

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE BEHAVIOUR, CHOICES, REALITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF MILLENNIALS: AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The influence of social media on the behaviour, choices, reality and social interactions of Millennials is a response to the conference theme of realizing new opportunities in the post-pandemic era. The study was conducted during July of 2021, after lockdowns were being eased. The main objective of the study was to investigate the influence of social media on the behavior, life choices, reality and relationships of Millennials. A secondary objective is to encourage readers to embrace the powerful opportunities that social media presents, while at the same time being warned of their possible negative impact. With very few empirical studies having been done on post-pandemic use of social media by Millennials, another goal of this study was to produce a robust empirical study on the topic. In this qualitative investigation, primary data from a realized sample of 40 students, alumni and professional individuals, representative of a variety of race groups and genders, was collected from a structured survey, and 12 responses from semi-structured interviews. The data were categorized according to the following themes: Time spent on social media; content preferred; evaluation of content (inspiring, repetitive, entertaining, educational, relevant to real life); impact on behavior (choice of friends, habits, dealing with issues, reality and life choices). The results are discussed according to these themes, representing all aspects of media usage and influence. The data collected suggests that social media do indeed have a significant impact on Millennials' behavior, life choices, relationships and reality. The main limitations of the study concerned the enforced digital collection of data, owing to Covid-19 restrictions. The significant contribution of this study is that it could serve as a warning to media users of the possible addictive influence of social media platforms and their tendency to limit the lifeworld and disconnect people from reality, as well as deceive them as to what is important. However, the results could also encourage social media users to realize the life-changing opportunities available to them on these interactive platforms in the post-pandemic era, especially with regard to the maintenance of significant relationships and academic, lifestyle and career choices.

Key words: Social media, millennials (used interchangeably with Generation-Y), agenda-setting theory, crystallization theory

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, and particularly during the Covid Pandemic, the number of active members on social media platforms has increased dramatically (Tankovska, 2021). Several applications are downloaded easily on online platforms, with the use of a mobile devices, allowing users to connect themselves effortlessly from any location. According to recent statistics, social media fostered around 4.14 billion users worldwide in 2020 (Lambert, 2021). Moreover, since lockdown was imposed to reduce the spread of Coronavirus, Millennials holding several social media accounts were spending an average of two hours and 41 minutes daily on these applications (Lambert, 2021). The leading platform gathering the greatest number of users is Facebook, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Lambert, 2021). Millennials, typically from 25 to 34 years of age, are considered to be the greatest users. This new technology has transformed their approach to relationships and encourages them to share a great amount of information about their lives. From the recording options to the sharing of thoughts and points of view, the features on social media platforms have been rapidly adopted and became one of the greatest online activities (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

As a user of social media platforms, it was brought to the attention of the researcher that the information shared, notably on Instagram, was often liked and shared on Facebook. For instance, if an advert is liked on Instagram, the same advert can be shared to Facebook by others – be it fake or genuine. This incident led the researcher to query the extent to which social media platforms are allowed to disseminate our data. Secondly, she wondered about the possible impact of social media on the lifestyle adopted by Millennials, as well as on their behaviour and social interactions. Since social platforms leave room for any of their users to publish content, trends have been launched effortlessly, impacting billions of viewers. For instance, TikTok, an application which attracts 150 million users daily, has been fostering several dancing challenges (Dequan & Omar, 2020). As soon as a 15-second dancing video is launched on the platform, it may collect thousands of 'comments', 'likes', 'shares' and 'downloads' and is replicated by other users (Dequan & Omar, 2020). One interesting factor is that since the music background of each challenge can be easily remembered, the user will be able to link the music to its original source. After repeated views of the dancing challenge, the user may well feel encouraged to take part in the challenge and possibly publish their own video. This situation applies to several social media applications, highlighting the influence of social media on the behaviour of Millennials.

Social media have effectively been embedded into the daily routine of Millennials, expanding their influence on their lifestyle. Platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, among others, are visited daily by users. An enormous amount of content is accessible from those platforms and convey both positive and negative information in seconds (Das & Hudnurkar, 2020). Mostly perceived for entertainment, those platforms became the ideal medium to create a personal brand and convey information smoothly to the Y-Generation. Furthermore, more options have been included to empower the user with the required tools to become a content creator and "influencer". Users regularly share the pictures, video clips or posts, seeking approval or acceptance. These platforms have designed a new era where "likes" and the number of "shares" qualify an individual to a working position in the media field. But more importantly, those platforms convey cultures and trends worldwide. However, an addictive use of these platforms has been observed, questioning the role of social media as well as its impact on Millennials' lives, according

to Hawi and Samaha (2016). Edwards and Giles (2018) found that opinions and mind set can be shaped as the viewer is exposed constantly to the same kind of information, resulting in a “subliminal” enforcement. It is especially easy for Millennials to be influenced by the habits of social media influencers in terms of lifestyle, use of slang and dress. Relationships, career path and personal image can be reshaped according to the trends and culture promoted on these platforms.

Millennials have been for several years the observation subject for various kinds of research. Companies hire consultants to understand ‘how to influence their purchasing power’ or ‘how to influence their choice for holiday destinations’ for instance (Davidaviciene, Meidute-Kavaliauskiene, & Paliulis, 2019). Succeeding Generation-X, Millennials have been qualified as one of the most educated generation, whose growth overtook that of the Boomers (Rangel, 2017). Therefore, since Millennials are gradually taking over the work force, it is essential to understand to what extent this generation is influenced by social media. Unfortunately, this generation faces several stereotypes such as being ‘lazy’ or ‘constantly on their smartphones but as digital natives, the Millennials are the ones who grew along with the evolution of technology (Shoots, 2018). Consequently, they are easily acquainted with new devices and technology and adopt new trends. It is essential for users to be aware of the consequences of adopting the behaviour and opinions promoted on social media, as it may not promote their well-being and may influence their entire sense of reality.

Hence, the objectives of this study are to investigate how the behaviour, lifestyle choices, perception of reality and social interactions of Millennials may be impacted by social media. Our post-pandemic world needs to realise the full power of social media to influence the lives of Millennials (along with all those who are frequent users of these platforms) both positively and negatively. Social media bring a host of new opportunities, but all users need to take warning as to social media’s ability to influence their reality, behaviour, lifestyle choices and social interactions in subtle and harmful ways.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Against the background of the incredible scale and speed of interactions on social media platforms – especially post-pandemic - and the enormous amount of time and attention Millennials spend every day on checking the latest posts, the main concern of this study may be formulated as follows:

How may social media shape the behaviour, lifestyle choices, reality and social interactions of Millennials?

The research problem may be broken down into the following sub-problems:

- What are the characteristics which define Millennials?
- How much time do Millennials spend on social media platforms?
- How may social media influence the behaviour of Millennials?
- How may social media influence the lifestyle choices of Millennials?
- How may social media influence the reality of Millennials?
- How may social media influence the social interactions (friendship behaviour) of Millennials?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researchers investigated what the literature reveals as to how social media may influence the behavior, lifestyle choices, reality and social interactions of Millennials.

Social Media’s Influence on Millennials’ Behaviour and Reality

While they link a great community worldwide, social media have received some criticism due to the negative factors which have amended the lifestyle of young people. For instance, poor sleep has been recorded among the Millennials, followed by anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem during adolescence (Janicke-Bowle, Narayan, & Seng, 2018). Therefore, many studies have been conducted to understand to which extent social media have impacted the Y-generation.

Behaviour indicates an important aspect of Millennials which may be influenced by social media. Behaviour deals with a set of adopted attitudes. Social media have been accused over the past decades of being responsible for the change of behaviour of its users and the stages-of-change approach, also known as the Trans-theoretical Model. This model proposes six stages through which an individual goes to either improve a habit or change a lifestyle (Bowe & al., 2016; Slater, 1999). This paradigm, introduced by Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, acts as a support for theories such as Agenda-setting Theory, in order to be effective (Slater, 1999).

Agenda-setting Theory is part of the conceptual framework for this study, since the assumption is that social media set the agenda for users in terms of what content they focus on and share. Since the inception of mass communication, content for newspapers and television has been sorted according to a defined set of procedures. Concerning specific characteristics, the content is organised. Branded as a media-centric theory, agenda-setting propounds a concept where information is narrowed in a way to communicate specific information to the audience. Thus, agenda-setting theory suggests that emphasis was brought to a specific type of content only (Bowe & Wohn, 2016). Mostly used in media as a persuading tool, agenda-setting usually determines the topic of discussion

and influences the approach of people to the information (Turow, 2009). Moreover, the information promoted may sometimes not reflect the reality, blurring lines between the audience and content producer (Bowe & Wohn, 2016). Social media appear to act as agenda setters to a greater extent than traditional media, because of the algorithms which are set in motion every time we view a certain type of content and lead us to that same type of content again and again.

An interesting point that people have been criticising about agenda-setting is that the paradigm focused more on the “mass” than the “self” (Bowe & Wohn, 2016). However, social media have found a way to reach the “self” while addressing the “mass”. Bowe & Wohn (2016) propose that applications such as Facebook have been acting according to agenda-setting theory not only in their algorithms but through their users too. They suggested a theoretical structure entitled “Crystallization”. This chemical process highlights the transition from a gas or liquid state to a solid form. When transposed into the physical process, Crystallization occurs when the particles stick to the nucleus to eventually evolve into a larger matter. Therefore, when applied to reality, those “particles”, which may be considered as information, will flow from different sources, and converge to the “nucleus” which become the seed of Crystallization. Ultimately, the information gathered through this process will shape the reality of the user. Through social media, the same principle is applied to lead the user to not only absorb the information promoted but the attitude of the promoter as well.

According to Bowe and Wohn (2016), the reality of people will depend on the information conveyed on the applications they have subscribed to. The more applications people have, the greater and diverse source of information will influence them and will influence their sense of reality. However, conflict may arise within the users as their perceptions differ from the “reality” communicated to them, leading them to amend their behaviour and opinions. Therefore, when we combine Agenda-setting Theory with Crystallization, social media users will mostly perceive the “reality” published on these platforms. They may find themselves in the beginning of the Pre-contemplation stage where they are not aware of any issue, but the flow of information directed to them, may lead them to the Contemplation stage where their beliefs may be triggered. Usually, according to social media algorithms, content is selected based on the users’ preferences. The selected content is then constantly promoted on the platforms of the users, shaping his “reality”, which may be then sensed as an “awareness”, leading to a change of behaviour. Consequently, the contents are revealed to be forceful rather than factual content, say Bowe and Wohn, (2016).

Millennials and Online Consumption Time

Another variable impacting the change of behaviour is the amount of time spent on several platforms. The more the users are exposed to the content, the more they will be in the state of “Contemplation”. Since social media are not only accessible from a computer but from a mobile phone, the users have considerable access to social platforms (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013). Millennials enjoy those platforms because of the amount of information which facilitates the explorations of new and unknown things, like meeting new people (Dabija, 2018). From videos to news or just scrolling through their feeds, Millennials have access to a variety of information. Furthermore, as they start to watch, an algorithm used by those platforms will promote content according to the preferences of the users, encouraging them to spend more time on their phones. The average time spent on social media per hour a day is two hours and 38 minutes (Watts, 2021). According to recent statistics, 20% of Millennials spend more than 20+ hours online, 16% spend between 10 -15 hours a day and only 8% spend up to five hours (Science, 2021). Seventeen percent of the Millennials are connected from 9 am to noon, and 35% are present online between 8 pm and midnight, making late morning and evening their preferred connection time (Science, 2021). Thirty-six percent admit to being online almost constantly and represent more than a third of the Millennials (Perrin & Atske, 2021).

These statistics reveal that Millennials, on average, spend an astonishing amount of their day on social media, which inevitably affect what they think about and do – their reality, choices and behaviour within an ever-narrowing range. The fact that social media provide unlimited access for any user to peruse any digital content (according to Das and Hudnurkar, 2020), presents an astonishing potential to influence the lifeworld in significant ways.

Millennials and Social Interactions (Friendships)

Millennials’ behaviour towards relationships have faced a great change since social media have intruded into their daily routine. Simon Sinek (2018) highlights the fact that Millennials’ interactions with social media are motivated by the will to always publish positive or happy perspectives of their day. The Y-generation mostly publish the happy events of their life, even though their reality is very different. Unfortunately, as mentioned by Sinek (2018), it is the result of the condition faced by this generation. Therefore, the same framework has been applied to their development of friendship. Sinek (2018) emphasizes that Millennials could have a great time with their friends even though they know that if anything better come along, this would not be the friends they would choose. This is quite alarming since people can share great memories with their peers without having a deep connection, revealing that relations are built superficially. With the introduction of social media, a small percentage of physical meeting occurs for the creation of friendships, since it can be done through a click. Social media share the incredible characteristic of being able to gather people around the globe who hardly know each other. People far from each other can be brought together, while people in the same room can be very distant. Even if a connection exists, its authenticity is questionable. Social media therefore tend towards superficial social interactions and relationships, by their very nature of short posts and comments, likes and retweets as opposed to in-depth conversations.

Another thought explained by Sinek (2018) is that Millennials grew up with the affirmation from their parents that they are special, which impacted their reality. Parents would not hesitate to complain to the teacher if a wrong note was given to their child. Therefore, Millennials stepped into the working world with this perception of life, only to face the reality that things are not earned so easily. Consequently, their self-esteem is harshly impacted, and they find refuge behind their screens. As they will

send messages to their friends, the responses are quite rewarding, since a chemical called dopamine is released in their body with every positive response. This chemical has been revealed to be the same one that stimulates people when they smoke, drink or gamble. Contrary to social media, those activities have an age restriction. Therefore, Millennials have access from behind their screen, to an unlimited addictive, disorienting chemical known as dopamine through interactions on social platforms, without being aware that this situation is impacting their behaviour and reality. Hence, most of the time when they face any issues, stress or anxiety, they will turn to their cell phones instead of turning to a friend (Sinek, 2018).

Moreover, interactions on social media may become an addiction and harm relationships (Sinek, 2018). For instance, the application Snapchat allows its users to exchange pictures daily and after three consecutive days, a Snapchat streak will be created and a number, as well as a fire emoji, will appear next to the user's name (Ghosal, 2019). This fire emoji highlights the fact that this friend is special and will encourage the user to send a snap every 24 hours. Therefore, to keep this Snapchat streak, users send any picture every day just to keep the number of snaps growing. However, Ghosal (2019) explains that should one of the users fail to send a snap, the streak would disappear, and the users would have to start all over again. Unfortunately, some friendships can be broken if one of the friends breaks the streak. This situation can be applied to other social platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, where the number of friends counts more than real friendship. The foundation of friendship is more virtual than real. Some people even adopt attitudes and trends promoted on social media to be accepted or liked. Sadly, this behaviour is a characteristic of Millennials who tend to seek approval (Sinek, 2018).

The literature review corroborates the assumptions made of social media as agenda setters which may blur the user's sense of reality, authenticity of their friendships and impact behavior to become addictive or escapist. The literature therefore reveals the research ability of the topic. The studies cited have encouraged a deeper investigation of the impact of social media on Millennials' behavior, choices, friendships and sense of reality.

RESEARCH APPROACH

A qualitative approach was predominantly used, since this is an investigative study, based on an interpretative paradigm. Because limited research has been performed on post-pandemic Millennials, this leaves much room for descriptive investigation and analysis of a qualitative nature. The reflexivity, credibility and trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation are described in full under Ethical Considerations. The questions asked in the survey, as well as those posed during the semi-structured interviews, are valid, since they are based directly on the sub-problems, and have been formulated according to the scientific principles of questioning. The findings may be considered to be reliable and the results transferable to certain Millennials, since great care was taken to ensure the reflexivity, credibility and trustworthiness of the data by way of triangulation (du Plooy, 2017; Kaman et al, 2016) and peer review. The fact that data was collected from two different countries – Mauritius and South Africa, and that an age-range of between 21 and 38 was selected, representing blacks, colored's, Indians and Europeans, improves the trustworthiness of the results. However, owing to the relatively small sample size, the results may not be generalizable to Millennials in general.

A cross-sectional approach was employed, as primary data was collected within a time-frame of one month, during July of 2021.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND SAMPLING

The unit of analysis is a group of 52 Millennials, also known as the Y-Generation, who are natives of the digital age (Dueño, 2014). They are a mixture of South African and Mauritian nationality. The realised sample group range from 20 to 39 years old, including 24 females and 16 males. Either students or in the working field, they have the benefit of a stable internet connection and live within the borders of South Africa and Mauritius. Participants born between 1982 and 1999 have been selected to align with the Y-generation categorization. Responses were collected from undergraduate students, professionals and alumni of Helderberg College of Higher Education. The research population included all social classes and races (Black, White, Coloured and Indian) from the nationalities mentioned above, to avoid bias.

This is a purposive/judgement sample. The participants were purposefully selected based on having the characteristics appropriate to Millennials, according to the judgement of the researcher, which are the following:

- Constantly active on social media
- Share either their creativity through pictures and videos clip or art, skills, music project and hold business pages on social media
- Seek for attention and approval
- Share their opinions and point of view on platforms
- Create a living by having aesthetic content
- Can become impatient as they look for instant gratification online
- Use social media as their most common means to communicate with friends and start looking for a partner (Safhida & Effendi, 2013).

Emails and messages via social media platforms facilitated communication with the participants.

OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To investigate how social media have tailored the behaviour of Millennials towards relationships, life choices and the way they spend their time (since their immediate environment has adopted a digitalised aspect, encouraging them to constantly post their daily activities online and check on notifications).
- To understand how Millennials' reality has been shaped by social media.
- To encourage Millennials to be aware of social media's impact on their behaviour and life choices, and to embrace a balanced life and a mindful, discerning approach to their use of social media.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Phase One: Quantitative Survey

Primary demographic and social media usage data was collected by means of 21 multiple-choice questions, using a Likert-scale format. This comprises the quantitative aspect of the research.

The following steps were followed in collecting the survey data:

Step 1: The first contact was established either via email or message on social media platforms. A link was sent to access the consent form as well as to the questionnaire.

Step 2: Participants had to ascertain that they were eligible for the survey by going through the section "About the participant". Google Forms was used to design the questionnaire and to collect information as well. The link to the questionnaire was easily provided from the used platform and allowed the participants to have a homogenous experience.

Step 3: The respondents completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire included four demographic multiple-choice questions followed by six multiple-choice questions to determine the behaviour and exposure of Millennials to social media. A Likert scale was implemented, with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, leaving room for the participants to give an accurate response.

Step 4: The responses were tabulated and expressed in pie charts and histograms for easy analysis.

Forty students and professionals combined responded to the structured questionnaire.

Phase Two: Qualitative Interviews

In the qualitative phase, which comprised the main data collection phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The following steps were taken:

Step 1: Upon acceptance to take part in the research, the link was sent to access the consent form and questionnaire.

Step 2: Participants completed the questionnaires. They had the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions in order to gain an understanding of their subjective perspectives. They were not compelled to respond to every question.

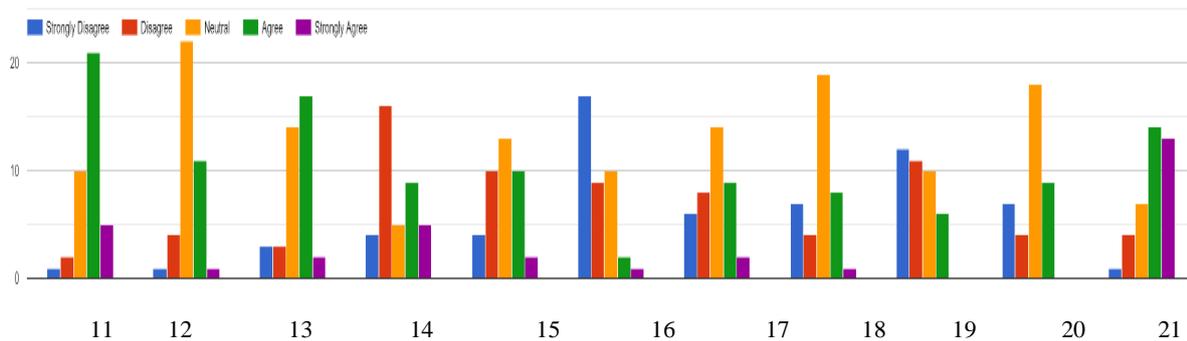
Step 3: The collection of this data was done through video WhatsApp calls, using long-answer questions on Google Forms.

Step 4: Participants had to correspond to the sampling criteria and inform the researcher when the form was completed. Thirteen people from the research population provided information through the semi-structured interview, based on the following questions:

Interview Questions

11. I prefer to view content on social media rather than posting.
12. I enjoy the suggestion of content on the social media platforms.
13. The content on my platforms is repetitive and similar.
14. I can avoid consulting my phone for a day
15. I tend to publish content where I look happy rather than my current state.
16. The number of friends or followers on the social platforms is important to me.
17. Social media help me to disconnect from my current life issues.
18. I am happy after each of my interactions on social media platform.
19. I feel incomplete if I do not check my social media notifications.
20. The content that I view influences the choices of my life.
21. I prefer meeting people in real life rather than online.

Figure 1: Histogram illustrating answers to 21 interview questions



ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The following steps were taken in analyzing the findings.

Step 1: The data was recorded on an Excel sheet.

Step 2: A table allocating a code to the responses was drafted to classify the data.

Step 3: A table with the answers to the demographic questions was designed, including the percentage of persons answering each question.

Step 4: Tables according to the answers received to the questions were created, displaying the number of respondents who responded and the number of responses received for each option. Moreover, a percentage was also determined.

Step 5: Bar charts, pie charts and histograms were then constructed, based on the compiled data.

Step 6: The quantitative data was analyzed and conclusions reached.

Step 7: The qualitative data was thematically analyzed using the codes previously assigned to each question. Conclusions were made and a narrative record of the results provided.

Transcriptions of the interviews, as well as the survey results, are available on request.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The proposal for this study was approved by the Research Coordinating Committee of the institution involved (document available on request).

To ensure reflexivity, the researcher continually monitored the research process according to accepted protocols, and engaged the oversight of an expert researcher at regular intervals. The researcher also remained conscious of her own impact on the research results, and intentionally guarded against subjective interpretation of the data.

Credibility of the study is assured by the fact that the findings are made public in an objective manner, avoiding bias and one-sidedness, by reporting the findings as accurately as possible, and by making sure interpretations are as close to the emic perspective of the participants as possible. The researcher assures the reader that there is no misrepresentation of facts, concealment or distortion of the truth, or fabrication.

Trustworthiness was ensured by using triangulation of data collection methods (a survey and semi-structured interviews), and by making sure that the data was rendered truthfully and interpreted accurately in accordance with the data collection and analysis procedures specified. Thereby, confidence may be had in the findings (du Plooy, 2017).

Informed consent was gained from all of the subjects who participated in the survey and interviews, for the collection of the primary data (document available on request). The participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and that the greatest care would be taken not to implicate them in any references which would be made in the published report.

Empirical evidence by way of quotations are included in the discussion.

MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that social media do indeed influence the behavior, relationships, choices and reality of Millennials' in real ways. Sixty-four percent agree that their lifestyle and behavior have been influenced by social media. Sixty-four percent also found that the content is inspiring ("I was inspired to dress a certain way by certain young ladies on YouTube"; "Social media constantly pushes me to learn new things and has changed the way I interact with people in my daily life"; "Spending too much time with social media has made me isolated from family"; "Social media sometimes places pressure on you to accept as factual that which you actually disagree with. But just because it's popular on social media, you feel the pressure to conform"; "Social media influence me to escape yes, deal with issues – probably not, only avoid them.").

Thus the main objective of the study was fulfilled, which was to investigate how social media influence Millennials' behaviour, choices, relationships and perception of reality.

The unique aspect of this study is that one of the researchers is a Millennial studying other Millennials. This researcher therefore came from a genuinely empathetic stance and could relate authentically to the subjects she surveyed and interviewed.

The study has corroborated the findings of previous empirical studies in that it demonstrated clearly how the frequent use of social media platforms can affect Millennials' sense of reality ("Social Media help me to disconnect from my current life issues"; social media can be a rabbit hole... have proven to be misleading, but their videos still get millions of views"), their relationships with self and others (tend towards superficiality) and influence their life choices and daily behavior negatively (by leading to addictive behavior); ("I got my first cellphone when I was 19 years old. It mostly became intrusive to my life when I got WhatsApp and Facebook. I didn't go onto Facebook often, but when I did it was very addictive and usually left me feeling upset about something"). Social media, also has many positive benefits. Fifty-nine percent said they are positively impacted by the content they view. ("The content on social media often inspires people to not just sit back and watch but to interact and take action"; "I ... rely heavily on the internet for my academics").

The Agenda-setting Theory is also seen in action to a large degree in the way our social media is determined by algorithms. We are only sent news which we have shown an interest in before. In this way, we become trapped in a kind of echo chamber. Our world gets smaller and smaller and our reality less and less real. In the words of one research participant: "Social media feeds you more of the same you're already choosing to watch - which means your worldview can become very biased and narrow if you're not discerning enough to realize you're actually creating your own reality through your social media interactions." It must be mentioned also, that what we see on social media posts, is mostly the best version of people's lives, which is not their everyday reality. A third of the respondents admitted to the statement: "I tend to publish content where I look happy rather than my current state.")

The results may be explained against the background of the Crystallization Theory (Bowe & Wohn, 2016). In a nutshell, attitudes and beliefs of a society are moulded and "crystallized" through the influence of social media based on agenda-setting. ("Social media desensitizes me to the wrong"; "Just having many apps to connect with people causes you to keep going through them which later becomes like a chore that you are constantly doing throughout the day.")

We understand that the majority of the participants spend more than three hours per day behind their screens, scrolling on the available social platforms. Seventy-six-point nine percent spend between two and six hours on social media per day. This data revealed that media has a great place in their routine and may well influence their behavior to become addictive ("I check WhatsApp every few minutes"; "Every time there's a notification.")

We learned that social media propose a diversity of content to which Millennials can relate easily. From our analysis, social media mostly act as a bridge to connect family and friends ("Social media is also a way to stay in touch with people.") However, a greater number of participants were mostly just exposed to content on social media. We may then conclude that Millennials would mostly practise a specific activity on social media which can redundantly expose them to a similar kind of content on a regular basis (algorithm engineered). ("Provides notifications and suggestions of videos that they think I might be interested in.")

We concluded that 67.5%, which represent more than half of the participants, acknowledge that the content on social media does influence their choices, which aligns with the assumption of the research ("The content that I view definitely influences the choices of my life.")

We understand that a majority of participants were greatly influenced by the content they came across on social media. This information highlighted the subjects' perception that the content viewed on social media would mostly tend to positively influence the life of the viewers. (Participants use social media "for learning purposes and acquiring knowledge, job opportunities, studying, news, devotionals, Bible study, new ideas, motivation, life-coaching, and for my job.")

The significance of this study, is that the powerful influence of social media on the behavior of Millennials has to a great extent been ascertained in terms of the vast amount of time and attention it demands from this age group. The importance of the study is that it shows how vulnerable Millennials are to the influence of social media on their behavior, sense of reality, relationships and life choices. Because social media platforms are trawled by web spiders to determine our interests, we can create our own reality by constantly being fed more of the same type of content repeatedly. We are shown the most exciting side of people's lives and their happiest moments and airbrushed faces, which creates a skewed reality and unrealistic expectations of life.

It is believed that this study makes a unique contribution to the field of communication, in that it serves as a warning to all frequent users of social media platforms of the dangers of these platforms, such as their addictive nature and deceptiveness as to what reality comprises, and of what is important. On the positive side, it also presents new opportunities for embracing the power of social media content in a post-pandemic world as an educational platform and a convenient way to share news, build one's career prospects and most importantly, maintain one's relationships in an age of unprecedented personal isolation.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The chief limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size, owing to Covid restrictions, physical distancing and the necessity of conducting all of the interviews online.

It is recommended that a better experience could be given to participants by way of real-life, face-to-face interviews, as opposed to virtual interviews.

It is recommended that the input of Millennial influencers be sought for similar studies, since the experiences of these influencers could provide valuable insights. It would also be useful to explore the impact of social media on the mental health of Millennials, or the consequences of possessing a cellphone on procrastination, or the advantages and crystallization theory and agenda-setting theory.

As a final word, it is recommended that Millennials should be mindful and discerning in their use of social media, given the potential of these invasive, addictive platforms to amend one's behaviour, reality, choices and friendships in harmful ways. At the same time, social media platforms have the power to provide unprecedented opportunities for personal growth, education and career paths formerly not available.

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