

Digital Technology in Mental Health and Well-Being: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has changed the way people access mental health care, making resources and support more available than ever before. Integrating digital technology into daily life has revolutionized communication, access to information, and mental health care. While it offers significant opportunities to enhance mental well-being, including online therapy, mental health apps, and digital support networks, it also presents substantial challenges. Excessive use of digital devices, especially among adolescents, has been linked to negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. The addictive nature of technology, coupled with issues like cyberbullying and the pressure to maintain a curated online persona, can exacerbate these conditions. This paper explores the positive and negative impacts of digital technology on mental health, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to its use. It also discusses strategies for promoting digital literacy, setting healthy boundaries, and fostering responsible technology use to mitigate risks and enhance the benefits of digital tools in supporting mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Digital technology, Mental health, well being

INTRODUCTION

Mental health plays a key role in a person's overall well-being. Mental health affects individuals' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning, and encompasses their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. The growth of digital technology has notably influenced attitudes and behaviors, particularly with negative outcomes like maladaptive changes in mood and social interactions. Adolescents, in particular, are spending more time online and interacting through digital platforms, raising concerns that constant connectivity may be impacting their mental health ^[1]. Mental health is a critical issue in India that requires urgent attention. The implementation of mental health policies and regulations in the country is still facing significant gaps, especially in terms of coverage and addressing humanitarian concerns. A study on the effects of social media usage and its content on the mental health of Indian youth found that depressive symptoms are significantly influenced by social media use, the nature of content consumed, emotional regulation, perceived stress, and sleep deprivation. These findings can be valuable for policymakers and healthcare professionals in enhancing mental health services, particularly those addressing issues related to social media usage and its associated content ^[2].

In recent years, digital technology has become a significant part of everyday life, altering how people communicate, work,

and seek entertainment. The world has seen significant change as a result of innovations like cell phones, social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. Although there are many advantages to these developments, such as better connectivity and simpler information access, worries about how they may affect mental health are growing. Digital technologies have also revolutionized the way people access mental health care. Platforms like Better Help and Talk space allow individuals to receive counselling remotely, increasing the accessibility of mental health support. Mobile applications such as Calm, Headspace, and Woebot help users manage stress and practice mindfulness, while AI-driven tools and virtual reality therapies offer innovative treatments for conditions like PTSD and anxiety.

However, the pervasive use of digital devices, especially among children, raises concerns about their impact on face-to-face social interactions. Many children now spend significant amounts of time engaging with online platforms, including gaming systems and social media, which can lead to a decline in real-world socialization. This shift from in-person interaction to virtual communication can contribute to social isolation, adversely affecting their physical, mental, and social development.^[3] As children prioritize online relationships, they may struggle to develop the essential social skills needed for personal growth, making it crucial to find a balance between digital engagement and face-to-face interactions.

These trends highlight the need to consider both the positive and negative implications of digital technology on mental health, especially for vulnerable populations like children and adolescents who may face unique challenges in navigating these evolving digital landscapes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital Technology's Negative Impact on Mental Health & Well-being

Digital technology also poses serious risks to mental health and well-being. Agha and

ZaaZa (2021) found that 37% of children exhibited low levels of active play, 65% had excessive screen time, and 26% experienced a combination of both. The study also highlighted that the use of digital technology is linked to issues such as inattention, aggression, obesity, physical inactivity, sleep disturbances, and improper technology usage, including concerns with content, posture, frequency, and duration. These factors have been influencing children's behaviour.^[4] Additionally, Hoge et al (2017) found that the diverse characters shown on online platforms and television can trigger fear, anxiety, and depression in children. Furthermore, a strong connection has been observed between social media use and the development of depression or anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents.^[5]

A study by Santo et al. (2018) found that spending too much time on social media leads to increased anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. People often compare their lives to the highly edited and filtered images they see online, which can create unrealistic expectations and emotional distress.^[6]

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant mental health risk, particularly for teenagers and young adults. Negative online interactions, including harassment and hurtful comments, can lead to stress, social isolation, and emotional harm. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time, making it difficult for victims to find relief.^[7]

Another growing concern is technology addiction. Excessive use of smartphones, social media, and video games has been linked to disrupted sleep patterns, shorter attention spans, and weakened face-to-face social interactions. Research suggests that individuals who engage with digital devices for more than six hours a day are at an increased risk of developing technology addiction and experiencing emotional distress.^[8]

The digital divide is an additional challenge, particularly for low-income and rural

populations who lack access to high-speed internet and digital literacy resources. Although digital tools for mental health support exist, financial and technological barriers prevent many individuals from accessing these resources. This disparity further exacerbates mental health challenges for underserved communities^[9]

Digital Technology's Positive Impact on Mental Health & Well-being

Digital technology is crucial in increasing awareness about mental health. Online platforms such as websites, blogs, podcasts, and educational resources provide valuable information on mental health issues, coping strategies, and self-care practices. This rise in mental health knowledge helps encourage individuals to seek help sooner and contributes to reducing the stigma surrounding mental health challenges.^[10]

Research shows that digital technology has made mental health care more accessible and effective. Many individuals who avoid traditional therapy due to stigma, cost, or lack of access to professionals are now seeking help through digital tools.

A sizeable number of studies found that teletherapy services effectively treat anxiety and depression. Platforms like Better Help and Talk space provide remote psychological counselling, helping individuals access therapy from anywhere.

^[11] Kusumajati et al. (2020) suggest that mental health apps are useful in managing stress and anxiety, offering features like self-assessment tools, guided meditation, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) exercises.^[12]

Digital technology plays a vital role in raising awareness and campaigning for serious social issues. Digital platforms enable individuals, activists, and organizations to engage with a wide range of people, mobilize support, and push for societal change. The ability to spread information and engage in real-time communication has made digital campaigns an effective tool for addressing critical issues such as climate change, mental health, human rights, and social justice.

This study examines how digital technology affects mental health and well-being using a systematic review and meta-analysis methodology.

Challenges faced with Digital Technology and Mental Health

The integration of digital technology into our daily lives has brought about both positive and negative implications for mental health and well-being. While digital tools can enhance access to mental health resources and foster connections, they also present significant challenges that can negatively affect individuals' mental health.



Technology Addiction

Excessive use of digital devices can result in technology addiction, where individuals become overly dependent on their gadgets. Studies have found that the frequent urge to check devices or social media platforms stimulates the brain's reward system, reinforcing addictive patterns of behavior. This addiction can interfere with daily activities, relationships, and overall well-being. A study by Kuss and Griffiths (2017) identifies internet and smartphone addiction as serious mental health issues. Rosen et al. (2013) suggests that high levels of digital engagement can result in poor sleep quality, reduced attention span, and social isolation, all of which affect mental health and well-being.^[13]

Anxiety and Depression

Research shows a strong link between excessive social media use and an increase in anxiety and depression, particularly among adolescents. According to Primack et al. (2017), individuals who spend over two hours a day on social media are more prone to experiencing anxiety and depression. This impact is thought to stem from factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and the pressure to uphold a carefully crafted online image.^[14]

Social Isolation and Loneliness

While digital technology helps connect people, it can also lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Research by Twenge et al. (2017) found that more screen time, particularly on social media, is linked to fewer in-person interactions, resulting in a sense of disconnection. Although online relationships provide some form of interaction, they often lack the emotional depth and connection that face-to-face relationships offer, contributing to feelings of loneliness.^[15]

Decreased Cognitive Development

Excessive screen time, especially among children and adolescents, can disrupt cognitive development. Overuse of digital

devices can negatively impact attention span, memory, and problem-solving abilities, as users are continuously exposed to a flood of information. Rosen et al. (2013) found that multitasking between digital devices can reduce cognitive efficiency and focus, which negatively impacts academic performance and mental health.^[8]

Body Image Issues

Social media platforms, in particular, have been associated with increased body image concerns, especially among young people. Platforms that emphasize visual content can exacerbate unrealistic beauty standards, leading to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Fardouly et al. (2015) found that women who engage heavily with social media experience more negative body image, which can contribute to mental health issues like eating disorders and depression.^[17]

Intervention Strategies and Policies for enhances mental health and well-being

School-Based Programs, integrating digital literacy into the curriculum helps students understand the positive and negative aspects of technology. Programs should focus on internet safety, online addiction and cyberbullying, screen time. Teachers can educate students on the psychological effects of excessive technology use and encourage healthy online habits.

Schools can implement guidelines for screen time, especially with the increase in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Policies could include daily time limits for online lessons and mandatory breaks between virtual classes to prevent eye strain and mental fatigue.

Families can encourage regular "digital detox" periods to reduce dependency on screens. This can include setting screen-free times during family meals, outdoor activities, and before bedtime. Parents can play an active role in monitoring and limiting screen time for their children.

As more professionals in India work remotely, managing digital technology usage has become essential for employee well-being. Companies should implement policies that encourage work-life balance, such as "no emails after hours" or limiting virtual meetings to avoid digital burnout.

In the workplace, companies can conduct training sessions on digital health, focusing on reducing screen fatigue and maintaining good posture during long hours of digital device use. Providing employees with ergonomic workstations, such as adjustable desks and proper seating, can also help prevent physical strain.

Intervention strategies and policies to manage digital technology use in schools, families, and workplaces are essential to mitigate the potential negative effects on mental health and well-being. Through a combination of digital literacy education, screen time regulations, parental controls, and workplace wellness programs, a balanced approach can be adopted to ensure that technology serves as a tool for empowerment while minimizing its adverse effects.

CONCLUSION

Digital technology presents both significant opportunities and challenges for mental health. On the one hand, it enables improved access to mental health resources, fosters communication, and provides platforms for self-expression and support. Technologies like online therapy, mental health apps, and social media can create a sense of community and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Excessive use of digital devices, particularly among adolescents, can contribute to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and feelings of social isolation. The addictive qualities of technology, the risk of cyberbullying, and the stress of maintaining a polished online image can all intensify these mental health challenges. To fully harness the potential of digital technology while mitigating its risks, it is essential to promote digital literacy, set healthy screen time limits, and encourage

responsible technology use. With proper interventions, awareness, and balanced use, digital technology can be a powerful tool for enhancing mental well-being while minimizing its harmful effects.

Declaration by Authors

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