

Social lives: glimpse of online & offline expressions in young adults

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ABSTRACT

The present information age and rapid expansions of social media networks have provided an interesting picture of online lives. The coronavirus pandemic came up all of a sudden, affecting us enormously. Various legal and moral steps such as lockdowns, social distancing, and quarantine were employed to combat the dreadful virus. This has forced people to stay home, others stranded in between. Lack of social interaction raises the concern of mental health issues, social isolation, and feeling of loneliness. In such tough times, social media came out as a space for obtaining information whether regarding COVID-19, health updates of people getting infected, and other helpful ways to be safe. However, on the other side, there was chaos, mass mayhem, and uncertainties due to fake news, insensitive statements, and disturbing visuals of deaths. All these emotional surges found a way of expression online. Instagram recently completed its 10th birthday and presented itself as a great platform for interaction, updates, and engagements for its users. The field of online expressions is recent yet significant especially during the times of offline restriction of movements and expressions. The article further draws upon the three theoretical approaches, namely, symbolic interactionism, de-individuation, and SIDS, out of which the first can provide a glimpse of how face-to-face interaction during the pre-pandemic times helped individuals make meaning with the world. The latter two understand how group dynamics can affect individual participation in such interaction, especially in virtual spaces.

Keywords: *Online expressions, COVID-19, Social Engagements, Online Lives, Self-Disclosures*

The year 2020 has been full of chaos, uncertainties and losses all around the globe. The identification of coronavirus back in 2019 in Wuhan, China from peculiar pneumonia cases triggered further exploration and in a matter of a few weeks, the situation worsened resulting in large numbers of deaths. In January 2020, WHO termed it a global concern and emergency (Garfin & Silver, 2020). By March, it announced the coronavirus spread as a global pandemic followed by nationwide lockdowns, health emergencies in many parts of the world including India (Ashokkumar et al., 2020). Profoundly impacting the physical as well as psychosocial lives, the pandemic brought the world on standstill. The measures like social distancing and quarantine were employed to lessen the exposure and the

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Received: February 11, 2021; Revision Received: March 16, 2021; Accepted: March 28, 2021

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spread of the virus. Such conditions contributed to an increase of stress and anxiety (Steinert, 2020). Further what raises concerns are the likely increased loneliness and social isolation strongly associated with self-harm and suicides (Holmes et al., 2020).

Young Adults

The term “youth” has always been presented in various light ranging from deviant, delinquent, and often called a modern concept between completion of schooling years and preparation of entering the labor market (Buckingham, n.d.). The sudden coronavirus pandemic outbreak seems to be taking a great toll on young adults who find themselves engrossed with uncertainty and feeling struck due to a total economic shift. A cohort study assessing the emotional distress among young adults, Covid-19 related stressors and coping strategies found increased perceived stress levels and coping strategies were mainly keeping a daily routine, positive reframing and physical activities (Shanahan et al., 2020). Young adults who tackle various key transitions such as educational, romantic relationships, social and professional (Arnett, 2000) often find this coronavirus pandemic threatening life transitions. Females, migrants, and students' are more prone to pandemic stressful situations which can be tackled with clear communication strategies taken up by the schools and universities along with financial help and policy initiatives (Shanahan et al., 2020). With the sudden shutting down of schools and colleges, students seemed more at risk of mental health problems mediated by rising loneliness and pandemic-related concerns (Fried et al., 2020). Duijndam et al., (2020) conducted an online survey to assess the predictors of fear during the coronavirus pandemic, they found the four main predictors were health anxiety, media exposure, social media usage, and concerns for loved ones. A study conducted immediately before and during the pandemic in china provided a significant finding i.e. 74% decline in emotional wellbeing, however, interestingly individuals' perceived level of knowledge was a strong protector of wellbeing than the actual knowledge suggesting more self-control (Yang & Ma, 2020). Detecting the emotional contagion in such spaces Coviello et al., (2014) found how the increase in happiness in one person may have a striving effect on others also calling it a rippling effect.

Social life pre-pandemic

Furlong (n.d.) highlighted the key transition from school to work arena which has mostly grown more unpredictable with growing inequalities and lack of opportunities for young adults. He further draws attention to the plights of many who continue their struggle, subtly getting excluded and hence, more vulnerable to deviancy. Wong (2020) draws upon the same lines providing an important aspect to youths today “hidden” from the social lives, though they might not be socially present to others they have their own safe space for expression on digital media where they feel quite “social” too. Citing Cole (1995). Furlong (n.d.) describes the two tasks of youth i.e., moving from “family of origin” to “family of destination” and housing away from parents again a growing concern due to unemployment and competition. The identity crisis never gets resolved or is established as an achievement but is an ongoing process of revising the concept of self and of reality. Once this is achieved, intimacy needs to move to the foreground of young adults, however, uncertainties in identity will shy away to form intimate longing and may lead to isolation (Lunsky, 1966).

Social life after during pandemic

Social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have successfully entered the lives of people for a long time long. This pandemic has provided an interesting glimpse of how individuals are opting for these social media platforms for interactions, entertainment, information attainment, and emotional expressions (Cinelli et al., 2020; Nability-Grover et al.,

2020; Pellert et al., 2020). Easy access and the ability to stay connected especially during natural disasters have also contributed to their outreach (Taylor et al., 2012). Baym (2015) comments on how these rapid expansions of digital media resulted in shallow relationships offline but more diverse connections online. Bashingwa (2020) analyzed the role of social media in preventing isolation suggesting wider reach and interactive pages could help in the same. Using Google Trends and Instagram hashtag between 20th February to May 6, 2020, a study investigated user behavior related to Covid-19 in terms of virus name, life during the lockdown, and the COVID-19 updates, findings suggests the top 5 terms “coronavirus”, “corona”, “COVID”, “virus”, “coronavirus”, and “COVID-19” (Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). “Infodemic” the word came out during the WHO conference by -General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (WHO Director) at the Munich Security Conference on Feb 15th, 2020 as cited in Zarocostas (2020) referring to the global spread of misinformation on social media along with the pandemic. This has intrigued researchers to study the rumor amplification on social media and understand the social dynamics for content consumption (Centola, 2010). Studies have also found “emotional contagion”- a phenomenon of widespread emotional sentiments on social media after natural or man-made disasters forming social resilience. (Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Goldenberg et al., 2017)

Self- disclosure

Social sharing or disclosure has always been an interesting topic of research, however, online self-disclosure has presented varied manifestations of findings. Lee et al., (2015) studied what motivates users to share photos on Instagram, their finding includes mainly four motives- information gathering, community support, status-seeking, and self-representation. Selective Disclosure i.e. more positive or less negative event disclosure has always presented rather a rosy picture of lives online (Gao et al., 2020). Users on Instagram tend to concentrate their posts during the weekend and the day end, endorsing more likes and comments (Centola, 2010). An interesting study found a marginally significant association between Instagram usage and depressive symptoms with mediation factors as social comparison and the number of strangers followed (Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). However, on the contrary, sensitive self-disclosure such as negative emotional experiences, seeking support as in case of depression attracts a positive response and a sense of social acceptance (Andalibi et al., 2017). Leroy et al., (2010) on studying social affiliation as an emotional regulation strategy found how situational and emotional similarity increase social affiliation. The present pandemic which led many people around the globe to battle together can be thought of as situational similarity. Individuals lacking offline social skills find a great avenue at online spaces however moderation is a must (Kim et al., 2009). The social distancing and lockdown imposed have provided our social media as a space for promoting connectedness and relationship development especially at the present times of pandemic. Nabity-Grover et al., (2020) provided us how the expressions during this Covid-19 pandemic and prior changed an Inside out and Outside in perspective i.e., the day outs and fine-dines which were once normal to disclose now attract backlashes and even sound insensitive thus calling for more mindful disclosures i.e., personal health, COVID-19 management info & social empathy cross-cultural comparison of psychological distress in four different parts of the world (USA, South Korea, France, and Hong Kong) during the initial months of pandemic mainly found the age (Young), COVID-19 concerns, and loneliness as major determinant along with the contextual factors cultural specific (Deana Derek J. et al., n.d.). The findings call out to allocate resources and multidisciplinary research for social support to individuals with mental health issues or at risk for the same (Holmes et al., 2020). Sentiment and emotional analysis in India using Twitter as the main

platform from March 22 to April 21, 2020, presented a positive sentiment in public however at the individual level, there isn't much difference (Das & Dutta, 2020).

Instagram – a photo-sharing platform and endowed with several attractive features such as filters, stories, and captions has emerged as one of the major social media platforms allowing users to capture, edit and publish photos, interact using likes, comments, and repost. (Manovich, n.d.) This pandemic also forced many to miss their loved ones and their physical presence, Tech et al., (2014) presented a beautiful take on how photos engage in online behavior as they do offline. This has also been a major reason for the rising fame of Instagram, launched in 2010 bypassed twitter in 2012 as active daily users thereby penetrating the lives of people (Abbott et al., 2013). The First Instagram dataset on COVID-19 suggested how Instagram is shaping and reshaping human lives and thus impacting whether personal and professional keeping people intact online (Zarei et al., 2020). Instagram which has emerged as a great avenue of emotional expression has provided a lot of awareness-generated posts and depiction of chaos due to the present coronavirus pandemic (Rafi et al., 2020). Instagram apart from being used as a leisure space for emotional expression found itself providing sound connect between teachers and students, as a pedagogy tool for organic chemistry during the times of school shut down attracting the attention of educators all around the world (Ye et al., 2020). A lot can be seen rather than being felt, and thanks to social media outreach. With easy access, inexpensive, and engaging, social media seems like an entire space for human interactions (Fernback, 2007). This has also led to a stream of potentially disturbing images circulating via social media, several studies supporting the harmful after-effects these can cause such as issues of anxiety and PTSD symptoms especially the graphic visuals of bloody mayhem and violence has been found associated with collective trauma (Holman et al., 2020). Goldenberg et al., (2017) provided yet another lens of viewing the collective emotions, a more macro-level affective processes whether positive such as trends, hypes, etc. while the negative such as polarization, campaigns, protests, etc differing from that of an individual level in terms of quantity, time and course. Any intense and emotional event brings people together and elicits emotional synchrony or identity fusion (Páez & Rimé, 2014) as in the present pandemic, mass greeting to healthcare workers and the call for lockdowns and curfews can be seen as some relating events for the same.

Theoretical frameworks

Elaborate social engagement patterns both pre-pandemic and during pandemic demands some theoretical frameworks. As we saw the pre-pandemic social lives of young adults were more face to face, happening as they strive for transitions from school to work, establish an identity of themselves, and intimacy in relationships. Three theoretical approaches, symbolic interactionism, De-individuation, and SIDS are briefly discussed to understand the pre-pandemic and during pandemic social engagements of young adults.

Symbolic Interactionism

Carter & Fuller (2015) briefly present the theoretical perspective by Blumer and others which focuses on the micro-level (the individuals) making sense with the society by constantly interacting with them face to face. The theory emerged opposing the structuralist functionalism. The latter saw the society dominant over the individuals. Pre-pandemic times have been like that when individuals were able to go out, meet friends and thus interact with society in person. Such constant action and reconstruction seems quite a significant feature than, however during the pandemic, such interactions have evolved to another space named the virtual spaces (Fernback, 2007). ***De-individuation Theory***

The emergence and diversification of digital media, easy accessibility, anonymity, and inexpensiveness have undoubtedly brought the world closer (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Anonymity or lack of awareness of who they are, has been found to cause De-individuation i.e., disregarding the social norms being followed. It can have both positive and negative sides to have a look, citing Zimbardo laboratory study where the female participants who wore hoods and hence felt anonymous gave electric shocks to others in the room (Chang, 2008). There have been a lot of instances such as violence, protests, etc. where this De-individuation seems to happen. Most recent and relatable is the “infodemic” – the massive rush of online information during the corona virus pandemic, the fake news, and many other irrelevant kinds of stuff (Cinelli et al., 2020).

Social Identity Model of De-individuation Effects (SIDE)

This theory presents anonymity in a group in a positive light where the individuals lack the awareness of self and get together forming a collective sense of identity or collective belonging of the group (Chang, 2008). Based on this collective identity of the group, Garcia & Rimé (2019) found a strong emotional bond formed after terrorist attacks in the USA when people shared their plight and thus felt socially bonded, forming “social resilience” (Garcia & Gross, n.d.)

CONCLUSION

The review tries to present constructs happening in virtual spaces especially when people are not going out more freely and somewhere finding avenues online. Such disclosures which can be either in linguistics or visuals provide insights into people's life (Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017). Instagram after being acquired by Facebook seems more interesting and appealing to young adults due to its many features and regular updates (Ting et al., 2015). Virtual spaces have rightly been seen as an extension of human horizons, a self without a body (Markham, 1998). Virtual ethnography can be seen as more recent and response to changing times, the age of information, however the further social divide following digital divide (Seymour, 2008). Online portrayals or narratives tend to provide us insights into how emotions are being expressed in virtual spaces (Andalibi et al., 2017)

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Singh A. & Bhargava V. (2021). Social lives: glimpse of online & offline expressions in young adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(1), 1201-1208. DIP:18.01.125/20210901, DOI:10.25215/0901.125