Negative Effects of Social Media on Young Adult Mental Health

in the United States

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**Summary**

There is more and more evidence that social media is having negative mental health effects on its users and particularly youth. There are many factors that could be contributing to the adverse effects of social media use but a few that stand out are the addictive and comparative nature of social media and the prevalence of cyberbullying. When youth are faced with those difficult circumstances at an almost constant rate they can face effects such as increased suicidal ideation, development of eating disorders, and loss of sleep. Considering that social media and the study of its effects are new, there are relatively few practices in place. Among the best interventions right now is educating parents and children on the harms of social media and how to develop healthy social media habits.

**Key Terms**

**Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)-** a six-item self-report scale that is a brief and effective psychometric instrument for assessing at-risk social media addiction on the Internet.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Cyberbullying-** an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**FOMO-** Standing for the fear of missing out.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Hate Speech-** Offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion or gender) and that may threaten social peace.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Impact-** Any significant or positive changes that solve or at least address social injustice and challenges.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Interpersonal Theory of Suicide-** The theory that suicide is predicted by two major factors: (1) the desire to die and (2) the acquired capability to enact lethal means.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Mental Health-** Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Sexting-** Using your phone, computer, or camera to take or send sexy messages or images — usually selfies.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Social Comparison-** Social comparison is a form of sociological self-esteem, where we derive our sense of self through comparing ourselves with others.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Social media-** forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Context**

**Q: Who is using social media?**

**A:** Social media use is becoming quite universal in adolescents. Nearly 95% of youth ages 13-17 say that they use a social media platform and a third say, “almost constantly”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Q: What social media platforms are being primarily used by adolescents?**

**A:** The five leading social media platforms for youth are the following. YouTube is used by 94% of kids 13-14 year old and 95% of kids 15-17 years of age. TikTok is used by 61% of kids 13-14 and 71% of kids 15-17. Instagram is used by 45% of kids 13-14 and 73% of kids 15-17. Snapchat is used by 51% of kids 13-14 and 65% of kids 15-17. Lastly, Facebook is used by 23% of kids 13-14 and 39% of kids 15-17.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Q: When can mental health issues begin stemming from social media use?**

**A:** Most social media websites require a minimum age of 13 but nearly 40% of children ages 8-12 report being on social media. Highly sensitive brain development begins at age 10 and social media can begin negatively influencing mental health as early as that age. It can then continue to last throughout their development and beyond.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Q: Where is social media affecting the mental health of adolescents?**

**A:** Mental health issues stemming from social media are not limited to a certain geography. It is a worldwide phenomenon. A global review of the effect of social media on mental health found literature that spanned countries including but not limited to Italy, Thailand, Poland, the US, Germany, Australia, Korea, and Pakistan.[[14]](#footnote-14) This paper focuses on the US population because of its proximity and affinity to the US population.

**Q: What types of mental health effects does social media have on adolescents?**

**A:** Use of social media in adolescents can cause them to be distracted, lose sleep, and expose them to bullying, and unrealistic views of others' lives. These, among other exposures and risks of social media, have been found to be linked to depression and anxiety.[[15]](#footnote-15) Research has shown that youth who use social media are three times more likely to suffer from depression.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Contributing Factors**

#*1-Comparative Nature of Social Media*

Social media creates an environment of comparison that leads to a state of decreased mental health. Social comparison is a term that means people find their sense of self through the comparison of themselves with others.[[17]](#footnote-17) There are two general types of social comparisons that people subconsciously perform. Upward comparison is when one compares themselves to someone that they perceive as being better than them. Downward comparison is when one compares themselves to others that they perceive as being worse off than them. The theory of self-discrepancy developed by Edward Higgins says that there are three domains of self. Actual is the representation of the attributes that someone believes you actually possess and ideal is the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like you to possess. Ought is the representation of attributes that someone believes you ought to possess.[[18]](#footnote-18) The human goal, it is said, is to do our best to diminish the gap between these three selves.

Social Media creates an environment and opportunity for individuals to present themselves as more than what they actually are. When others are viewing social media feeds they see these images of what their ideal self should be and then fail to bridge the gap of their actual self. When they fail to bridge this gap it leads to disappointment and negative emotions towards themselves.[[19]](#footnote-19) Because social media causes an ideal-self phenomenon, the odds of upward comparisons are significantly higher leading people to believe that others are leading better and healthier lives. Those upward social comparisons have been linked to negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem and depression.[[20]](#footnote-20) Users of social media are also faced with many times the amount of relationships which increases the odds of social comparison. In a research study that was done before the social media era, it was estimated that the average person had 10-20 close relationships and up to 150 general relationships. Now, the average number of online friends is estimated to be around 338.[[21]](#footnote-21) In addition to comparing attributes of ourselves to others and attempting to close the gap between our three selves, social media also presents the opportunity to compare experiences with others and view missed experiences. There is the example of a 7th-grade girl whose best friend chooses to post a picture of her and her new best friend on a night out. Twenty years ago that girl would not have known unless she was told. This comparison of events and missed events leads to FOMO. Missing out on experiences leads to negative thoughts and emotions and when continually exposed to that fact, can develop into anxiety and depression.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*#2-Cyberbullying*

Social media has created an environment where cyberbullying is more prevalent and easier to perform than ever before. A 2022 Pew Research study found that 46% of teens say that they have experienced cyberbullying online or on their cell phones.[[23]](#footnote-23) Cyberbullying is the cause of much mental and physical turmoil that stems from social media use. Another study found that nearly 34% of all kids in the United States have been cyberbullied at least once and that 68% of kids who have been harassed online have mental health issues.[[24]](#footnote-24) While another study found that 16% of high school kids had been cyberbullied in the previous year and a research center claims that 73% of that cyberbullying occurred on social media platforms.[[25]](#footnote-25)

There are several factors that make cyberbullying so prevalent. Face-to-face bullying is much less common because of the lack of anonymity whereas with cyberbullying the perpetrator can keep their identity hidden through fake names, photos, and contact information. With cyberbullying there is also increased accessibility. This means that a perpetrator's victims are more easily within reach. It can happen at any time and in any place, there are no bounds to it. Additionally, cyberbullying through social media can be publicized much more easily. There is the ability to publicly post and humiliate others and then invite or include others in it.

Regarding the effects of cyberbullying, there is a substantial amount of research and information however, the internet and social media are relatively new so there is still research and data being gathered about the full and growing effect of cyberbullying. It has the ability to produce intense psychosocial and physical harm such as depression, self-harming behavior, and tragically, suicide.[[26]](#footnote-26) Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents. A study done on the connection between cyberbullying and suicide found that adolescents who are cyberbullied are twice as likely to have suicidal ideation.[[27]](#footnote-27) In a review of the effects of cyberbullying, they found across several studies that adolescents who had been cyberbullied reported feeling more withdrawn, losing self-esteem, developing general uneasiness, and negative relationship effects with family and friends. [[28]](#footnote-28)

*#3-Addictive Nature of Social Media*

Adolescents in the United States face mental health issues from social media because of its addictively designed nature. Social media addiction is defined as, “being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable motivation to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas”.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale judges social media addiction based on six traits: preoccupied with social media (Salience), using social media to reduce negative emotions (mood modification), gradually using social media more and more (tolerance), suffering distress if prohibited from it (withdrawal), sacrificing other obligations or harming other areas of life because of social media use (conflict), attempting to control the use of social media without success (relapse).

There are several factors that contribute to its addictive nature. Among the culprits are the designers of the social media platforms themselves. The people who created social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have designed them to be addictive and kept them that way despite the growing evidence that it has the potential to take a massive toll on users' mental and physical well-being.[[30]](#footnote-30) When an adolescent, and any person, uses social media, the platform causes surges of dopamine to the brain which keeps them coming back for more and more. “The shares, likes, and comments on these platforms trigger the brain's reward center, resulting in a high similar to the one people feel when gambling or using drugs.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Another study compares the effects of social media on the brain to that of using cocaine.[[32]](#footnote-32) Additionally dopamine is also triggered by novel experiences, add that to the artificial intelligence algorithms that learn and memorize what we’ve liked before and show us similar but slightly different content that leads to further addiction.[[33]](#footnote-33) Furthermore, the overuse of social media in adolescence can cause the brain to rewire and constantly seek immediate gratification which leads to addictive behaviors.[[34]](#footnote-34) An additional facet of addiction to social media is connected to the nature of the reward system in our brains. The reward center of people's brains is shown to be most active when they are talking about themselves. In the non-virtual world, it is estimated people talk about themselves about 30%-40% of the time whereas on social media it is estimated that people talk about themselves a staggering 80% of the time.[[35]](#footnote-35)

This social media addiction is then a problem because it is relied on as a coping mechanism when faced with stress, loneliness, depression, and other negative emotions. Social media is providing temporary relief to these emotions and so users end up engaging more and more. This eventually leads to multiple personal problems such as ignoring real relationships, work, school responsibilities, and physical health which bolsters negative emotions.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Negative Consequences**

*#1-Increased rates of suicidal ideation and suicide.*

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States. People aged 10-24 accounted for 14% of all suicides in the U.S. In a recent survey, 22% of high school students said they had seriously considered suicide in the past year, 18% said they had made a suicide plan, and 10% said that they had attempted suicide at least once.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The interpersonal theory of suicide and media says that the desire to die is influenced by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. And that acquired capability is how a person overcomes the fear of death. Time spent on social media may decrease in-person interactions which leads to decreased feelings of belongingness. There are also experiences such as cyberbullying, FOMO, and comparisons that similarly decrease feelings of belonging. On top of that social media also exposes adolescents to media that may increase their acquired capability such as watching people die, commit suicide, cause harm, and more.[[38]](#footnote-38) In a systematic review of social media and its connection to suicide, 24 papers found that social media was a large platform of disseminating pro-suicide and suicide-encouraging content. In that same review 27 papers identified cyberbullying as a leading contributor of suicide and suicidal ideation among adolescents stemming from social media use.[[39]](#footnote-39) Another contributor that occurs through the means of social media found in the same systematic review is sexting. Sexting involves the receiving and sending of sexual or nude images and videos. Those images then can potentially be used to humiliate, blackmail, and harass individuals causing shame, depression, and embarrassment leading to suicidal ideation.[[40]](#footnote-40)

*#2-Loss of sleep and increased risk of sleep issues*

Social media and its influence play several roles in the effect that it has on adolescents' sleep patterns. However, it is first important to emphasize briefly the role that sleep plays in the developing bodies of adolescents. Sleep is the most significant factor in adolescents' health. They need 8-10 hours however most only get 6-7 or less. This lack of sleep can lead to several consequences including a higher risk of depression and anxiety, an increase in low self-esteem, decreased school performance, and more.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Research shows that nearly 95% of youth ages 13-17 say that they use a social media platform and a third say, “almost constantly”.[[42]](#footnote-42) On top of that one study shows that 86% of adolescents sleep with their phone in their bedroom and another 37% report that they have lost sleep due to social networking sites.[[43]](#footnote-43) Blue light emission comes from many electronic devices with a screen. The use of social media and therefore an electronic device causes our eyes to be exposed to blue light. It is harmful to sleeping patterns because blue light is a high-energy form of light and therefore almost all of it passes straight through to the back of our retina and blocks melatonin which is a hormone that causes drowsiness.[[44]](#footnote-44) It can be inferred that social media is being used by adolescents before bed leading to this blue light exposure and therefore loss of sleep. Additionally, the use of social media before bed causes increased cognitive arousal and can interrupt sleep by arousing adolescents with texts and notifications.[[45]](#footnote-45) On top of those effects, social media can also affect adolescents' psychosocial pathways. Research has suggested that FOMO and social norms could be important factors. This may be the case because youth fear losing social status, missing out on social experiences, or experiencing disapproval from peers if they are not continuously online. A study found that adolescents experience a considerable amount of anxiety when their access to texting and social media platforms is limited. They also reported feeling stressed and guilty when they did not reply to a message immediately.[[46]](#footnote-46) This suggests that the duration of social media use doesn’t alone affect sleep patterns but the found meaning in social media for adolescent users.[[47]](#footnote-47) This lack of sleep and the creation of poor sleep habits as before stated leads to many negative consequences such as depression, anxiety, and more.

*#3-Increased risk and cases of eating disorders*

Eating disorders are a behavioral condition that is characterized by serious and persistent disturbances in eating behaviors and associated distressing thoughts and emotions. They include but are not limited to anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating and affect up to 5% of the world population.[[48]](#footnote-48) A review of studies found a gender-specific percentage of 8.4% for females and 2.2% for males.[[49]](#footnote-49) Though the research is relatively young many studies are finding that there is a connection between social media use and eating disorders. We must first discuss the fact that it is a prevalent problem in media to portray the ideal yet unrealistic thin, beautiful female body and the large muscular male body. Over time the cultural ideal for women’s body size and shape has become thinner and leaner and the male body has become stronger and more muscular. A study that examined the centerfold models of Playboy magazines found that over two decades found that at the end 70% of the women were underweight and more than 75% were less than 85% of their ideal weight.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The viewing of the portrayed ideal male and female body on social media can have a profound effect on adolescents and how they view and treat their bodies. In an analysis of 25 studies on females, they examined the effect of viewing the slender body ideal compared to average or plus-size media. They found that female adolescents viewed their bodies in a significantly more negative fashion after viewing thin media images.[[51]](#footnote-51) This dissatisfaction with body weight or shape is the number one contributor to the development of eating disorders. In a study of middle school children, they found that 52% of girls and 45% of boys exhibited behavior in-line with eating disorders such as skipping meals and heavy exercise. In addition, it found that there was a significantly higher risk of eating disorders observed in girls and boys who held each type of account (Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook).[[52]](#footnote-52) Social media provides individuals with the ability to edit and distort their body image to portray the ideal self. When the individual fails to close the gap of their ideal self they can begin to take extreme measures to do so such as skipping meals, extensive exercise, and regurgitating food.

**Best Practices- Practice**

*Teaching parents and children about social media use*

Given the wide use and benefits of social media, it is understood that it is not ever going to go away. Nevertheless, there is a need for interventions that counteract the harms of social media Among the leading practices on preventing the negative effects of social media is teaching parents and children healthy social media habits, how to develop them, and the dangers of social media. A relatively new organization called, Organization for Social Media Safety, offers school programs, family consultations, and even corporate presentations. In their student presentations, they educate kids on the most prevalent dangers of social media such as hate speech, cyberbullying, suicide, body dysmorphia, and more. They also discuss how to prevent them and how to react when they are encountered. The parent presentations offer information on social media dangers as well as tips and ideas for setting guidelines as well as how to create restrictions on computers and mobile devices.[[53]](#footnote-53) Another source that is practicing similar strategies is the government. The U.S. Surgeon General recently released a health advisory about the effects of social media on young adult mental health. At the end of the advisory, they advise several steps that parents and youth can take such as creating a family media plan, reporting cyberbullying, teaching children healthy media habits, creating boundaries, not keeping online harassment or abuse a secret, and more.[[54]](#footnote-54)

*Impact*

This intervention is being pushed by many organizations large and small such as the government and the Organization for Social Media Safety. However, the impact that these organizations are having is difficult to track. The intervention is merely educating people on the harms and ways to prevent negative social media-related effects. The Organization for Social Media Safety, for example, has a report on the impact they have had but there are direct numbers associated with their impact so it is difficult to say what has changed. They simply say that they have helped reduce or prevent cyberbullying, violence, harassment, etc.[[55]](#footnote-55) Others such as the government and smaller organizations don’t even mention the impact that their efforts have had.

*Gaps*

Considering that social media and its negative effects are a relatively new issue compared to poverty and lack of water, there needs to be a substantial amount of research done on the effects of social media so that we can pinpoint the effects and then come up with effective and trackable interventions. The Surgeon General's advisory notes exactly that, “There is broad concern among the scientific community that a lack of access to data and lack of transparency from technology companies have been barriers to understanding the full scope and scale of the impact of social media on mental health and well-being.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The education of parents and youth on the harms of social media and social media habits is a good place to start but as evidenced by a lack of information it is difficult to track the impact. There are also gaps in this practice one of which is that there are potentially those that don’t care and therefore wont take the time to learn about the harms of social media, education is a voluntary practice. Another gap that is present in this practice is that there is no guarantee that even if people choose to be educated that they will make the necessary changes and apply their learning into practices. It must be questioned whether or not it is a great practice despite being the only prevalent practice at this time.

**Key Takeaways**

* Social Media is a new social and cultural norm in many parts of the world and is being used by a large percentage of youth.
* There are many factors that could be linked to social media causing mental health issues among which are the addictive and comparative nature of social media as well as the presence of cyberbullying.
* A decrease in mental health among youth has been linked to the use of social media causing issues such as increased suicidal ideation, eating disorders, loss of sleep, and more.
* The current best practice is educating parents and children on the dangers of social media and how to use social media in a healthy way. However, there is a need for further research on the effects of social media on youth mental health and the development of an effective and impactful intervention.

**Source Folder**

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1xPcfqXjWRju6b3P5XV1NnjzWylFH0ksH?usp=share_link>

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