The Impact of Network Cultural Mechanisms on Adolescent Mental Health: A Case Study of the Netflix Series Adolescence

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Abstract. The psychological well-being of contemporary adolescents is heavily influenced by social media, particularly via algorithm-driven recommendations and virtual networks. This study explores how aspects of online culture, including misogyny, group polarization, and algorithmic amplification, impact adolescent psychological well-being and their views on gender roles. Through the use of the Netflix series Adolescence as a case study, this analysis applies Social Learning Theory, Objectification Theory, Attachment Theory, and Emotion Regulation Theory to evaluate the relevance of these frameworks in examining the series' narrative, characters, and symbolic elements. The results indicate that toxic online communities exacerbate identity confusion, emotional regulation difficulties, and adherence to rigid gender norms among adolescents, especially in the absence of secure attachments. As such, these communities are closely linked to negative mental health outcomes. To this end, interventions should prioritize media literacy education, active parental guidance, and platform accountability to promote critical thinking, emotional resilience, and safer digital environments for young people.

Keywords: Adolescent mental health, Media literacy, Online misogyny, Group polarization, Toxic masculinity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of digital technology has given rise to an engaging "network culture," which is governed by a system of rules, core values, and behavioral norms controlled via online connections, intelligent algorithms, and virtual community platforms. Prior studies show that network culture affects various aspects of adolescents' mental health, emotional states, and social relationships. Nevertheless, studies on the effects of online misogyny, toxic masculinity, and group polarization on adolescent well-being are relatively scarce, compared to those on cyberbullying, online comparison, and internet addiction. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more in-depth investigation, particularly focusing on adolescent girls, to explore the relationship between network culture and adolescents' mental health. This study examines the relationship between adolescents' perceptions of gender roles and network cultural phenomena like online misogyny, echo chambers, and algorithmic amplification. Specifically, the process by which adolescents' identity, emotional

well-being, and internalization of gender norms are shaped by online communities is examined. It is important to note that, due to the rapid spread of toxic gender ideas in digital environments, the normalization of gender norms is also accelerating, which may have a profound long-term impact on adolescents' beliefs and behaviors. Using a case study approach based on the Netflix mini-series Adolescence and psychological theories, this study seeks to offer actionable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers, thereby highlighting the need for parental involvement and platform accountability in safeguarding adolescent mental health in a connected digital world.

2. Related theoretical foundations and case overview

2.1. Theoretical foundations of network culture

Network culture refers to the collective norms, values, practices, and interaction patterns that arise and persist in digital systems, shaped by the interplay of online communities, technologies, and algorithms. It involves how individuals use digital platforms, the collective identities they form on those platforms, and the ideas, concepts, beliefs, and theories circulating within them, providing insight into how the internet can affect adolescent development [1].

In particular, Rogers's Information Diffusion Theory outlines the spread of ideas, behaviors, and innovations within a social system. In network culture, digital platforms expedite these processes, allowing pro- or anti-social narratives to quickly influence teens. For instance, memes expressing misogyny can rapidly spread gender-biased views through peer networks [2,3]. Moreover, Virtual Community Theory explains how people form communities in digital spaces to share similar ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and values. While virtual communities provide a sense of belonging and support, they can also trap individuals in echo chambers, magnifying extreme ideologies. Among youth, intense participation in tightly-knit online communities, such as incel forums, leads to heightened group polarization, fostering more rigid and hostile worldviews [4,5]. Besides, Online Disinhibition Theory posits that online anonymity and invisibility eliminate real-life accountability, reducing behavioral limits. Studies show that anonymous adolescents are more likely to engage in aggressive and discriminatory online communication than those who are not anonymous [6,7]. Consequently, these theories above highlight that network culture shapes adolescents' cognition, emotions, and social development by speeding up information spread, creating isolated communities, and reducing behavioral limits, significantly influencing their beliefs, identities, and mental health.

2.2. Psychological impact on adolescents in the digital age

The digital age poses distinct challenges to adolescent mental health, mainly due to the widespread impact of online platforms. Adolescents, in particular, are at a stage where they are developing their self-concept and emotional regulation, making them more susceptible to the psychological impacts of the digital environment. While these platforms offer opportunities for learning and socialization, they also expose teens to significant risks, such as anxiety, depression, and confusion about their identity. From the standpoint of Social Identity Theory, adolescents adapt their self-concept based on their affiliation with digital groups. Online communities provide a sense of belonging but can also push adolescents toward more rigid or extreme identities, often dictated by group norms. As teens engage more deeply with online communities, they may prioritize group values over their own, narrowing their self-awareness in the process [8]. Besides, Emotion Regulation Theory highlights the emotional toll of digital platforms. The continuous stream of emotionally intense content, such as cyberbullying and hate speech, can overwhelm adolescents' capacity to manage their emotions

effectively. This overload results in maladaptive coping mechanisms, like rumination or impulsive behavior, which intensify distress and heighten the risk of mood disorders [9]. Furthermore, heavy social media use correlates with higher levels of depression and anxiety in teens, whereas online social comparisons and cyber-victimization contribute to lower self-esteem, especially during key stages of identity development [10,11].

2.3. Overview of the case study: the Netflix series Adolescence

Released on Netflix in 2024, the mini-series Adolescence revolves around 13-year-old Jamie Miller, who is accused of killing his classmate, Katie Leonard. The story focuses on Jamie's psychological transformation, particularly as he gets involved in radical online communities, gradually falling into a digital environment filled with false narratives and harmful misogynistic ideologies. Across four episodes, the series illustrates how these online platforms shift his perception of Katie. The series realistically portrays the influence of network culture on adolescent identity, emotional well-being, and behavior, particularly within the youth demographic. The show shows how Jamie's prolonged exposure to misogynistic content leads to cognitive bias, more hostility, and less empathy. It also highlights how adolescents, without proper adult guidance, become more vulnerable to extremist ideologies, thereby increasing their psychological risks. This series was chosen as a case study for its in-depth portrayal of adolescent mental states in a digital environment. The paper examines the impact of network culture on adolescent mental health and applies psychological theories to explore its effects on adolescent behavior and psychology.

3. The mechanisms of network culture's impact on adolescent mental health

3.1. The role of anonymity and deindividuation

In online spaces, anonymity allows adolescents to bypass social norms and evade judgment from peers, parents, or teachers, giving them the freedom to express emotions such as anger or frustration without fearing real-world consequences. This lack of accountability often encourages behaviors that would be restrained in face-to-face interactions.

Psychologically, this behavior can be explained by Zimbardo's Deindividuation Theory, which posits that when individuals are placed in anonymous environments, their sense of personal identity weakens [12]. As a result, they become less self-aware and more likely to engage in antisocial or deviant actions. The Online Disinhibition Effect further supports this by explaining how the absence of visibility and authority in online environments leads to more uninhibited actions, encouraging behaviors that are restrained in offline situations [6].

In the case of Adolescence, Jamie exemplifies this phenomenon. In real life, he tends to avoid confrontation and adopts a more passive attitude, but online, his behavior is strikingly different. On anonymous platforms, he regularly posts misogynistic comments and hateful messages, showcasing the contrast between his online and offline identities. This discrepancy highlights how anonymity in the digital world enables him to avoid social constraints that would normally regulate his behavior, fostering the creation of a more aggressive and extreme persona. The case of Jamie illustrates the dual-edged nature of deindividuation. While anonymity allows adolescents to explore their feelings without immediate consequences, it also increases the risk of internalizing and reinforcing harmful ideologies, leading to a more maladaptive belief system. This dynamic highlights the psychological risks adolescents encounter when navigating online spaces without adequate guidance or awareness.

3.2. The influence of echo chambers and group polarization

The echo chamber effect refers to a limited information space where individuals are continuously exposed to views that align with their own, while opposing perspectives are seldom encountered. This information environment reinforces the individual's existing biases, leading to more extreme positions. Group polarization, on the other hand, occurs when, over time, group members' opinions converge, and this polarization intensifies, resulting in more extreme views and attitudes [11].

For example, Jamie becomes increasingly involved in "incel" forums, which are predominantly composed of young men who attribute the failure of their romantic relationships to women, often viewing them as manipulative, exploitative, and corrupt. Within these communities, Jamie is often exposed to views that match his own, reinforcing his negative views of women. As time passes, his views on gender become more extreme, hence leading him to see all women as untrustworthy. This growing hostility eventually results in group polarization, with Jamie isolating himself from female classmates, adopting misogynistic views, and accusing women of dishonesty.

According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, this stage represents a critical task of identity formation during adolescence [7]. Jamie's identity gradually aligns with the group's norms, even though these norms are inherently extreme and harmful. Social Identity Theory explains that Jamie finds belonging and identity within the group, but this sense of self is rooted in hostility and resentment [12]. As such, the echo chamber effect and group polarization not only amplify Jamie's negative feelings toward women but also push him to adopt an extreme self-concept within the group, accelerating his radicalization process.

3.3. The formation of gender cognition and behavioral norms

The network culture presents a significant role in shaping adolescents' gender cognition, especially in spreading harmful gender ideologies such as "toxic masculinity" [13]. These ideologies are often propagated through online platforms, reinforcing the idea that men should display dominance and suppress emotions instead of showing care, empathy, or respect. This cultural environment has a profound impact on adolescents' gender perceptions, encouraging them to accept and imitate these stereotypical gender role norms.

In Adolescence, Jamie encounters these gender ideologies online and gradually internalizes them. Initially, after being ignored by a female peer, he seeks support in online communities, where the responses link his experience to the belief that "women only respect powerful men," encouraging him to display strength and dominate others. Using Social Learning Theory, this study illustrates how Jamie begins to emulate the online male figures who suppress emotional vulnerability, viewing relationships as power struggles [14]. By observing and imitating these figures, he progressively strengthens his gender biases, starting to perceive women as weak and believing that women only respect powerful men. Besides, social Comparison Theory further explains this process [15]. Jamie compares himself to online figures who boast about their control over women, and as a result, he experiences a conflict between the confidence displayed by these figures and his own uncertainties in real life. This leads him to adopt their attitudes and behaviors, reinterpreting the emotional pain of rejection as a signal to display superiority and hostility. Moreover, Objectification Theory reveals the effects of objectification in this process [16]. Over time, Jamie begins to view others' politeness as an attempt to manipulate him, and this perception deepens as he is exposed to related media. Eventually, he bases his interpersonal relationships solely on power and control, disregarding the emotional and self-worth diversity of others. Through this process, his gender perceptions become

increasingly extreme, reflecting the formation and reinforcement of negative gender norms through social interactions, which ultimately intensifies his gender biases.

3.4. The impact of emotional dysregulation and family alienation

Emotional dysregulation and family relationships play a crucial role in adolescent development. In particular, emotional regulation refers to an individual's capacity to recognize, experience, express, manage, or endure emotions, and it directly impacts adolescent behavior. When deficiencies in this ability occur, they can result in reactive hostility, proactive hostility, impulsivity, social withdrawal, and various other behavioral problems. These issues are particularly evident during adolescence, further complicating the development of the adolescent's sense of identity.

According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, adolescents who lack secure attachments often feel helpless when faced with emotional distress [17]. In Jamie's case, due to his distant relationship with his father and emotional estrangement within the family, he lacked sufficient emotional support and regulation skills. The negative content and gender prejudices Jamie was exposed to online worsened his emotional dysregulation, resulting in heightened emotional responses, vengeful behavior, and social withdrawal. He perceived these emotional struggles as a challenge to his identity and power, transforming his emotional regulation into a reaction to the negative information online, thus further intensifying his hostility toward women and emotions. Emotional dysregulation caused Jamie to respond to rejection or conflict via aggressive behaviors or social withdrawal, rather than resolving issues through rational thinking and emotional regulation. This emotional vulnerability, combined with gender biases in the online environment, further accelerated his radicalization and affected his ability to form effective relationships with others. Thus, emotional dysregulation and the absence of family relationships, amplified by the negative impacts of network culture, increased the risks to adolescent mental health and social functioning, particularly in the areas of gender cognition and behavioral norms.

4. Intervention pathways for the impact of network culture

4.1. Psychological insights and intervention theories

Exposure to harmful online environments, as seen in Jamie's case, can profoundly affect adolescent psychological development. In particular, misogynistic online can space distort self-perception and behavior, fueling aggression and hostility. Social learning theory explains how Jamie's consistent interaction with negative figures online has led him to adopt their aggressive language and reject emotional openness [14]. This shift aligns with objectification theory, which suggests that repeated exposure to negative depictions of women can foster harmful self-beliefs [15]. Over time, Jamie's perception of women transformed from viewing them as peers to seeing them as adversaries, shaped by the hostile communities he interacted with. Attachment theory further posits that adolescents who lack secure emotional bonds, such as a supportive father-son relationship, are more vulnerable to developing maladaptive behaviors, such as aggression or social withdrawal [17]. When combined with emotion regulation theory, it becomes evident that poor emotional control can contribute to online radicalization [10]. Adolescents with difficulties in managing their emotions are particularly vulnerable to the negative influence of toxic online environments. Accordingly, interventions must target both emotional and cognitive growth. As such, cognitive-behavioral approaches can address harmful gender beliefs, whereas group therapy can substitute negative peer influences with positive, supportive interactions. Emotion regulation training is crucial for helping adolescents cope with the

challenges of online environments and develop healthier emotional responses. These strategies can guide adolescents like Jamie toward healthier behaviors both online and offline.

4.2. Media literacy, parental mediation, and educational programs

Media literacy, parental involvement, and educational programs play a crucial role in preventing the formation of harmful stereotypes in adolescents. Studies have demonstrated that equipping teens with skills to critically assess media content can help them resist internalizing negative norms such as sexism and aggression [18]. For Jamie, media literacy could have been key in preventing his immersion in radical online spaces. If he had learned to spot manipulative rhetoric and question hostile narratives, his path might have been different. School programs that foster these skills would help instill a healthy skepticism in adolescents, making them less vulnerable to online polarizing groups. Parental mediation also plays a crucial role. Active involvement, such as discussing online experiences, setting boundaries, and maintaining open communication, has been shown to reduce risk-taking and aggressive behavior in adolescents [19]. For Jamie, an emotionally available parent who fosters open dialogue could offer key support against harmful online impacts. Besides, schools should also consider incorporating gender sensitivity training into their media literacy programs. By teaching students to critically examine gender stereotypes, educational institutions can help them develop healthier, more balanced views of men and women, reducing the risk of harmful beliefs.

4.3. Policy, platform regulation, and community support

Government policies and platform regulations can play a significant role in mitigating the negative aspects of online culture. For instance, misogynistic content, often amplified by algorithms, exposes users to hostile rhetoric and harmful imagery. In this context, it is argued that regulatory measures should be implemented to ensure recommendation algorithms flag and deprioritize such content, thus reducing its impact on vulnerable individuals [20]. Besides, platforms can implement several strategies to address this, including stronger content filters to detect hate speech, regular auditing of algorithms to prevent extremist content recommendation loops, and the introduction of safety tips that encourage users to think critically before engaging with harmful material. At the community level, coordinated efforts among schools, parents, and youth organizations can create a supportive network to protect adolescents. Had there been stronger collaboration between Jamie's teachers, counselors, and family, early signs of his radicalization might have been detected, thus allowing for prompt intervention and support. By combining psychological interventions, educational initiatives, and effective platform policies, stakeholders can limit the harmful effects of negative online cultures on teenagers' mental and emotional development.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the impact of network culture on adolescent well-being, identity formation, and gender cognition, focusing on the influence of online misogyny, anonymity, and group polarization. Using the Netflix series Adolescence as a case study, the paper applies theories like social learning, objectification, attachment, and emotion regulation to demonstrate that adolescents in the digital age are more susceptible to internalizing harmful behaviors. This often leads to skewed self-perceptions and poor emotional control. Through Jamie's transition from exclusion to increased misogyny, the study illustrates how virtual platforms can create a false sense of belonging while fostering negative views and undermining empathy. Despite the valuable insights, the research has limitations. First, it

uses a fictional case, which may not capture real-life complexities. Second, it focuses on Western media, ignoring cultural differences in digital engagement. Third, it relies on secondary sources, limiting the depth of analysis. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative measures with qualitative interviews across diverse cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies could also evaluate the long-term impact of online exposure and intervention effectiveness. Besides, investigating how media literacy programs, parental mediation, and platform algorithms can reduce harmful online influences on adolescent mental health would be valuable.

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