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Exploring the Impact of Communication Style, Attachment Style and Parental Involvement among Teenagers with Online Disinhibition

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital world, teenagers are more connected than ever, but this online presence comes with challenges. This study explores how communication styles, attachment patterns, and parental involvement influence online disinhibition—the tendency for individuals to behave more impulsively or aggressively online than they would in real life. Research shows that lower self-control, insecure attachments, and emotional regulation difficulties increase the risk of toxic online behaviour, such as cyberbullying and misinformation sharing. Parental involvement also plays a crucial role. Rather than simply blaming technology, this research highlights the need for emotional regulation strategies, parental guidance, and digital literacy programs to create healthier online spaces. The findings emphasise that fostering self-awareness and responsible digital behaviour is key to ensuring that social media becomes a tool for positive engagement rather than harm. Therefore, by shifting the focus from blaming technology to nurturing emotional intelligence, digital literacy, and mindful parenting, we can empower teenagers to use the internet as a space for meaningful connections rather than digital disconnection.

Key Words: Online disinhibition, communication styles, attachment patterns, parental involvement, cyberbullying, parental phubbing, emotional regulation, digital literacy, adolescent online behaviour.

Introduction

In an era where screens dominate daily life, the internet has transformed how people interact, communicate, and express themselves. Teenagers, in particular, have grown up in a world where digital interactions are as significant as face-to-face conversations. While these technological advancements have provided countless opportunities for learning, socialization, and self-expression, they have also introduced new challenges. Among these challenges is online disinhibition—the tendency for individuals to behave more impulsively, aggressively, or openly online than they would in real life. This phenomenon, fueled by anonymity, lack of immediate consequences, and digital culture, can have significant implications for adolescents' mental and emotional well-being. At the heart of this issue lies the way teenagers communicate, attach to others, and experience parental involvement. How they express themselves, seek validation, and interact with authority figures online often reflects deeper psychological patterns rooted in their upbringing and social environment. Online disinhibition can manifest in various ways—sometimes positively, as in the case of shy individuals finding the courage to express themselves, but often negatively, leading to impulsive and aggressive behavior. Cyberbullying, trolling, misinformation sharing, and risky self-disclosure are all examples of the darker side of online disinhibition. Communication is more than just words; it's about how we connect, express emotions, and interpret responses. Teenagers adopt different communication styles based on their personalities, upbringing, and social environment. Some are open and expressive, while others struggle with vulnerability, preferring to communicate indirectly or aggressively. These tendencies often carry over into the digital realm, where text messages, social media posts, and online chats become primary modes of interaction. Parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's online behavior, whether they realize it or not. Their level of involvement, communication style, and attitudes toward technology significantly influence how teenagers engage with digital platforms. However, the rise of parental phubbing—where parents themselves are engrossed in their phones and disengaged from their children—has created new challenges. When teenagers feel ignored or emotionally disconnected from their parents, they may turn to the digital world for comfort, validation, or social connection. Conversely, when parents actively engage in conversations about digital habits, set healthy boundaries, and provide emotional support, teenagers develop a more balanced approach to online interactions. Research suggests that adolescents with involved parents are less likely to engage in cyberbullying, reckless online behaviour, or excessive screen time. Instead of using social media as an escape, they are more likely to use it as a tool for learning and maintaining meaningful relationships.

Review of literature:

In today's digital age, social media, particularly Twitter, has become a double-edged sword for teenagers. Studies show that online disinhibition—where individuals behave more impulsively or aggressively online than in real life—is influenced by self-control, attachment styles, and parental involvement. This study, conducted by Ramadhani and Merida (2024), delves into the link between self-control and toxic online disinhibition—where anonymity and

online interactions lead to impulsive and often harmful behaviours. Through a study of 165 Twitter-active teenagers in Bekasi, researchers found a clear negative correlation: the stronger a teenager's self-control, the less likely they were to engage in toxic online behaviours. The findings stress the urgent need for interventions that enhance self-regulation skills among adolescents. As it states, "higher self-control is associated with lower levels of toxic online disinhibition," highlighting the role of self-discipline in fostering a healthier online environment. Given the increasing influence of social media, this research calls for targeted educational policies and parental guidance to shape responsible digital citizens. Future studies could further explore emotional intelligence and social influences to deepen our understanding of online behaviour. In another interesting study by Schimmenti et al. (2021), they explore the complex relationship between problematic internet use (PIU) and various psychological factors among young adults, highlighting what they call the "Unfabulous Four": maladaptive personality traits, insecure attachment styles, dissociative experiences, and excessive online behaviour. Their study, conducted on 253 young adults, found that individuals who spent more time online and exhibited traits like negative affectivity (emotional instability), avoidant attachment (emotional detachment from relationships), and dissociative symptoms (such as feeling disconnected from reality) were more likely to struggle with PIU. As the authors state, "problematic Internet use cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an addictive behaviour," emphasising that underlying emotional and relational difficulties often fuel excessive online engagement. Hence the research underscores the importance of looking beyond screen time and recognizing the deeper psychological factors at play. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) it highlight how these digital interactions shape adolescent relationships and identity development. They find that, rather than replacing face-to-face connections, online communication often reinforces existing relationships, with teens using platforms to maintain friendships and explore potential romantic interests. However, the internet also introduces risks—exposing adolescents to cyberbullying, online predators, and potentially harmful content. As the authors state, "electronic communication may also be reinforcing peer communication at the expense of communication with parents," highlighting the growing gap between teens and their families in the digital age. Additionally, while online interactions can provide social support, they may also lead to misinformation and risky behaviours. More research highlghts that Children who grow up in institutions often struggle with forming healthy emotional bonds, a condition known as disinhibited attachment. In study by Rutter et al. (2007) explores how early institutional deprivation affects children's social development into adolescence. The research follows Romanian adoptees who were raised in institutions before being adopted into UK families, comparing them to children adopted within the UK. The study found that children who experienced institutional care for more than six months displayed persistent signs of disinhibited attachment—such as seeking attention from strangers, difficulty forming close relationships, and a lack of emotional selectivity. As the authors state, "disinhibited attachment constitutes a valid, and handicapping, clinical pattern that is strongly associated with institutional rearing." Interestingly, while some children improved over time, many continued to struggle with emotional and social challenges, highlighting the long-term impact of early deprivation. Another study by Romanson (2018) explores how attachment styles—whether someone is comfortable depending on others or tends to avoid emotional closeness—affect their willingness to seek help online. The study surveyed 354 university students and found that nearly 95% had used online tools to seek help for personal or emotional problems within the past four weeks. The research reveals key differences in how attachment styles influence help-seeking behaviours. Meanwhile, individuals with attachment anxiety, who fear rejection but crave support, were more inclined to seek help online—especially from anonymous sources—while being hesitant to approach close friends or family. As Romanson notes, "higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted lower tendencies to disclose distress to others," highlighting how deeply ingrained relationship patterns shape online behaviours. Wang et al. (2020) in his study explore how parental phubbing—when parents are distracted by their phones during interactions with their children—can contribute to adolescent cyberbullying behaviour. Through a survey of 2,407 middle school students in China, the researchers found a troubling pattern: teens who frequently experienced parental phubbing were more likely to engage in cyberbullying. The study also found that online disinhibition, or feeling less restrained in digital interactions, further intensified this effect. As the authors explain, "parental phubbing, as an exclusion behaviour, can send a 'very clear message' to adolescents that parents view smartphones as more important than their children," leading to frustration that may be displaced onto others in the form of cyberbullying. Syrjämäki et al. (2024) highlight the link between emotion regulation difficulties and uncivil online communication, highlighting online disinhibition as the key mediator. Their study of 215 participants found that those who struggle to manage their emotions are more likely to experience disinhibition online, leading to increased engagement in toxic interactions. One of the study's key takeaways is that emotion regulation difficulties predict online incivility even when controlling for personality and empathy. As the authors state, "higher levels of online disinhibition were associated with reports of uncivil communication," suggesting that when people lack emotional control, they are more likely to engage in offensive or harmful online discourse. Interestingly, individuals who use cognitive reappraisal—rethinking negative situations more positively or neutrally—were less likely to engage in uncivil communication, reinforcing the importance of adaptive emotion regulation strategies. This research thereby views it as an important step toward understanding and addressing toxic online behavior. Rather than simply blaming individuals for their actions, we need to focus on emotional awareness and regulation skills as a means of fostering more constructive and respectful digital interactions. Kurek (2018) investigates the online disinhibition effect—the tendency for people, particularly teenagers, to behave differently online than they would in real life. Through a series of studies, she explores how personality traits, identity development, and digital engagement contribute to disinhibited behaviours, including cyber aggression and false self-presentation. One key finding is that adolescents with "dark personality traits"—narcissism, sadism, and psychopathy—are more likely to exhibit online disinhibition and cyber aggression. As Kurek states, "high online engagement is associated with dysfunctional identity and behaviour," suggesting that digital environments provide a space for risky, antisocial behaviours to emerge. The thesis also highlights that teenager with a "false self"—a tendency to present an idealized version of themselves—are particularly susceptible to the online disinhibition effect. Hence, this research offers a crucial insight into how personality and identity shape adolescent digital behaviour. Instead of blaming technology itself, we need to focus on helping young people develop authentic self-awareness and emotional regulation skills to foster healthier online interactions. Promoting digital literacy, ethical online behaviour, and emotional resilience may be the key to ensuring that the internet is a space for positive development rather than harm. In another interesting study by Salavou & Giannakopoulos (2024), they explore how attachment patterns evolve during adolescence and the challenges that come with them. Building on classic theories by Bowlby and Ainsworth, the study highlights the interplay between attachment security, emotional regulation, and psychosocial well-being. The authors note, "Parental reflective functioning and early caregiving behaviours influence attachment security across generations," emphasizing how attachment patterns are often passed down. It is thereby viewed that how

peer relationships, romantic bonds, and the evolving role of fathers' shape adolescent attachment. Additionally, it delves into attachment-related disorders, such as reactive attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder, particularly in cases of adverse caregiving environments.

Conclusion

The findings of the study foregroung how communication styles, attachment patterns, and parental involvement shape online disinhibition—the tendency for individuals to behave more impulsively, aggressively, or differently in digital spaces than they would in real life. One of the key takeaways is that self-control plays a crucial role in curbing toxic online behaviours. Adolescents with stronger emotional regulation skills are less likely to engage in cyberbullying, misinformation sharing, or other harmful online interactions. Attachment styles also play a significant role—teens with insecure attachments, whether anxious or avoidant, often struggle with online interactions, sometimes seeking validation from strangers or avoiding emotional engagement altogether. Parental involvement, or the lack of it, further influences teenage online behavior. When parents are overly distracted by their own digital devices (a phenomenon known as "parental phubbing"), teens may feel neglected, leading to frustration that can manifest as online aggression. Conversely, strong parental support and guidance can help teenagers develop healthier digital habits. Rather than blaming technology, this research underscores the importance of digital literacy, emotional regulation, and mindful parenting in fostering responsible online behavior. If we want to create a safer and more constructive digital space for young people, we must focus on teaching them emotional resilience, self-awareness, and the ability to engage meaningfully online. Encouraging open communication between parents and teens, promoting ethical online behavior, and integrating digital well-being programs in schools can be key steps toward a healthier digital future. In the end, the internet is neither good nor bad—it is a tool shaped by those who use it.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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