Social Media and Youth

This editorial is based on the article **How do we protect youth in the Digital Age?** which was published in The Indian Express on 14/10/2021. It talks about the need to regulate social media platforms to protect youth from its ill-effects.

Recently, **Instagram and its parent company, facebook** faced public backlash after Reports suggesting their usage has a negative impact on youth. Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen also revealed that for the big social media companies, profit is a higher priority than youth's mental health. This has brought forth the **impact such** social media apps and websites have on the youth**.**

Positive Impact of Social Media

- **Connection:** Platforms like Facebook and Twitter give teens and young adults a **sense of belonging and acceptance.** This is particularly true for those who feel isolated or marginalized, such as LGBTQ youth**.**

  - Its allround effect was clear **during the pandemic**, when it connected people and loved ones living in isolation.
- **Positive Inspiration:** Social networks can create **peer motivation** and inspire young people to develop new and healthy habits. Teens can also find **positive role models** online.
- **Identify Formation:** Adolescent years are a time when youth are attempting to master their identities and finding their place in society. Social media provides a **forum for teens to practice skills** related to identity development.

  - **A study has shown** that young people who express their opinions on social media experience increased well-being.
- **Research:** Mental health experts and researchers can use it to **collect data** that subsequently informs research. In addition, **therapists and other professionals can network with each other** within online communities, thereby **expanding their knowledge and reach.**
- **Giving Voice:** Social media has allowed teens to develop **a voice of advocacy.** This can be a **very positive influence when exposed to the right outlets.**
- **Gateway to Talent: Social media outlets** provide students with **a platform to share their creativity and their ideas** with a neutral audience and get an honest response. The response becomes a guide for them to better shape their skills if they are looking to pursue that skill professionally.

  - For example, a photographer or videographer starts by posting their shots on Instagram. Many youngsters are already **making a career** out of it.
- **Boost to creativity:** Social media can help youth to **enhance their confidence and creativity.** It connects young people with a world of ideas and a world of possibilities. These platforms encourage students to exercise their creative skills in terms of engaging with their friends and their general audience.
- **Digital activism and social change:** Social media can be a **vehicle for making an impact in the community.** It exposes them to essential issues not only in their community but all over the

world as well. **Greta Thunberg** is one such example of youth activism.

Negative Impact of Social Media

- **Mental Health problems:** Studies have found **close links between social media usage and** teen depression**.** As per a study, youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms were **nearly twice** as likely to use social media almost constantly.Teenagers on social media spend much of their time observing the lives and images of their peers. This leads to constant comparisons, which can damage self-esteem and body image, exacerbating depression and anxiety among adolescents.
- **Physical Health problems:** Over usage of social media has resulted in less time being spent on doing healthy, real-world activities. **sleep deprivation** due to staying up late to continue scrolling through their social media feeds, a habit known as **vamping.**
- **Social Relations:** Adolescence is a key time for developing social skills. However, as teens spend less time with their friends face-to-face, they have fewer opportunities to practise them.
- **Tech Addiction:** Scientists have found that teen social media overuse creates a **stimulation pattern similar to the pattern created by other** addictive behaviors**.**
- **Reinforcing Prejudices:** Social media allows **reaffirmation of prejudices and stereotypes** they have about others. This is exacerbated by meeting like-minded people online, giving them a sense of community. For eg. **Flat Earth Theory.**
- **Cyberbullying or Trolling:** It has posed serious problems and has even led to cases of teenage suicides. Moreover, even teens who commit acts of cyberbullying are more likely to report substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviors.

  - **Online Child Sex Abuse and Exploitation:** A study in USA found that nearly **half of all American children** surveyed indicate that they have been **made to feel uncomfortable, been bullied, or had an interaction of a sexual nature while online.** In another study, it was found that over **50 percent of the victims of** online sexual exploitation **are between the ages of 12 and 15.**

Way Forward

- **A dedicated Social Media Policy:** A **holistic policy to** regulate social media by creating **accountability of social media platforms** to not target youth as **consumers or future consumers.** This will make the algorithms more attuned towards adults rather than youth.
- **Safeguards for inappropriate content:** Platforms should be **prohibited from recommending or amplifying certain content** involving sexual, violent, or other adult material, including gambling or other dangerous, abusive, exploitative, or wholly commercial content.

  - **Standards of Ethical Design:** These standards will set forth **principles for tech companies to prevent, avoid, and discourage digital distraction** and prioritize ethical human learning.
- **Digital Literacy:** It is important to not lose sight of the digital divide **prevailing in India,** esp. in the education sector. A policy decision in the name of protecting youth should not result in youth of underprivileged background to lose out on opportunities of the future.
- **Governance and Regulation:** Government regulation in form of **greater accountability of platforms for their content,** Data Localization**, third party digital audits, strong** Data Protection Laws **etc.**
- **Role of Social Media Platforms:** Banning certain features like **"auto-play" sessions, push alerts** and more importantly to create products which do not target youth.
- **Role of Social Agencies: Parents, Educational Institutions and the society** as a whole have the important role to control the correct and limit the use of social media. This can be done by using **Parental control, limits to screen time, constant communication with kids, and promoting outdoor activities.**

Conclusion

The effects of digital technology on youth is important because these **effects will colour their adult**

behaviour and the way future societies will behave. It is interesting that tech titans like **Bill Gates and Steve Jobs** severely restricted their youth's access to technology.

All technologies have obvious benefits and potential harmful effects. As in mostly everything in life, the **key could lie in moderate use of social media.**

Drishti Mains Question

'Social media is a double-edged sword in the present times.' Discuss the need to regulate social media platforms to protect youth from its ill-effects.

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