How Does Social Media Affect the Mental Health of its Users?

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The Rise of Social Media?

What is Social Media?

There are many different forms of social media, but they are most commonly known as websites or applications that are used to share content and communicate with others. Social media is driven by content created by users, which can then be shared with other users. At the moment, social media sites are Web 2.0 applications (*Obar and Wildman, 2015*), but this could change in the future as the internet continues to grow.

Growth of Social Media

The amount of social media users has grown quickly over time, with nearly 2.5 billion worldwide users in 2017, as shown by this graph from (*eMarketer, 2017*).
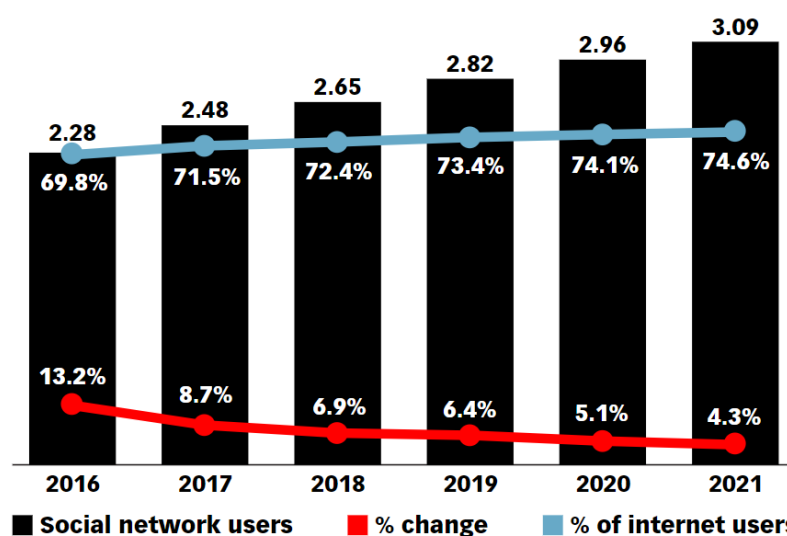
The graph estimates that nearly 3.09 billion people will use social media by 2021 which is well over a third of the population. This shows that regular social media use has been adopted worldwide and it is now a huge part of today's society. The USA is one of the biggest countries in terms of social media users, with 65% of its adults being social media users by 2015 (*Perrin, 2015*). The number of social media users has grown at a similar rate to the amount of internet users, as shown by this graph from (*Perrin, 2015*):

% of all American adults and internet-using adults who use at least one social networking site
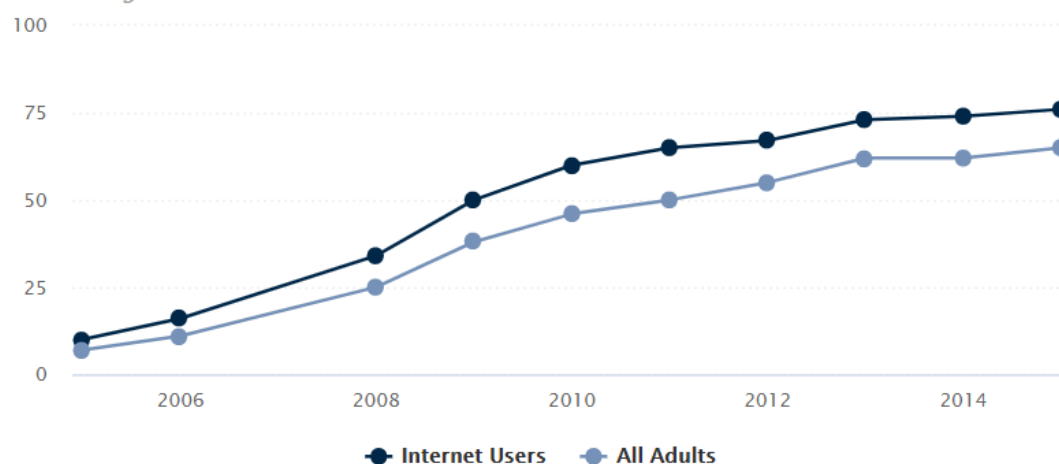
Social Media Addiction

Definition

Many people believe social media addiction is when one becomes dependent on social media and can no longer control their habits. This can lead to problems in other parts of their life, such as work or school and it can even affect one's mental health. Over time, it has grown increasingly difficult to determine how much time spent on social media is too much, as it has become more and more normal for someone to spend hours on their phone. In the UK, the average smartphone user spends around 2 and a half hours accessing the internet on their phone every day, checking it every 12 minutes (*Ofcom, 2018*). Years ago, it would've been seen as a crisis if everyone was spending this much time on their phones but now it is almost accepted as normal. I still believe that people spend too much time on their phones and social media, but I accept that they are both crucial to the infrastructure of today's society.

What Makes Social Media Addictive?

Part of what makes social media addictive is the way notifications are set up. If the app determines that something which has been posted is of some interest to the user, then it will immediately send a notification of that event to the user's phone, giving them access to the information straight away. If someone is getting notifications from an application throughout the day then they are bound to check that app at least once and perhaps several times. A key part of this is "FOMO" (fear of missing out) and this leads to people checking their phone way more than they would without social media and this can cause addiction (*Blackwell et al., 2017*).

Another thing that makes it addictive is the way it gives a sense of reward for posting something "good" by allowing you to receive "likes" from others and most apps display the number of "likes" received. This can make some people feel good about themselves and they might feel a need to get "likes" so they can continue to feel good about themselves. This leads to them posting and engaging more on social media which can lead to addiction.

Some believe that social media has been turned into a "game" of sorts, with people who receive more likes being viewed as more popular by some, and this creates an environment in which people will compete for "likes" and "followers" (*Ali, 2018*). I believe this only affects certain types of people, but it is still a feature that I think has too much of a negative impact to still be in place on most platforms. Recently, Instagram removed the feature that displayed the number of "likes" on photos because they believed it was harming the mental health of its users (*Nelson, 2019*). I believe this shows that some companies are starting to realise that some features in their applications are having a negative impact on the lives of its users, but some people believe that this is just a technique that Instagram's parent company, Facebook, is using to make more money (*Ovenden, 2019*).

Social Media and Mental Health

Does Social Media Affect Mental Health?

Personally, I think that social media has an overall negative effect on the mental health of its users, but I believe that it can have a positive effect when used in moderation (although this can be difficult due to the addictive nature of it). Surveys in the US showed that depression and suicide rose in teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18, in the years 2010 to 2015. It also showed that those in that age group who spent a lot of time on social media were more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression and other mental health issues than those who didn't spend very much time on them (*Twenge et al., 2017*). A study in the UK showed that children between the ages of 12 and 15 who used social media were more likely to suffer from mental health problems than those who didn't (*Donnelly, 2019*). However, another study determined that there was no link between social media

usage and depression and that the mental health issues were caused by other factors (*Coyne et al., 2019*). I think that there is a chance that social media doesn't cause mental health issues but even if that is the case, I think that it still makes existing mental health issues worse and therefore I disagree with this source.

Why Does Social Media Affect Mental Health?

Social media can have a negative affect on one's mental health is by causing them to constantly compare themselves to others. It's so easy to have a social feed filled up by people with "perfect" bodies and "perfect" lives. This can lead to someone developing body dysmorphia which can then cause depression. A study in Copenhagen found that passive users were most at risk from this (*Coughlan, 2016*).

Another way it can affect a user's mental health negatively is by how it reduces face-to-face contact. I think people find it so easy to message someone that they tend to do that instead of meeting up, despite it not making people feel as good. Even though this probably won't cause depression, it can have a serious affect on someone's overall mood and this can increase the chances of suffering from it. It's clear that those most likely to suffer from mental issues due to social media are those who are addicted to it.

Improving Mental Health Through Social Media

In order to improve mental health through social media, it would be beneficial to know who is suffering from mental health issues. This can sometimes be difficult as there is still a stigma surrounding mental health and often people do not report their issues. One way to get around this would be to use social media to highlight users who might be suffering. There have been multiple potential solutions that have been discussed and this includes predicting depression using social media posts (*Aldarwish and Ahmad, 2017*). This method seems feasible and this is backed up by a similar method that would be used to detect people with depression through shared content on social media (*Yazdavar et al., 2018*).

 I think that another good way to find people suffering from mental illnesses through social media would be to highlight people who used it a lot and are therefore more likely to be addicted. This is because I believe there is a link between social media addiction and mental health issues (as I talked about earlier). An application was developed to work out if someone was addicted to social media and then give the user feedback to help them solve their problem (*Valakunde and Ravikumar, 2019*). I think this is a good way to prevent excessive social media use but I think they could improve it in order to detect those who might be prone to mental illness.

Current State and Moving Forwards

Currently, social media addiction is very common and it's having a negative impact on the mental health of users. I believe that companies should do more to reduce the addictiveness of their apps whilst trying to use their platforms to detect people who may have mental health issues. This would mean that they can get the help they need, even if that help is just reducing the amount of time they spend on social media. I trust that there are methods to detect these individuals and now they just need to be refined and put in place.

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Self Assessment

Spelling and grammar (3 marks)		
Grade boundary	**Description**	**Self-assessment**
3	The report reads well throughout with none of the issues identified below ever appearing. The writing would not look out of place in an academic publication	
2	The report does not contain spelling or grammatical mistakes but is not easy to read. Sentence construction is awkward and/or there are comma splices, imprecise language, copy splices or awkward phrases used	X
1	The report is poorly written or contains spelling or grammatical mistakes that a spellchecker would find	

Use of Sources (8 marks)		
Grade boundary	**Description**	**Self-assessment**
7-8	The report backs up all claims that it makes with appropriate references and includes at least 12 different sources including 8 from academic sources	X
5-6	The report backs up the majority of claims that it makes to the satisfaction of the marker and effectively uses at least 12 different sources including 6 from academic sources	
3-4	8 different sources including 4 academic papers used correctly in the document. The formatting of the reference section and citations is consistent	
1-2	The references includes at least one appropriate academic paper the content of which is analysed, the report includes 5 other sources	

	Information Presentation and Structure (7 marks)	
Grade boundary	**Description**	**Self-assessment**
6-7	The report consistently uses formatting appropriately. The document includes some graphical information produced by the student to help emphasise their point. Information consistently presented in graphical form where appropriate. The document is very easy to follow and looking at the contents page of the document gives a good level of insight into the report	X
4-5	The report generally makes use of formatting to clarify its information (bolded text, subtitles, italicised text, bulleted or numbered lists where appropriate) and presents information in forms besides text such as graphs, tables or images. The document escapes the "Intro->Method->Results->Conclusion Trap" we discuss in class on the topic of report writing	
2-3	The report intermittently makes use of formatting but it detracts from the overall message in places. As a reader, I could read the sections in any order and it would make little difference OR the documents is relatively unstructured with few sub-sections or unhelpful section titles	
1	The report makes no use of anything other than written text to present its information, formatting is inconsistent. There are appropriate subheadings but they are poorly related to each other. The document is unstructured, there is no use of sections to segment the information and help the reader	

Quality of Analysis (10 marks)		
Grade boundary	**Description**	**Self-assessment**
9-10	The document includes more than one non-obvious insights into the topic being discussed that are clearly grounded in evidence. The student consistently makes the distinction between fact and opinion clear	
7-8	The document explains the domain being presented clearly and in depth. The document includes a good amount of discussion and analysis. At least one non-obvious insight is presented by the student. The student clearly critiques and compares their sources whenever it is appropriate	
5-6	The document explains the domain being presented. The document includes a good amount of discussion and analysis. Some non-obvious insights are presented by the student. The student rarely confuses opinion and fact in their discussion. The student only infrequently engages critically with their source	X
1-4	The document includes a limited amount of discussion and analysis. The document generally lacks insights into the problem area only repeating others' information or does not make the topic area clear. The student only engages critically with their source on an infrequent basis	