Study finds young women of color in Hartford use social media to navigate relationships and meet developmental needs

November 28 2023

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The pervasiveness of social media has transformed how teens communicate and connect with their peers. Research suggests that it can

be harmful to teen girls, in particular, exposing them to unrealistic beauty standards, eating disorders, and cyberbullying.

Yet a study on gender and social media, led by School of Social Work (SSW) researchers, found that girls and young women of color in Hartford use social media in nuanced ways to meet their developmental needs, enhance their well-being, and resist violence.

"The study centered girls' own voices to examine how young women of color living in marginalized neighborhoods perceive, manage, and make meaning of social media threats and conflict," says Ph.D. candidate Maritza Vasquez Reyes, who was first author of a paper that drew on data from Associate Professor Caitlin Elsaesser's research lab.

The study, published in the *Journal of Youth Studies*, stems from a longtime collaboration between Elsaesser and COMPASS Youth Collaborative in Hartford, where researchers recruited 41 primarily Black and Latino/a/e adolescents from Hartford neighborhoods with high levels of violence. More than half, 59%, were female and 42% were male. The youth completed questionnaires and participated in four focus groups at UConn.

During the focus groups, researchers asked the teens about their perceptions of online conflict, whether those conflicts led to in-person violence, and what strategies youth used to de-escalate conflict. Social media "is a key setting where youth form their identities, navigate relationships, and see those relationships grow as well," Vasquez Reyes explains. "Given that the youth use the platforms so often, it's also the place where some conflicts occur, or at least get initiated, and some of those conflicts escalate to offline violence."

The findings

A body of research has suggested that social media can amplify conflict and lead to violence. However, these studies have primarily relied on boys' accounts. Through the focus group interviews with girls and boys, the researchers found that experiences of social media and conflict differed by gender.

Both girls and boys used social media daily, but girls were more likely to be among heavy users: 53% of boys used social media up to three hours per day, but 63% of girls used social media more than nine hours per day.

In the study, some youth dismissed girls' involvement in social media as shallow and focused on topics like appearance or dating relationships. However, looking at specific accounts of conflict revealed important reasons girls engaged in social media.

Girls were using social media to cultivate their reputation—not simply their body image—and to choose whether or not to engage in conflict. One exchange illustrates the deep desire to be "seen" and "heard" online.

Sonia: "People do it just to do it."

Hannah: "People just want to be seen."

Sonia: "They just want to be heard."

Hannah: "Then they get ducky, ducky."

Sonia: "Some people do want to fight, and some people just do it just to be seen."

"Some of them candidly said, what we really want is just to be seen and heard," says Vasquez Reyes. "And that was very powerful to listen to

them say that because, in reality, if you think about it, being seen and being heard is such a basic human need for all of us."

The teen girls' narratives also suggest they used social media platforms to reflect on themselves and the role of social media in their lives. One participant shared:

"We should just all be happy people and try to make social media a good thing again because it was really refreshing when social media wasn't seen as such a monster in people's life. Even, I don't know how to explain it, I just think that everybody should try to re-evaluate themselves, including me. Stop trying to point fingers and put your pride aside and try to re-evaluate yourself so that we can make society and social media a positive, happy place again. "

What the results mean

The researchers found that girls in Hartford were not passive or simply "shallow" consumers of social media but that they in fact had a complex and nuanced approach to social media as a force in their lives.

"Social media allows girls to connect with their peers and friends, to nurture and observe the growth of these relationships, and to work out issues in those relationships," Vasquez Reyes notes.

While the girls did sometimes choose to engage in conflict on social media, it was often for the purpose of managing relationships and protecting their dignity and reputations. The research team also found that girls would exercise their agency to resist social media conflict as well.

Given the findings, Vasquez Reyes and Elsaesser highlight the importance for violence prevention researchers to bring a critical lens

where youth may be reproducing negative stereotypes about girls. Furthermore, Vasquez Reyes and Elsaesser suggest that strategies to prevent social media conflict from escalating into actual violence should include partnering with youth. One strategy could be using research to advocate and pressure social media platforms to provide more security features to enhance positive online experiences for youth.

Another take-home lesson from the study is that teachers, social workers, and other professionals who work with teens have a role to play in reducing online conflict and offline violence. These adults can help youth better process and respond to online slights or threats.

"We know from our previous work that social media plays such an important role in youth's well-being—or their harm," says Elsaesser. "Vasquez Reyes' study highlights the importance of understanding specifically how social media conflict is experienced by girls." The researchers also emphasized that violence is not ultimately caused by social media but rather by the structural violence youth face in their communities.

The study calls attention to the importance of collaborating with youth, particularly girls of color, to understand how issues such as respect and strength are communicated online. "The girls, we found, are key experts on the role social media plays in violence and have insights to contribute on how to prevent violence. It is critical that we continue to hear their voices," the researchers note.