Dependence on the Internet Intensifies the Social Division of Emotional Expression

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Abstract: As the Internet continues to expand, social media has progressively integrated into daily life, leading to a growing reliance on the emotional articulation and social interactions it facilitates. However, this over-reliance has led to issues in authentic emotional expression among groups and deep social interactions between individuals, forming social divisions. This study, utilizing a comprehensive literature review, data analysis, and additional methodologies, concludes that Internet dependency significantly influences emotional expression across diverse age demographics, genders, and professional backgrounds. The analysis reveals that individuals tend to express emotions more on the Internet than in real life, leading to a decline in face-to-face interaction skills, especially among adolescents. This study concludes that Internet dependence can lead to self-isolation, where individuals prefer online communication, thereby reinforcing dependence on the Internet. Over time, communities that depend on emotional expression in digital environments expand, leading to a decline in emotional articulation and empathy in face-to-face interactions. As this demographic increases, a greater segment favors social media platforms, thereby exacerbating social fragmentation. While emphasizing the development of social media, this paper also stresses the importance of authentic social interaction.

Keywords: Internet dependence, emotional expression, social division.

1. Introduction

In the age of information advancement, the Internet has emerged as an essential component of contemporary society. It is omnipresent in daily life, learning, and work, with Internet technology promoting its widespread use and enabling unprecedented connectivity. Nonetheless, this advancement presents a challenge: behaviors dependent on the Internet have become visible to the public. Yet, this dependence on digital expressions of emotion is not without its disadvantages.

Internet dependence, defined as excessive and uncontrollable use of the Internet, is becoming a significant social issue. Young characterized Internet dependency as the overutilization of online resources that interferes with essential real-world activities, including professional responsibilities, educational pursuits, and interpersonal interactions. [1] This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among adolescents and young adults, who invest considerable time and energy in the online world through social media, online games, and instant messaging for emotional expression and social interaction. As reliance on the Internet intensifies, there is a potential decline in individuals' ability to express emotions and their social competencies in real-life settings. This may result in diminished

face-to-face interactions, adversely impacting interpersonal relationships and ultimately jeopardizing emotional well-being.

In recent years, with the widespread use of online phenomena, the way emotions are expressed has undergone significant changes. Emotional expressions exhibited by individuals in digital contexts tend to be more liberated and prevalent compared to those in face-to-face interactions, likely attributable to the anonymity, immediacy, and omnipresence characteristic of the online landscape. Goffman posited that emotional expression serves as the cornerstone of social interaction, mirroring an individual's emotional condition while also functioning as a crucial component in the formation and sustenance of social relationships[2]. However, in online settings, emotional expression often becomes more superficial and fragmented, lacking depth and authenticity. This may impact individuals' ability to establish deep emotional connections in the real world, further intensifying social fragmentation.

Addressing the challenges posed by digital dependency, it is crucial to identify strategies that foster positive online behaviors while mitigating adverse effects on personal mental well-being and social cohesion. This has emerged as a significant concern in modern society. This study aims to deeply explore the impact of online dependency on emotional expression, and how this, in turn, exacerbates social fragmentation. By reviewing relevant research methods, we find a strong correlation between online dependency, emotional expression, and social fragmentation. Furthermore, through an examination of prevailing trends in digital dependency, shifts in emotional communication, and the fragmentation of social interactions, this research aims to offer theoretical perspectives and actionable recommendations for cultivating positive online behaviors, improving individuals' interpersonal skills in the physical world, and promoting inclusive and unified social settings.

2.   Literature Review

Internet dependence, as a social phenomenon, has garnered extensive attention from scholars domestically and internationally. Xiaoming and Xiaodong discovered that internet dependency is prevalent among Chinese adolescents and is associated with academic deterioration, social challenges, and mental health concerns, thereby validating Young's theory within the Chinese context.[3] As a basic way for individuals to interact with society, emotional expression is one of the core contents of social psychology research. Goffman posited that the conveyance of emotions plays a crucial role in social interactions [2]. It not only reflects the emotional state of the individual, but also is the key to the construction and maintenance of social relations. The study conducted by domestic scholar Lihua highlights that the online environment offers a novel platform for individuals to articulate their emotions. However, it also leads to a detachment in emotional expression, characterized by either an overabundance of expression or the suppression of genuine feelings in the digital realm. This phenomenon may subsequently impair individuals' capacity to convey their emotions in real-life interactions. [4] Social differentiation, as an important feature of social structure, refers to the group differences formed by various factors (such as age, gender, educational background, occupation, etc.) of social members. Social differentiation is not only reflected in the uneven distribution of resources, but also in the differences in values, lifestyles, social networks, etc. Through the study of social differentiation in China, domestic scholar Gang found that with the rapid development of the economy, social differentiation between urban and rural areas, classes and regions is increasing. The widespread adoption of the Internet and the growing reliance on it have intensified this phenomenon, particularly among the younger demographic. The Internet has emerged as their primary medium for social interaction and information gathering, resulting in a detachment from conventional social practices and amplifying the generational divide in social engagement.[5]. Existing studies show that there is a significant relationship between Internet dependence and emotional expression, social skills, mental health status, etc. Caplan's research indicated that the level of Internet dependency is inversely

related to an individual's social competencies, self-worth, and symptoms of depression. [6] Kuss and Griffiths further emphasized that reliance on networks not only impacts individuals' interpersonal skills but can also result in their social isolation in the physical world. [7] The research conducted by Turel and Qahri-Saremi examines the influence of network dependence on academic achievement, revealing a negative correlation between the level of network dependence and academic performance. [8] The study conducted by domestic scholar Hua examines the role of network dependence in fostering social differentiation through the lens of social networks. Research indicates that individuals exhibiting a significant reliance on their networks are more likely to cultivate their own online social circles. This phenomenon not only restricts their interactions with diverse individuals in the physical world but also intensifies the information cocoon effect. Consequently, individuals gravitate towards information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, thereby diminishing cross-group comprehension and empathy, which further aggravates social fragmentation. [9]

Based on the literature review and analysis presented, it can be concluded that the interplay between network dependence, emotional expression, and social differentiation is interconnected and mutually influential. [10] Network dependence affects an individual's emotional expression and social interaction ability. Network differentiation limits the social ability and emotional expression and contribution ability formed in the process of limiting the real interaction between individuals and society, which is another manifestation of exacerbating social differentiation. Therefore, in the future research and development process, while dealing with the healthy development of the network, we should focus on social differentiation and the problems brought about by the health of the network individuals.

3. Research Methods &Results

3.1. Research Methods

This article adopts the method of literature review to obtain a certain number of articles by searching for keywords in the knowledge network system. Through the study of these articles, it is found that the relationship between network dependence, emotional expression and social differentiation is particularly close. The literature sources encompass a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and communication, as well as academic journals, conferences, select publications, and significant authoritative databases. Especially in the process of consulting materials, the research results in this regard at home and abroad are analysed, so as to build an analytical framework for literature.

3.2. Results

Through literature review and analysis, this study found that there is a significant negative correlation between Internet dependence and emotional expression habits and face-to-face social skills, especially in the younger generation. The reliance on networks not only transforms the manner in which individuals convey their emotions, fostering a greater dependence on virtual environments and diminishing face-to-face social interactions, but it also intensifies the phenomenon of information cocooning. This leads individuals to favor communication with like-minded groups, thereby diminishing cross-group emotional comprehension and empathy, ultimately exacerbating social fragmentation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Internet Dependence Exacerbates Emotional Expression

4.1.1. Technology Substitution and Interpersonal Alienation

With the widespread use of smartphones, social media, and instant messaging, more people prefer screen communication over face-to-face conversation. This trend has led to a decline in emotional expression skills in real-life settings. Extended engagement in the digital realm can lead to a deterioration of vital listening abilities, non-verbal communication skills (such as eye contact and body language), and conflict resolution competencies, which are all crucial for fostering meaningful interpersonal connections. This decline in abilities not only hinders personal emotional connections but also sets barriers to societal empathy and mutual understanding, intensifying social division.

4.1.2. Social Consequences of Impaired Emotional Health

The degradation of social skills directly impacts emotional health, manifesting in increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression. The prevalence of psychological distress stemming from Internet dependency significantly undermines societal well-being and stability, thereby intensifying social fragmentation. Individuals who excel in digital communication yet experience feelings of isolation in the physical world may establish insular communities, which further alienates them from the broader society and exacerbates the disintegration of social structures.

4.1.3. Algorithm Bias and Homogeneous Communities

Internet platforms use recommendation systems to enhance user experience but inadvertently create filter bubbles. Algorithms tend to suggest content matching users' historical behavior, leading them to only encounter viewpoints and emotional expressions similar to their own, ignoring diversity and complexity. The uniformity of this information stream constricts individuals' viewpoints, diminishing opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, particularly regarding sensitive and contentious topics. As a result, emotional connections among diverse groups diminish, achieving consensus becomes increasingly challenging, and societal rifts become more pronounced.

4.2. Emotional Expression Exacerbates Social Differentiation

4.2.1. Degradation of Social Skills

With the deepening of network dependence, individuals' emotional expression ability and social skills in the real world may gradually deteriorate. This results in a reduction of in-person interactions, hinders the formation and sustenance of interpersonal connections, and subsequently adversely affects individual emotional well-being while intensifying social stratification.

4.2.2. Information Cocoon Room Effect

Individuals who exhibit a strong reliance on their networks are more likely to cultivate their own online social circles. This tendency not only restricts their interactions with people from diverse backgrounds in the physical world but also intensifies the phenomenon known as the information cocoon effect. Individuals tend to be exposed to information similar to their views, thus reducing cross-group understanding and empathy, and further exacerbating social differentiation.

4.2.3. Social Differentiation between Generations

With the popularity of the Internet and the increase of dependence on the Internet, especially among the younger generation, the Internet has become their main social and information access channel, which has led to a disconnection from traditional social modes and exacerbated the social differentiation between generations. The younger demographic may exhibit a greater familiarity with the articulation of emotions through digital platforms, resulting in a generational divide with the older cohort, which tends to favor in-person communication.

4.2.4. The Intensification of Group Differences

Internet dependence has a great impact on the emotional expression of different ages, genders and professional background groups. This disparity could result in emotional communication disorders among various groups and intensify social stratification between them. For example, teenagers may rely more on the Internet for emotional expression, and there are differences in emotional communication with adults.

4.2.5. The Gap between the Digital Native Generation and the Analogue Era

As the "digital native generation", the younger generation has been immersed in the Internet environment since childhood. Their learning, entertainment and even making friends are highly dependent on digital devices. The phenomenon of the information cocoon effect intensifies emotional polarization, leading individuals to exhibit increased exclusion and hostility when confronted with viewpoints that oppose their own beliefs. Conversely, the older generation, having matured during the era of simulation, places greater emphasis on the quality of face-to-face interactions and personal relationships. The huge differences between the two generations in emotional expression, such as the contrast between instant satisfaction and patient listening, intuitively cause communication barriers and misunderstandings. Especially within the family, the generation gap between parents and children is widening, which affects the closeness of family ties and indirectly exacerbates the intergenerational division of society.

4.2.6. Changes and Conflicts of Values

Technological advancements reshape lifestyles and values, with youth embracing multiculturalism and change, while older generations prefer tradition and stability. This clash of values leads to societal friction, intensified by cyberspace anonymity, fostering extreme rhetoric. Polarized public sentiment erodes mutual understanding, challenging societal harmony. Generational differences in emotional expression preferences further deepen societal divides.

4.2.7. The Rise and Marginalisation of Online Subculture

Groups of different ages, genders and professional backgrounds have formed their own unique subcultures in cyberspace. These subcultures typically coalesce around particular interests, ideological stances, or social issues, fostering unique systems of discourse and patterns of emotional expression. Nevertheless, this diversity can, at times, become a hindrance, obstructing communication and comprehension among different groups. For example, game enthusiasts and academic researchers, LGBTQ+ communities and religious conservatives, despite common interests or potential cooperation opportunities in reality, it is difficult for the two sides to cross the boundaries and achieve true integration due to the strengthening of online identities and differences in the habits of emotional expression.

4.2.8. Unequal Distribution of Resources and Inequality of Emotional Expression

Network dependence does not impact all social demographics uniformly. Those in higher economic strata benefit from enhanced network services and possess greater opportunities for expression, whereas marginalized groups may face constraints due to inadequate resources, limited knowledge, or regulatory barriers, hindering their ability to engage fully in emotional interactions within the digital realm. This inequality is not only reflected in material resources, but also in many aspects such as familiarity with network rules and digital ethical awareness. As a result, some people's voices are infinitely amplified, while others are marginalised, exacerbating social injustice and differentiation.

5.   Conclusion

This study concludes that Internet dependence significantly impacts emotional expression habits, which, in turn, exacerbate social division. The phenomenon of Internet dependency impacts not only personal emotional articulation but also societal advancement and structural integrity. Therefore, from the perspective of social development and the trend of healthy Internet use, it is crucial to focus on improving individuals' social skills in real life. For individuals, mental health and social harmony are paramount in real-life social interactions.

The exacerbation of social fragmentation due to reliance on the Internet is especially pronounced among younger generations. Consequently, it is crucial to advocate for the cultivation of healthy online practices and to bolster interpersonal skills in face-to-face interactions, as these factors significantly influence economic progress and the stability of future societies. This study raises questions on how education and policy can help mitigate Internet dependence and enhance real-world connections. Education institutions and policymakers should collaboratively devise feasible programs to improve social and emotional skills among youth. Network platform administrators must also assume social responsibility by refining platform architecture to mitigate negative impacts on users' emotional expression By introducing positive interaction mechanisms, they can foster genuine communication among users, effectively mitigating the negative consequences of Internet dependence.

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