#1 Intro

As technology progresses, the age at which children gain access to mobile devices drops. This can be cause for concern because, with access to mobile devices, children tend to participate in fast-paced social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram. These different entertainment outlets can harm a child's ability to socialize or empathize with others if left unchecked. Several Studies suggest that without interruption, social media can lead to deterioration of the user's socio-emotional abilities (O'Reilly et al. 2024; Piccerillo et al. 2025). The issue lies in determining the appropriate time spent on social media, as it can harm a person's face-to-face interactions, yet it still enables users to connect with people they might have known before using it, and/or to keep in contact with them. It is in this way that I believe social media can improve a person's empathy/ social-emotional connections. Being able to check in on your friends with the click of a button isn't something you can achieve without technology. My project's goal is to define where the negative returns from social media start, and the positives begin. What parts of social media are harmful to the youth's social-emotional development, and what parts tend to assist and improve a person's socialization?

Carson et al. argue that "higher technology interference was significantly associated with lower response inhibition... and emotional self-regulation... and higher log internalizing... scores" (4). In other words, their study shows how technology, particularly smartphones, can disrupt children's ability to manage their impulses and emotions. John et al. expand this discussion by suggesting that technology is not inherently harmful but can serve both destructive and constructive purposes. While it may encourage unhealthy

habits, it can also support children through educational shows or social-emotional learning (SEL) apps (4-5). Similarly, O'Reilly et al. focus on social media use and propose a "digital cognitive interruption" to counteract "ping and post" and reconnect users with the reality that people online are not just part of an algorithm but real individuals (14-15).

These perspectives highlight the complexity of technology's role in youth development. Carson et al. emphasize its risks (6), while John et al. suggest that the key lies in how technology is applied, whether for passive entertainment or meaningful learning (5). O'Reilly et al.'s proposed solution adds another layer, raising the question of whether the responsibility to prevent harm lies with app designers, parents, or children themselves[SB1] (14-15). Examples like the show Bluey demonstrate that technology can, in fact, have overwhelmingly positive effects when designed with intentional lessons in mind. Taken together, these sources raise an important question: is the problem truly technology itself, or how it is created, consumed, and managed?

In my review of literature, two common focuses have emerged: the range of effects social media has on the youth, as well as the effects of technology in general. O'Reilly et al. discuss the continuous use [SB2] of social media being a clear factor in generating disconnect as its users get sucked into the instant gratification of it all and stop thinking of people as people and instead see them as entertainment (9-10). Beyond social media, Carson et al. did a study on multiple forms of technology and their effects on children during significant developmental stages (Ages 3-5). He found that smartphones were very disruptive and noted a negative correlation between how often technology interrupted interactions and one's ability to suppress impulsive responses (5). John et al. go on to

examine the effects different media outlets can have on children. Noting that some media did positively influence SEL, granted, these were shows and games designed specifically for this purpose.

#2 Method

For my methodology, I will be gathering comments from posts on the social media platform, Reddit. Reddit is a media outlet divided into different communities based on subject areas known as subreddits, where you can post information relevant to the subreddit's subject area. For my research, I'll be analyzing the top 4-5 popular and relevant comments from the two posts under the subreddit r/SeriousConversation. What classifies a comment as part of the top 5 is its number of upvotes and comments in response to it. The reason behind my use of this subreddit is the high interaction ratings on relevant posts they had widely available when searching Reddit using my keywords. I was able to see different perspectives by viewing the different discussions in this subreddit. This is because they all have relevant information but speak about said information from different perspectives. In my search for relevant posts, I used keywords such as "Emotional Intelligence", "Social media", "development", and "youth"/ "kids".

r/SeriousConversation is a subreddit founded for the purpose of having genuine, meaningful conversations. It's a place for "In-depth discussion" where people can pose a question to expand on topics and voice their opinions. Of the comments I have selected, each of them has posed a popular (10 or more upvotes) and unique response to the OP's [SB3] question. A comment is unique when it is popular and brings new relevant

information into the discussion. I implemented this because plenty of the top comments were 500-word essays of adults talking about how technology was growing up, and I didn't feel that it was necessary to include the same opinion 5 times over.

#3 Analysis

This section will go over what I have analyzed and learned from an assortment of 9 comments from 2 different post, the first post "Is it time to have a serious look at the way social media is playing a significant role in reducing empathy in people?" and the second post "People don't appreciate how damaging the digital age has been to children." Overall, I found split opinions; on one side, there are many who think social media is a detriment to the social-emotional development of their children and people in general. But on the other hand, some people believe it's a combination of two things: 1. It's designed not meant to be used for bad things, but can very easily be abused to do such, and 2. Social media didn't start making us worse people; we've always been terrible. Now there's just an easy outlet to inform the general public about all the terrible things we do.

To begin with, I'll analyze comments #1, 2, and 5. These 3 comments assert the opinion that social media, by design, isn't bad; it's the people who lack empathy and use social media as a place to congregate that give it the bad stigma everyone associates with it. Comment #1 claims social media isn't inherently bad, but some use it for bad purposes. In a perfect world, there would be nothing wrong with it; unfortunately, we do not live in a perfect world. The commentator explains that it's how, even though something isn't designed to be bad, people can leverage the platform for their own agenda. This agrees

with O'Reilly et al.'s article on the analysis of people's empathy in online spaces, through social media, people tend to interact much harshly than they would in person (10). This is because of the disconnect generated by the separation of a screen and presenting the people behind it as entertainment rather than actual people. In comment #2, the commentator argues that social media very well can be and has been used for good, but we, as a society, have proven we are not responsible enough to be trusted with such a tool, as it's far more negative than it is positive. In John's et. al. study on the "Barriers and Facilitators..." they discuss how social media isn't designed to be helpful to those who use it, it's designed to be an addictive source of entertainment, and regardless of how it affects the youth, if it makes them money. Granted, there have been times when social media has helped facilitate the social-emotional learning of the youth. John et al state, "For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media and technology may have facilitated SEL at a time when risks for social isolation and disconnection were high" (5). Comment #5 brings up a positive aspect of social media, but in a negative light, "...now they have a platform to congregate" (Appendix A). Social media has the benefit of connecting like-minded individuals; there are situations where this is a huge positive, such as with Reddit, and creating a place for people to discuss their thoughts on a variety of topics and expand their understanding with more knowledgeable people.

Comment #7 is unique in claiming that social media has no/minimal effect; it's just bad parenting. Comment #7 says "People want to completely blame technology for kids being unsocial..." (Appendix A). Trying to make the point that the issue doesn't lie in social media but in the parenting methods surrounding it. Piccerillo et al.'s research study

disagrees. "The findings of this study confirm H3 that there is an inverse relationship between the frequency of social media use and emotional intelligence in preadolescents" (12). While there is a correlation between parenting methods and the effects technology has on a child's social intelligence, as Carson et al. have found, "...device use was significantly associated with fewer verbal and non-verbal parent–child interactions" (6). There is a negative relationship between the encouragement of device use and the social ability of the parents' children.

Comments #3 and 4 push for the fact that social media isn't bad, it's just revealing how horrid people have always been. In comment #3 "...The problem is not social media. People have always been awful..." (Appendix A), and comment #4 "Are you sure it's reducing empathy or just exposing people's existing lack of empathy?" (Appendix A). This is a valid point. Historically, humans have been awful to each other, as comment #3 points out; we used to have slavery, now we're worried about a couple of mean comments online (Appendix A). I thought this was a very interesting point to bring up and a great idea for further study: how the average emotional intelligence of people varies from generation to generation. O'Reilly et al.'s research found that "...different social rules seem to apply in digital spaces than physical places" (10). Which is a reasonable counter to both comments #3 and 4's points, children are growing up and learning social rules based on the online spaces they spend time in, which may not translate into proper etiquette in a physical interaction.

Finally, comments #6, 8, and 9 fully agree with the idea that social media is harmful to the development of children's social abilities and emotional intelligence. Comment #6

advises "...I would recommend avoiding (or limiting) social media, mainly because of the endless scroll" (Appendix A). This is supported by O'Reilly et al.'s research, where they proposed the solution to the endless scroll by "interrupting thoughtless reactivity through a planned (digital) cognitive interruption" (14). O'Reilly et al. in their study explains the how the fast paced flow of social media does not afford its users the time to think empathetically about how their words might affect the one it is in response to, more importantly, social media's "...missing dimensions of feedback are the body language vocal dynamics..." are critical to conveying the meaning behind ones words (14). Comment #8 acknowledges the concerns surrounding the dangers of social media but references the repeated notation of there always being something dangerous children should avoid because it may hurt their development. Carson et al. acknowledge this in their study about technological interference in children's development, noting the effects from smartphones, TVs, computers, tablets, iPods, and video game consoles; with smartphones having the highest interference rating (4). Comment #9 agrees with the OP's point, stating, "I agree and it's been going on for a while" (Appendix A). This commentator believes social media is harmful to the development of those who use it and also agrees with the other 2 comments that constant phone use and social media time can be harmful to the development of children's social skills. As Piccerillo et al. found in their study, constant phone use and social media can be, in males, attributed to "muscular-ideal internalization" and, in girls, a "greater concern about their attractiveness" (12).

#4 Conclusion

Overall, my findings from analyzing these two discussion posts have been somewhat enlightening. My understanding from the majority of stigma growing up was that social media is a detriment to mental health. And while I personally can attest to the connection/bonds social media can maintain between people over long distances. I only began using social media platforms at the age of 16 (of my own volition, I decided not to use the apps until said age). I have noticed the effects social media can have on a person; I've become desensitized to the tragedies that happen around the world constantly and less empathic to the people on my screen. I believe it is more than reasonable to claim that excessive use of social media at any age, with an emphasis on during the preadolescent period, is harmful to one's development of social skills and emotional intelligence.

Appendix A.

Chart #1	r/SeriousConversations Comments: Post 1: 1-5 | Post 2: 6-9
#1 r/SeriousConversations	As with most things in life… It is generally one of those situations where it is less about the thing in and of itself, and instead about the way in which the thing is being leveraged towards one direction or the other
#2 r/SeriousConversations	It is well past time. Social media can be used for good, but more often it seems to be used for spreading misinformation and hatred
#3 r/SeriousConversations	Long before there was social media, we used to deny women basic civil rights, keep entire races of people as slaves, and force children to work in factories. Hell, we were still cutting criminal's heads off as a form of public entertainment when Star Wars first hit theaters. The problem is not social media. People have always been awful. But we used to be a lot worse, and we're slowly improving, considering we went from "these ones don't count as people" to just making really cunty comments on the internet, in the span of a couple of generations.
#4 r/SeriousConversations	Are you sure it's reducing empathy or just exposing people's existing lack of empathy? I think it's the latter. Much like police brutality, it was going on long before everyone had a camera on their phone.
#5 r/SeriousConversations	There's always been assholes that went "who cares" but now they have a platform to congregate
#6 r/SeriousConversations	Interesting outlook. I was reading a new york times article that was echoing the damages to young adults and kids. Anecdotally, as a 31 year old, the advice I would give is instilling reading for pleasure, and limiting social media. Reading because it's just so good for brain development. I was in the programs for kids who couldn't read, and nothing teaches could do got me interested or better. Then I found a book series that told an amazing story and I got addicted to reading. Went from being in the dumb dumb classes to advanced classes and finally to college level courses. Reading did that. I would recommend avoiding (or limiting) social media, mainly because of the endless scroll. Back in the day, you would scroll to the bottom of a page, and you could say, "alright, at the end of this page, I'm getting off." Now it's endless. Makes it so much harder to get off social media. It's designed to be addicting.
#7 r/SeriousConversations	People want to completely blame technology for kids being unsocial but ignore how so many parents kept their kids in the house the majority of the time. Just to turn around and complain about how their kids don't socialize in their teen years.
#8 r/SeriousConversation	To me, it's just the same song-and-dance we heard growing up about video games as well as TVs before that

#9 r/SeriousConversation	I agree and its been going on for a while. I'm 31 and I don't think adults understand what it was doing to us in the early stages of social media and constant phone use

Citations

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