How Does Social Media Differentially Influence Conformity in Adolescent Peers, Family Members and Socioeconomic Contexts?

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Abstract

This paper examines how conformity among adolescents in peer groups, family members and across socioeconomic contexts could be influenced by social media. Social media has become more integral to daily life with more people engaging in for a longer period of time, however, much of the research focus for the past few decades has been evaluating social media use and its relationship with adolescent risk behavior, leaving a gap in the current literature regarding the impact of social media on conformity in peer groups and other social connections. To achieve the goal of this paper, it compared the influence of social media consumption on social conformity among peer groups and families through a developmental and social lens. To do so, this paper analyzed studies primarily published between 2000 to 2024, found through keyword searches on databases such as PubMed, Scopus and Google Scholar, with the addition of earlier works which provided foundational theories. The findings show that adolescents' exposure to risky behaviors through social media increases the likelihood of conforming to negative social norms such as engaging in risky behaviors. Furthermore, both young people and parents compare themselves through online platforms leading to negative impacts, especially for those with lower socioeconomic status or self-esteem. These findings emphasize the need for critical awareness to then develop prevention and intervention strategies such as media literacy education and support programs for vulnerable populations that can reduce the harmful effects of conformity.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that the digital community space has had an increasing impact on society (Charoensukmongkol, 2018; Rao & Kalyani, 2022). For adolescents in particular, social media use can influence engagement in risky behaviors (Charoensukmongkol, 2018; Vannucci et al., 2020); these behaviors are of interest to several disciplines of research because of the lasting effects in adolescents' lives, the interest in neurodevelopmental factors, and the public health concerns that arise from risky behaviors. Additionally, psychosocial development and the experiences that are characteristic of adolescence can increase the likelihood that adolescents will use social media (Vannucci et al., 2020). Laursen and Faur suggested that exposure to content lures highly susceptible adolescents to risky behaviors, with susceptibility being defined as the likelihood for conformity to occur and consequently, a plausible moderator for the participation in risky behaviors (Laursen & Faur, 2022). Nonetheless, social conformity can be observed in all age groups through influences like peer pressure and hazing; social media is just another avenue through which it is elicited, and though conformity can promote social cohesion and well-being, it can also lead to negative outcomes and risky behaviors too (Laursen & Veenstra, 2022).

With the saturation of new technologies and cybernetic services, everyone is more likely to signal their own adherence to specific norms and adopt new patterns of behavior—often described as trends. As a result, the interaction between social media use and the family unit may look different compared to the social media use among peer groups.

Though many social applications are free and accessible to everyone, there may be limitations surrounding the way in which people might interact with their extended social communities. For example, one's socioeconomic status may give rise to an inability to form social connections; similarly, socioeconomic status could limit how much parents can visibly provide (such as clothing, housing and food) for their children (Laursen & Faur, 2022; Sidani et al., 2020).

Much of the research focus for the past few decades has been evaluating social media use and its relationship with behavior (Vannucci et al., 2020), specifically with adolescents, leaving a gap in the current literature regarding the impact of conformity on social networks across different groups of people. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to compare the influence of social conformity consumed through social media across socioeconomic contexts and social groups through reviewing existing research. This review can provide some empirical and theoretical grounding for future research to perform well-informed prevention and intervention strategies that can reduce harmful influences of social media on conformity. To do so, this review research primarily analyzed research that was published between 2000 and 2024, which were obtained through keyword searches such as social media, conformity, adolescents, risky behaviors and socioeconomic status, on databases such as PubMed, Scopus and Google Scholar, while adapting earlier works where foundational theories were needed.

2. Roles and Identities

2.1 Adolescent Peers

A big part of social media influence of behaviors is due to the want to assimilate into a role or identity within peer groups or families. For example, in schools, there are various friend groups that make up the student population. These groups can often be classified into a hierarchy with categories such as "Elites" or "Athletes" being categorized to have a higher social standing compared to other groups that may be considered less popular (Sussman et al., 2007). However, the main problem with this behavior is that adolescents drastically overestimate the number of risky behaviors high status teens partake in (Helms et al., 2014). For example, non-high-status peers described these high-status teens to be smoking 1-3 cigarettes per day and smoking marijuana 1-9 times per month (Simons-Morton et al., 2001), yet popular teens in fact reported to have not even reached the level of one cigarette per day or one use of marijuana in the past month (Valente et al., 2013). This kind of misperception is very dangerous and impactful in the development of adolescents' lives as adolescents who believed popular teens engaged in substance use more were seen to increase their substance use over time (Helms et al., 2014). Misconceptions about others' risk behaviors will lead to a higher chance of following these behaviors, and they are especially likely to conform to such behaviors when they are endorsed by high status peers. To understand more about such behavior, susceptibility, the likelihood for conformity to occur, must be recognized and studied (Laursen & Faur, 2022). In this context of susceptibility, the agent of influence, which can be described as any person or factor that causes conformity (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005) can be considered to be social media, which exposes teens to others' risky behaviors. Since engagement in social media content does not usually include dyadic interactions (i.e. in the same way as in person, face-to face interactions), the level of influence by the agent of influence is constrained. Therefore, the most impactful variables are often the target for influencers—individual traits and circumstances-commonly known as situational variables (Laursen & Faur, 2022), which can be further explained as the external factors such as social group context or socioeconomic status which can shape conformity behavior (Asch, 1951), or socioeconomic status which can shape conformity behavior. Moreover, the susceptibility to peer influence is found to be greatest during early to mid-adolescence (Laursen & Faur, 2022). Therefore, exploring the topic of susceptibility to peer influence is highly important as it can ultimately aid in the prevention of detrimental effects of peer influence, while maximizing the benefits it may provide such as global connectivity, easy access to education and information, ability to promote initiatives easily, and encouraging good behavior (Rao & Kalyani, 2022).

2.2 Younger Adults & The Role of Parenthood

While teenagers are often portrayed with a stereotype of being naive and easily conformed into risky behaviors—*especially* with the potential negative effects that social media can have on their developing mind—adults are not

immune to these negative effects. With many young adults feeling heavy responsibilities, such as managing their socioeconomic status, employment, and relationships, it is not uncommon for a toll on mental health to take place (Chou & Edge, 2012). As a result, balancing the responsibilities of adulthood and/or parenthood can make having interactions that provide realistic depth into others' lives less achievable. Furthermore, the presence of social media gives an inaccurate look into others' lives, making the process even harder. Developed in the early 2000s, Facebook has become ubiquitous; this application provides a viewable access point into others' lives, but the problem is that the way in which users present themselves on Facebook often are misguided as it could be presented in a favorable way. (Chou & Edge, 2012). Furthermore, it is stated that Facebook users judge based on easily recalled examples—the availability heuristic—usually retrieving instances of positive messages and happy images. Chou and Edge further stated that the other factors that affected the perception of others were the years of using Facebook, time spent on Facebook each week, and number of people listed as their Facebook ''friends''; their findings revealed that those who used Facebook more perceived the others as happier than themselves and that life is not fair. Additionally, those who spent more time on Facebook and had more Facebook "friends" they did not personally know were even more likely to believe that the others are in better and happier lives. Due to adults' pursuit of an identity of leading a fulfilling and happy life, comparisons with these "happier" adults are inevitable. Correlations between these social comparisons and *personal relative deprivation* (e.g. "resentment originating from the belief that one is deprived of desired and deserved outcomes compared to others"; PRD), are seen in adults, with greater prevalence in *younger* adults as engagement in social comparison peaks around young adulthood and weakens from middle age to older age (Callan et al., 2015). Losses or shifts in interpersonal contacts, social isolation, and a decline in cognitive capacities required for social comparison also may cause lower levels of social comparison, leading older adults to experience lower levels of PRD (Hughes et al, 2016). Overall, these social comparisons are often caused by the need for conformity that adults see as necessary for themselves to become happier. Unfortunately, this can also correspond to negative experiences like PRD due to their inability to achieve such a happy state like others, who seem like they are fulfilled (Callan et al, 2015).

3. Social Status

3.1 Socioeconomic Status and Well-being

One factor that correlates with an individual's sense of fulfilment is socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is one of the most impactful situational variables, the context in which the target of influence is situated or less permanent individual difference variables, that causes conformity in addition to other trait-like variables, characteristics of the target of influence or stable individual difference variables (Laursen & Faur, 2022). A higher socio-economic status leads to higher self-esteem; conversely, lower socio-economic status leads to lower self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). As stated before, when concerning social media, individual traits and situational variables can increase the likelihood of conformity as social media tends to exert a relatively consistent degree of influence among different contexts (Laursen & Faur, 2022). Socioeconomic status, a situational variable, impacts self-esteem, an individual trait, which can lead to changes in levels of confidence. Low self-esteem means low confidence and a feeling of not having much control of your life, which can result in unmet needs (Mclaughlin et al, 2012). "Unmet needs", such as the need for integration and alliance with a peer group, can lead to loneliness, a state that motivates individuals to change their social circumstances" (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018).

Social media may further increase feelings of loneliness by showcasing others being in large social circles, leading to an increased likelihood of conformity. This is due to how one can often join friend groups easily by "Being perceived as amenable and compatible" (Laursen & Faur, 2022). As an example, low status teens in unpopular groups are more inclined to follow the behaviors endorsed by popular groups to increase their status and popularity like individuals in popular groups (Helms et al., 2014). Both adolescents and adults may appear to be "keeping up with the Joneses" due to social pressure to compare themselves to their peers and behave in similar ways to their peers (Helms et al., 2014; Sidani et al., 2020). In order to be on the same level as one's peers, these unmet needs must somehow be fulfilled, which is usually done with conformity to join a peer group.

3.2 Signaling Success

Another example of a situational variable influencing conformity in peer-groups, is that of in-group competition. Social media plays into this context as it is a means of displaying one's life events. As a result, "exposing too much to content that friends have posted on social media can inevitably trigger individuals to compare themselves with their friends, eventually leading to envy" (Charoensukmongkol, 2018). This is especially the case within peer-groups with high in-group competition as adolescents would actively use social media as a means of impressing others through their achievements and status (Nesi, Telzer & Prinstein, 2017). These envy-inducing comparisons can be further intensified by family. The social learning theory explains how individuals learn by observing the actions of others in their social group. In this case, the individuals learned from are individuals' parents who may engage in comparing their children with other children. This action can lead to "developing negative personalities and behaviors such as jealousy, sibling rivalry, and loss of self-confidence" (Charoensukmongkol, 2018, p. 71), and thereby leading children to "become overly aware of what others have vs. what they don't have" (Charoensukmongkol, 2018, p. 71). As a result, children often conform into a role of inferiority that is incompetent, possibly even leading to depressive symptoms.

Lastly, self-comparisons of parenting between young adults are very prevalent and there are "associations between parental social media comparison (PSMC)—the degree to which individuals compare their parenting with others on social media (SM)—and depressive symptoms" (Sidani et al., 2020). Parents showcasing high levels of PSMC reported that based on other parents' posts, others are providing their children a better life than they are for their children in terms of clothes, food and housing (Sidani et al., 2020). Moreover, many young adults believe that others' successes are due to their own personality and traits rather than their differing circumstances. This is even more so for those on social media they don't personally know, highlighting the concept of fundamental attribution error (Chou & Edge, 2012; Harvey et al., 1981). Disregarding the possible varying economic situations between each parent that allows better care for their children causes parents to beat themselves up because they believe that they are worse than other parents and are not providing enough for their children due to their lacking abilities.

4   Discussion

This research review shows the impact that social media plays throughout the lives of adolescents and adults. Social media has the power to increase the prevalence of conformity to behaviors and potentially induce negative psychological experiences due to constant comparisons being made between oneself and others. Adolescents are further endangered by the fact that they are still in their developmental period where the tendencies they conform to in adolescence can permanently affect their future tendencies. This is not helped by the fact that they overestimate the number of risky behaviors of their high-status peers that they want to engage in.

Nonetheless, this could lead to negative consequences as the individuals may conform to risky behaviors to fulfill their unmet social needs, improve self-esteem and reduce social anxiety. An example of this is how some anxious adolescents reported having their depressive symptoms conforming to match their peers and adjusting their alcohol consumption and truancy to match others in order to raise their compatibility to social groups (Laursen & Faur, 2022). As for adolescents, young adults and parents, they constantly compare themselves to others in social media posts who are purposely portrayed to be very happy and successful. This results in them feeling lacking in their capabilities of nurturing their children or simply leading a fulfilling life, leading to depressive symptoms.

There are a few limitations to this research paper; one of them is that for several of the studies cited, most of the data collected is through measures of self-report and surveys that are all based on the honesty of the participants engaging in the study. So, for cases like adolescents' engagement in risky behaviors, it may be somewhat inaccurate because adolescents may choose not to give an accurate report of their engagement in risky behaviors in fear of punishment. Furthermore, most of the data collected are not from longitudinal research, which occurs over a long period of time, making the predictions about future states of well-being after conformity not absolute.

5   Conclusion

While social media and different technologies are always changing and will continue to change as years pass, it is essential to spread awareness about how social media bolsters the negative effects that conformity to bad behaviors have in both adolescents and adults, suggesting a need for continuous research in this field. To improve on determined limitations, professionals or examinations may take place to increase the validity of the collected data as many of them are currently relying on self-reports and surveys which depend on the honesty of the participants. Also, the research should be conducted for a longer period of time to increase the accuracy of data and observation.

As suggested throughout the paper, prevention and intervention strategies should be considered to minimize these negative impacts. For example, media literacy education could be applied in educational facilities such as schools or even through the national campaigns alerting individuals to carefully examine what they may encounter through social media and to make better decisions. Support programs for vulnerable populations could also be useful as it could help to reduce vulnerability to peer pressure, increase digital skill building and encourage identity expressions.

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