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Online Vs Offline social support and its effect on Psychological well-being

ABSTRACT : With the widespread adoption of digital technologies, online social support has emerged as a novel form of social support. Distinct from traditional offline support, online social support is transacted in distinct and creative ways, such as wall posts, private messages, emotions, likes, favourites, comments, shares and reposts (Li, Chen, and Papiel 2015; Valkenburg, Koutamanis and Vossen 2017), with increasing social interactions happening online, a significant issue is how the impact of social support changes when it is received through social media rather than face-to-face. Offline social support based on face-to-face interactions often involves deeper emotional connections, non-verbal cues, and immediate interpersonal responses, which may alleviate excessive digital interactions (Chan and Cheng 2016, Shensa et al 2020). Prior studies have demonstrated that offline social support is negatively associated with internet addiction and social media dependency (Lin et al 2018; Mazonni et al 2016; Yang Liu and Wei 2016), suggesting the protective effect against problematic technology use.

Key words : Online Vs. Offline, Social Support, basic psychological needs, mental health, psychological well-being.

Introduction : The internet is a crucial platform for individual to gain social support, enhancing their well-being. However, research indicated that while online social support has positive aspects, it is also carries potential drawbacks and can lead to problematic internet use. Give the current debate in the literature, a meta-analysis compiled prior research to access the overall relationship between social support and internet addiction and discovered a medium-sized negative correlation between the two (Lei et al 2018). However, most current studies on social support fail to distinguish the contexts in which social support is transacted i.e. face – to - face or via social media, resulting in the conflation of the roles of in person and online social support.

Face-to-Face social interaction has long been

recognized for its profound psychological and relational significance in human lives, long before the advent of the internet and social media.

Problematic smartphone / internet use is defined as continued smartphone use despite negative consequences and societal restrictions. It is characterized by a number of symptoms, including withdrawal, salience, loss of control, euphoria, and conflict (Walsh, White, and McD Young 2010). Many studies have used the term 'addiction' as a metaphor for the phenomenon and linked it to a series of adverse influences for adolescents, such as procrastination, academic failure, sleep disturbance, insomnia, anxiety, depression and poor life satisfaction (Gokalp, Saritepeci, and Durak 2022; Liu et al, 2022, Sumen and Evgin 2021; Wang et al. 2019; Yu and Shek, 2018; Zhang et al 2020). However, these consequences do not meet the severity levels of those caused by addiction, and 'smartphone addiction' was not included in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (Panova and Carbonell 2018).

Previous research has linked problematic smartphone use with social support. However, many studies have not differentiated between the sources of social support whether it is obtained online or offline. With the increasing prevalence of digital socialisation, recent investigations have begun to explore the role of online social support in problematic smartphone use, yet the underlying mechanism remains unclear.

Social support and mental health : Social support encompasses feeling loved, valued, and part of a network that offers mutual assistance (Cobb, 1976; Sarason et al 1987; Wills 1991). Many studies highlight its protective role in mental health, yet, the precise ways it impacts mental well-being remain unclear. This gap offers an opportunity for exploration, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies during the Pandemic noted increased stress, physical issues, fatigue, loneliness, depression and anxiety.

Social Support : Social support, a multidimensional concept, is typically measured in terms of either the structure (number of relationships) or the functions (like informational, instrumental and emotional) of social networks (Wills, 1991). Perceived support, the perception of available help, often has a more significant impact on mental health than received support (Kessler and McLeod, 1985; Thoits, 1985, Wethington and Kessler, 1986). Research also shows that social support can stem from various sources like family, friends, and pets (Allen et al. 2002; Ford et al 2007), and can benefit mental and physical health in both stressful and non-stressful times (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

Social Support and mental health : Numerous studies highlight social support's protective role in mental health. For depression, research underscores the significance of parental support for children, while adults benefit from spouses, family and friends (Garipey et al, 2016; Mohd et al, 2019). Low support relates to higher depression, anxiety and self-harm.

The stress and coping theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) provides a framework to understand the pivotal role of social support in mental health. The theory suggests that social support significantly shapes how we perceive and handle stress. It acts as a crucial resource when facing challenges, impacting our stress levels, when we feel supported and equipped to cope, stress tends to diminish. Thus, an event's perceived stress is not solely inherent; our evaluation, influenced by our perceived social support, greatly shapes how we perceive it. A robust support system can alleviate the overwhelming nature of specific events. Therefore, increasing social support is more likely to decrease perceived stress.

Perceived stress and mental health : Perceived stress, shaped by how individuals appraise situations and their coping abilities, strongly correlates with mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and harmful behaviours. Epidemiological studies confirm that facing more stressful events and consistently reporting high perceived stress over extended periods are linked to poorer mental health and increased mortality (Epel et al, 2018). The COVID-19 has been a significant stressor impacting mental health, with rising anxiety and depression rates.

Anxiety, a response to stress, shows a strong link to perceived stress, activating similar brain regions. Perceived stress significantly contributes to depression and harmful behaviours like substance abuse. Notably, higher positive effect, vital for well-being, correlates negatively with perceived stress.

Social Support and perceived stress : Empirical evidence consistently indicates a positive link between greater social support and improved mental health outcomes. Further previous studies have highlighted that social support contribute to mental health well-being by diminishing perceived stress. Theoratically rooted in Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory, social support is recognised as a pivotal factors influencing how individuals perceive and manage stress, consequently impacting mental health.

Conceptualization of Social Support : How social support is defined and assessed include various aspects of support. For example, we can define and measure actual received support, perceived availability of support, Frequency of social interactions, and density of social networks. However, definitions of most studies include the provision of support than can range from emotional to instrumental (Antonucci and Jackson, 1987). Emotional support is perceived notion that a person is esteemed and accepted. By communicating to individuals that they are valued and accepted despite any faults, individual's self-esteem can be strengthened; so it is also referred to as esteem support (Cobb, 1976). Informational support refers to help in understanding and coping with challenges, so, it is also referred to as cognitive guidance or appraisal support. Instrumental support involves the provision of tangible support such as financial help and needed services (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Although features and functions of social support can be differentiated conceptually, they are not generally independent in real life.

Social support and psychological well-being : The beneficial effects of social support on psychological well-being and health have been established over decades of research. Holt Lunstad et al 2010; Saphire Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). Research has consistently shown that individuals with close and supportive spouses, Friends and Family have greater life satisfaction and well-being Antonucci & Jackson, 1987, Chen & Feeley, 2014) and Fewer Psychological and health related costs, such as loneliness, depressive symptoms, and cognitive deficit. On the other hand, lack of social support has been implicated in emotional distress, depressive symptoms and morbidity (Yang et al 201; Lerman Ginzburg et al, 2021).

Within the literature, diverse theoretical frameworks have been presented to understand the processes, such as attachment, belonging, intimacy, and social integration, whereby supportive relationships affect psychological well-being. Researchers have also vigorously examined a wide range of variables that affect to the importance of social support for individual's well-being and optimal psychological functioning, (For a review). Several theoretical models and empirical research have characterized the diverse ways in which positive relationships contribute to psychological well being.

Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT); Deci and Ryan, 1985). Which posits that the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs is necessary for individual's well-being and thriving. Although prior research has examined whether the satisfaction of basic psychological needs acts as explanatory mechanism in the associations between social support and psychological well-being, most studies have often aggregated the different needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness into a global measure and have considered overall satisfaction of needs without differentiating the unique effects of each specific need. Thus, it is difficult to assess the relative importance of different psychological needs for psychological well-being (Abidin et al, 2022; Vermote et al, 2022).

Furthermore, many studies investigating the links between social support and well-being have used groups of participants who are developmentally homogeneous, such as adolescents, young adults (Martela and Ryan, 2016; Tian et al, 2016; or older adults

(Neubauer et al 2019), Chen and Zhang, 2021). Thus it is not clear if there are differences between age groups in the importance and impact of social support and satisfaction of basic psychological needs on psychological well-being. Although social support has pervasive benefits throughout the adult life span, the relative salience of different relationships and the satisfaction of needs could change over time due to age related losses in behavioural and psychological functioning and social circumstances associated with age (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Cartensen, 2006).

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