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## Social Media and Mental Health: Weighing the Costs and Benefits

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**T**HOUGH MOST SOCIAL MEDIA platforms present themselves as free services, we have long known that social media isn't free. There can be real costs to users, ranging from loss of privacy to a decline in mental health. Most users sign up for these services with full knowledge that their personal data will be mined and used to sell targeted ads, but what they do not often consider is that because these platforms' bottom lines depend on users continuing to scroll and react and buy—providing more and more personal information—the companies behind social networks will go to great lengths to keep users online. Their goal is to keep you clicking, whether it harms your psyche or not.

Recent U.S. Senate hearings on claims that certain platforms prioritize profit over user safety have galvanized public interest in social media and how we use it. As whistleblowers come forward<sup>1</sup> and new data come to light, there is increasing anxiety about the detrimental effects of social media use, especially when it comes to mental health.

Social media companies are not exactly in the dark about the negative consequences for their users either. Facebook, now called Meta, has long been aware of the damaging aspects of its platform.<sup>2</sup> Their company's algorithms were created to keep people online, not to protect mental health.<sup>3</sup> For its part, Instagram encourages users to create online versions of themselves, the majority of which tend to reflect only edited and idealized personas. Bombardment by these inaccurate perceptions can take a toll on mental health too.<sup>4</sup>

However, none of this information is really new or revelatory. We have known about (and studied) social media's negative influences on mental health for more than a decade, and what we have found is that social media is not definitively good or bad. The truth is much more nuanced.

In reality, there are many mental health benefits in the world of social media. For one, social networks help us maintain relationships and combat loneliness—an aspect made much more obvious during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Social media also provides an ideal platform for raising awareness about mental health issues and providing peer support for those who are suffering. Campaigns and tools such as those highlighted below help destigmatize mental illness and aid individuals in understanding that they are not alone.

Though it is not a platform often associated with mental health, a recent article<sup>5</sup> found that Reddit has the potential to

help us better understand factors that may help to identify and support those in suicidal crisis. Unlike other social networking platforms, Reddit allows users to construct anonymous profiles and post under a pseudonym. Because of this, users are more willing to post when they are in crisis. The anonymity removes some of the stigma around making suicide-related posts. It was also found that some discussion threads go beyond merely discussing suicide-related experiences, with a number focusing on self-help and providing social support.<sup>5</sup> Insights gained from these threads on Reddit may be able to inform intervention and prevention strategies for those in suicidal crisis.

Other social networks have taken a more active role in providing tools to improve users' mental health. For example, on Facebook, searches for "depression" lead users to a landing page that offers the phone numbers for several crisis hotlines, along with a series of self-care exercises. Instagram does the same, pointing users who post hashtags such as #depression and #suicide to a similar resource page.<sup>6</sup>

In perhaps one of the most surprising platforms to take on the mental health cause, several years ago, Pinterest—a platform known for sharing recipes and craft ideas—began using its algorithms to recognize and provide resources for mental health. In 2019, the company launched an initiative called "compassionate search," which aimed to help users fight stress and anxiety through guided breathing or journaling. The company also began to moderate search results for things such as "suicide" and "self-harm." After training its algorithms to recognize content promoting self-harm, report of such pins went down 88%. The company has also built, in collaboration with a group of mental health organizations, a series of exercises specifically geared toward preventing self-injury.<sup>6</sup>

While executives admit that the benefits of these exercises are not the same as one-on-one therapy, they were created to help users redirect their energy into more positive pursuits. Not only are these services provided free of charge, but Pinterest does not store data about who uses them, and participation never affects future advertisements or pin recommendations on the platform.<sup>6</sup>

Even Google is getting in on the action, turning its focus to improving mental health and making a strategic hire in October 2021 of former Headspace executive Megan Jones Bell. Trained as a clinical psychologist and researcher, Bell

will be overseeing Google's approach to mental and behavioral health, leading a team of clinicians and health experts who support a number of Google's consumer products.<sup>7</sup>

This isn't Google's first foray into considering the mental health of its users. In the past, Google created screeners for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and postpartum depression, all of which are clinically validated. In the past few years, Google also launched a number of features, resources, and partnerships to address substance abuse recovery. Early in the pandemic, Google partnered with the National Alliance of Mental Illness to launch an anxiety screener that included medically validated information about anxiety, including symptoms and common treatments. Even Fitbit, which is now owned by Google, has expanded their tools to help individuals manage their everyday mental health and well-being.<sup>7</sup>

As is often examined in this journal, social media has both positive and negative attributes. Certainly, action is warranted to mitigate the negative. But we cannot dismantle the entire system. Nor should we. Without the algorithms that drive users to keep clicking, there would not be the same motivation to use social networks to connect with friends and loved ones. Although misuse of personal information is of widespread concern, it is possible, through reform, to maximize the positive consequences and minimize the negative.

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