The Negative Impact of Social Media

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The emergence of social media and digital communication technologies has changed the world. The use of these technologies has allowed widespread connection among peoples of different origins and cultures. While these technologies have provided benefits from business to personal, there are also many downsides to the prevalence and use of social media. Addiction, fake news, depression and body dysmorphia are all consequences of social media use. To understand the dark side of social media, we will look at these consequences and analyze their impact.

We can all agree that social media usage can take up much of our day, but the extent of it is shocking. According to Search Logistics, not only is 56% of the world on social media platforms, but they spend on average nearly two and a half hours per day on social media. If you were to start social media at 16 and live to the global average lifespan of 73, you would spend nearly 6 years of your life on social media. This is frankly an absurd figure, but it gets worse when you consider the amount of time children spend on social media (*Social Media Addiction Statistics for 2024*). Due to COPPA (the Children’s Online Privacy and Protection Act) here in the United States, most social media platforms require you to be thirteen before you can create an account. Despite this, Search Logistics estimates that more than half of children eleven to twelve are active on social media. Search Logistics has provided an awful set of data, including that 43% of teenagers feel bad about themselves if no one comments on their posts, and the same percentage have deleted posts because they didn’t get enough engagement online. This becomes scarier still with the figures on teenage addiction. Not only do teenage social media addicts spend, on average, more than 9 hours a day on social media, but the suicide attempt rate goes up dramatically. Seven of ten teenagers who spend more than five hours a day on social media are at a far greater risk to attempt suicide.

A common argument in favor of social media is that all this time on social media can often be productive, but this seems exceedingly less likely when over half of all social media accounts are not for business, but entertainment purposes. Now, can entertainment be useful? Absolutely. It can be a great way to relax and “recharge your batteries” before returning to work. The issue comes in when the three primary “entertainment” activities are connecting with family, watching videos, and *killing time*. It is the third of these that is frightening. Not only are people spending nearly two and a half hours a day on social media, but a good chunk of it is just used to be intentionally unproductive (*Social Media Addiction Statistics for 2024*).

The rise of social media use and addiction has fueled the rise of fictitious posting, or fake news. The popularization of the term “Fake News” in recent history has been both a blessing and a curse. The term fake news can be traced back to the 1890s when newspapers were first becoming popular. Since its inception, the term does not have a concrete definition and has proposed uses in a variety of ways. The term is widely accepted and used to describe pretty much any type of misinformation. The modern popularization of the term has led to an increasing conversation and awareness about the importance of topics such as online censorship, media and digital literacy, and the importance of investigation. We will first take a look at what Claire Wardle has identified as the 7 different types of mis and disinformation. Then we will try to understand how social media users’ digital literacy relates to their ability to discern truth from falsehood. If we don’t want widespread misinformation, we will need moderators. We will examine who should moderate content, and we will finally examine how we can evaluate news safely and critically.

         Modern fake news can be hard to spot, and with more and more sophisticated technologies like artificial intelligence, the sophistication and realism of fake news are only increasing. Understanding fake news is paramount to identifying it in the wild. In an article from 2017, author Clair Wardle wrote an article called “Fake News. It’s Complicated”. This article is great for getting an understanding of what Misinformation and Disinformation is. The article outlines 7 different types of mis and disinformation, which we will evaluate now. Satire and parody typically have no intention to cause harm but do have the potential to fool. Misleading content involves the misleading use of information to inaccurately frame an issue or individual. Imposter content is when genuine sources are impersonated. Fabricated content is the creation of new content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm. False connection is when headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content. False content is when genuine content is shared with false contextual information. Finally manipulated content is when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive. Understanding these different types of fake news is very important when evaluating news sources.

         With a modern increasing awareness of fake news, how do social media users understand and digest online content? In a peer-reviewed study from the Harvard Kennedy School in December of 2021, researchers attempted to answer the question as to how social media users’ level of digital literacy relates to their ability to discern truth versus falsehood when assessing the accuracy of news posts and when deciding what news to share. The survey was of 1,341 Americans who were quota sampled to be demographically accurate in age, gender ethnicity, and geographic region. There were two measures of digital literacy employed in the study, the first being a series of self-report questions about familiarity with internet-related terms and attitude toward technology. The second digital literacy measure focused specifically on literacy about social media and asked subjects how social media platforms decide what news stories to share with them. This measure was well suited to assess the challenges of identifying fake news on social media; If people don’t understand that editorial guidelines do not apply on social media, they would likely be less skeptical of low-quality social media news content.

The study found that both digital literacy measures are independently predictive of the tendency to accurately discern the truthfulness or untruthfulness of news. The ability to engage in analytical thinking increases the likelihood that news discernment will be accurate. Thus, a lack of digital literacy is associated with less ability to tell the truth from falsehood. This pattern, however, does not hold for sharing intentions. Neither digital literacy metric evaluated could be consistently associated with sharing discernment; the tendency to share true news more than false news. It is only procedural news knowledge that is positively associated with a higher fraction of shared news that is true. The findings of this study are mixed, but it is clear that a higher level of individual digital literacy is associated with the ability to identify true from false information.

Not everyone has the same level of digital literacy, so in an effort to ensure that misinformation has less ability to spread online, advocacy for censorship in recent years has risen. Censorship has a positive relationship with lower rates of misinformation, but how do people feel about censorship? Pew Research has conducted studies on whether or not Americans want censorship, and who they want it from, the government or tech companies themselves. The questions posed to participants were “\_\_\_\_ should take steps to restrict false information online, even if it limits freedom of information” and “Freedom of information should be protected, even if it means false information can be published”. The blank was filled in with either the U.S. government or Tech companies. In 2018, 58% of participants agreed that freedom of information should be protected. In 2023, 65% of participants think tech companies should restrict false information, and 55% think that the government should also intervene, while a staggeringly low 42% agreed that freedom of information should be protected by the government and 32% agree that it should be protected by tech companies. With the demand for censorship rising, regulation by private firms is becoming increasingly important to consumers online. This censorship serves to limit the spread of misinformation online and serves to create safer and more responsible online spaces.

The biggest takeaway for us is to learn to identify and evaluate news and media. Having strong digital literacy skills is the most important skill that we can learn in this digital age, and there are concrete steps that we can take to better give ourselves a chance to identify misinformation before we choose to share it. The University of Michigan Library has a few tips to help readers and social media users identify misinformation online. Three overarching principles they emphasize are 1. Read widely- reading a wide variety of sources from various points of view will help garner a comprehensive picture of the issue and can give you a long-term wide perspective. 2. Become comfortable with ambiguity- reading news that challenges your understanding of an issue or upsets your previous idea of how to approach a problem. Ambiguity, and learning that there might not be one simple, cohesive answer to the question you are asking, is a beneficial skill. 3. If you haven’t read the article, don’t share it- reading articles and posts closely before sending them to family and friends is highly important in stopping the spread of fake news. Relying on headlines alone may foster the spread of fake news. Keeping these tips in mind when assessing online sources can be highly beneficial to slow the spread of misinformation and promote more comprehensive digital literacy.

Digital literacy and identifying fake news is important as we look to body dysmorphia and addressing insecurities. The research reveals a profound impact of social media on body image and self-perception, particularly related to the propagation of unrealistic expectations and the development of body dysmorphia. Filters and photo editing have become so pervasive that they're creating new norms for appearance, which are often unattainable without digital alteration. Constant exposure to edited and curated images of others can negatively affect self-esteem and lead to a condition known as body dysmorphia, where one obsesses over perceived flaws in their appearance that may be minor or not observable by others. These unrealistic portrayals can also lead to more severe consequences like eating disorders, with facilities like the Center for Change reporting patients who spend 10-12 hours a day on social media showing increased severity in these disorders.

Social media platforms are intricately designed to engage users, but this engagement comes with a psychological cost. The continuous presentation of ideal lifestyles and bodies can generate feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's own body. There's a trend of influencers and social media users altering their images to fit a certain beauty standard, which, while boosting self-esteem temporarily, can lead to increased anxiety and pressure when faced with real-life interactions that don't offer the same filters and editing options.

To combat these challenges, some strategies include taking breaks from social media, practicing self-compassion, embracing gratitude, staying present, and maintaining a balanced life with offline activities. It's also essential to remember that photos and videos on social media are mere snippets and not always accurate reflections of real life. Social media platforms themselves have a responsibility to manage algorithmic feeds responsibly to avoid exacerbating these issues and to provide users with tools to control their online experiences and support mental well-being.

Social media has been said to play a big role in impacting people’s mental health in a negative way. According to several articles, social media creates depression, anxiety, isolation, and other negative effects from social media. We discussed addiction, fake news, and unrealistic expectations. Now we will discuss further mental harm that comes from all of that being delivered to users on social media.

Bright Futures article found that 70% of teenagers check social media several times a day. 59% of adults say the use of social media has impacted their mental health. Certain expectations are being put out there, making you feel like you must live or look a certain way. For example, certain beauty expectations are being posted all over social media and even ads. Making people think you should look a certain way. People find themselves comparing their appearance to others or even their lifestyles to others. In a study they found that 41% of women felt pressured to present themselves in a certain way. Not only that but 42% of people who use social media were reported to feel more insecure about their appearance after using it. With all these beauty expectations arise; eating disorders and mental health concerns as well. However, what is difficult to remember is that a majority of beauty standards being put out there can be unrealistic and fake news. Many of us have been exposed to the world of social media and we see what is being viewed and when seeing all of that it can be overwhelming and create a decline to our mental health.

Depression, many if not all of us know or at least have heard about depression. It is a mood disorder that causes the constant feeling of sadness or loss of motivation (*What is depression?* 2024). Some symptoms people may experience are; sadness, loneliness, no interest, too much or little sleep, little energy, and sometimes no motivation to live. In a study it was found that 40% reported feeling depressed and anxious after using it. Like discussed above, the amount of fake or unrealistic expectations being seen are what lead people to feel depressed or feeling like they aren’t “good enough”.

Anxiety is another mental health concern seen with the use of social media. Anxiety is defined as an emotion of constant worrying and tensioned feelings. Anxiety symptoms people may experience are; faster heart beats, muscle aches, headaches, trembling, trouble sleeping, and many more (*Anxiety* 2024). These symptoms tie in with depression symptoms too and even loneliness. At times, one mental illness can lead to another.

Loneliness is a mental health concern seen coming from depression and anxiety. When there are several mental health illnesses it can cause a person to feel alone in their battle. Studies have shown that people may turn to social media when feeling lonely, however, after using it 63% reported feeling lonely (Kaiser Permanente | January 12, 2023). Not just loneliness is being seen but even sleep deprivation. Due to constant flooding thoughts or feeling lonely, with no motivation has caused sleeping issues with people. With that comes harm to memory retention and academic performance.

Many of these mental health illnesses are leading to one another due to the usage and content of social media. Not only will this impact their mental health but studies have seen these lead to a decline to people’s physical health. Researchers have seen a huge association between social media users and anxiety, depression, isolation, and poor sleep. We are seeing the fake news, beauty standards, lifestyle expectations, and other factors causing mental health harm to social media users.

The dark side of social media is pervasive and damaging. These negative impacts are widespread and harmful. While social media and digital communication technologies have been very positive in many sectors, their negative effects still need to be addressed and mitigated. Addiction, fake news, body dysmorphia and depression rates are all rising alongside the use of social media. Understanding why and how these problems emerge will allow us to better understand the best use cases for social media and how to create a digital culture that benefits us.

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