

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