

# **The End of My Toxic Relationship with Social Media**

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This position paper is a memoir written by a modern-day teenager, her experience with social media and its impacts, what she learned, and how her intentions with social media have changed and improved.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

If you walk into a group of teenagers hanging out these days, you would hope to see them watching a movie, chatting, playing games, or enjoying food — not eyes glued to a screen for hours on end, with blue light reflecting off their faces as they laugh and mindlessly scroll on Instagram reels. Something inconceivable a decade ago is the consuming hold social media has on modern day youth, even reaching to elementary age children, and its influence on our daily lives and wellbeing.

I first downloaded the social media platforms TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat at the age of 12 years old, in sixth grade. My mom tried to limit my usage as much as possible right away, even before I got social media. However, I saw those apps as the only way I could fit in with my middle school's uniform and privileged population; my belief was that if I had a lot of followers, knew the same trends, and kept Snapstreaks, I would be accepted. Of course, it didn't hurt that the bright colors, catchy sounds, and attention hooks were at every bend. When my mom enforced screentime limits, I felt like she was trying to exclude me from my peers. That became an issue of contention with my mom for the next couple of years, my usage of social media. The tunnel vision I had for screentime was to maximize it whenever I could, consuming as much as possible before my time limits ran out. I never imagined its effects reaching into every area of my life; not just my mental health, but my relationships with the people in my life, my passions and interests, and general quality of life.

## **2 MEMOIR**

In this section, I first describe the impact social media had on mental health and my attention span. I then spoke about loss of interest, passion, and motivations through comparison and unrealistic standards on social media. Lastly, I discussed decreased in-person connections and social skills; then included misconceptions of screentime, and how parents should view it instead.

### **2.1 Impact on Mental Health and Attention Span**

I didn't realize at the same time of being engrossed and attempting to assume this new online presence, I lost my sense of identity, motivation for daily life, and human experience. Starting 6th grade, I was trapped in the world of social media. I envision it in my head as a dark thundercloud, where I could feel my brain melting away, my attention span declining steadily, and my excitement for anything outside of my phone gone. The brief dopamine from scrolling on social media became a constant within my everyday life, which could only provide a temporary distraction that became addictive to

chase after. This meant hours of Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, and always begging my mom to rescind my screentime limits.

These issues eventually continued when I began struggling with depression and anxiety in eighth grade. I would downplay my mental health, as I couldn't tell whether I was depressed because I was addicted to my phone, or if I was using my phone as a distraction because I was depressed. I can't place blame on any certain factors, but it is true that excessive use of social media has degrading effects on anybody's wellbeing. I know now that the social media algorithm is trained to have an emphasis on beauty standards and consumerism; but as an impressionable, new teenager I had no way of understanding that. For one, the push of beauty standards led me to question my own physical attributes, associating conformity with beauty, and heightening of insecurities. Another subtle aspect of every social media platform, even beloved influencers, is the unrelenting need to have more of everything instead of simple gratitude. When adults say, "Social media is bad for you! You kids are phone zombies, that's all you care about!" It feels, and only felt like to me during that time, chastisement and unnecessary blame – instead of considering the context of our current world and expectations set for young people today.

However, the only reason that I can look back and discern social media's negative affects on my mind is through serious evaluations and a hard, but learned experience. Like I mentioned, I was caught up in an online world and lost in the real world. It is inexplicably difficult to tear yourself away from the screen and be present, when social media becomes a second nature and habit. Over the summer of my freshman to sophomore year, I did a student program where we didn't have WiFi and our phones were shut off for the first few weeks. At first, I grappled with the idea of FOMO and wondered what my friends were doing back home. I couldn't check Instagram stories or newly uploaded TikToks and see what they were doing without me. I felt disconnected from my life at home, which caused a brief self-isolation in this amazing experience. Now I don't consider the disconnection a terrible thing at all, even as alone as I felt in the first week of that trip. This is because I was instead able to focus on the community I was serving, create new, genuine connections with the kids I met, and enjoy the simplicity of the world around me without worrying about the fast pace of the online world. I consider that trip, which was only last year, to be the turning point in how I let social media affect my life.

## **2.2 Unrealistic Standards: Loss of Real Passion and Worldview**

These days as a high schooler, I, along with millions of other teenagers are engulfed with the worries of college applications and our futures. There is a constant wave that feels impossible to ride, that includes juggling school, extracurriculars, relationships, wellbeing, and on top of everything feeling like you have to have your whole life figured out. I admit that over my first few years in high school, I have been caught in that wave. Unfortunately, when trying to keep up I have found I only sacrificed crucial parts of myself along the way; including my ability to appreciate every step of the process. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and even heated discussions on Reddit, are a driving force in these expectations of teenagers nowadays.

It is true that we only see the best of people's lives online; who would willingly post their mistakes, personal issues, or tragic life events? Even those examples are only a sliver of parts of life that people don't share online. That realization might seem logical to parents or adults who aren't in modern atmospheres, but to teenagers it is detrimental for their self-esteem. All teenagers deal with the unrealistic standards of achievement from adults and online! I think it would be interesting to see with the prevalence of the Internet over the past decade, how teenagers' perceptions and standards for college and their futures has changed. I know that my dad likes to tell me about his paper and pen applications to colleges, sent and received by mail, when kids didn't create nonprofit organizations or be president of sixteen clubs.

I also think it is a separate topic on the issue of high school students thinking they have to have everything figured out, even prompted by the big questions of job or college prospects. Like I mentioned, social media platforms do a great job of displaying kids who have accomplished everything in high school, and pushing ideas that make kids think they have to follow. This has created a false pretense, where I often see kids questioning online, "How do I create a passion project if I'm not passionate about anything?" or "I need to make a nonprofit to get into a good college." Although it is a combination of parental and environmental pressures, I see the driving force as the online culture that glorifies little sleep and exhaustion with achievement and productivity. It is unrealistic to expect this of teenagers so early on in their lives, creating disillusioned views of how the rest of their lives and the world works.

When I would get caught up in the brief dopamine hits that came from social media, it would take hours later to realize that they gave me no real meaning or purpose. Choosing to stalk somebody's page, or make unhealthy comparisons used to be an easy way out of working on my personal goals. Comparison can only decrease self-worth and create unnecessary insecurity. It's easy to say, "Instead of making yourself feel worse unintentionally by looking at others' good qualities online, just work on improving yourself!" Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Going back to the beginning of last summer, I was able to focus on what I'd neglected during the fast-paced pressures of social media and my environment. Unintentionally, just by staying off of my phone for a few weeks, and along with my interests and passion growing naturally so did my self-confidence.

### **2.3 Nuanced Perspectives of In-Person Connection and Relationships**

Originally, social media was created as a way to foster connections such as online pen pals, relatives across the world, and learning more about others' diverse cultures. I have seen amazing stories of long lost friends or siblings reconnecting because of social media connections, or even simpler joys such as keeping in touch with grandparents. In my personal experience, the ways that I have been able to use social media for connections has outweighed the negative. I remember seeing cybersecurity videos warning young people not to talk to strangers online, even from a young age to send any personal information such as location or family members. There was definitely a period of time when Facebook, Instagram, Wechat were new and exciting and teenagers were much more vulnerable to stranger danger, back in the 2010s. These days, I have heard very few incidences of online safety risks and have never experienced or fallen prey to in my life. Thankfully, we are now living in an online era where kids are much more aware and educated on online safety; it almost feels like a built-in, second sense – what is more worrying is how social media itself is dangerous to teenagers' in-person interactions and social skills.

My hook in the introduction was the norm of "modern" teenagers: instead of facing awkwardness and silence, or engage with each other, people prefer to pull out their phones. I myself see it all too often, at my school, music programs, and community settings involving large groups of teenagers. Sometimes I will challenge myself, as a former phone-addled teenager as well, to not even check the time on my phone when spending time with other people. The best connections and memories I've made with my peers have been screens-free, and enjoying the moment. With social media, I feel like we've collectively lost this ability. Honest connections feel difficult to find nowadays without the influences of phones and social media. Even my friends' primary form of communication is over Snapchat, not even iMessages; sometimes even Instagram DMs.

I have noticed some recent trends that normalize shedding social skills for easy ignorance on your cell phone, whether it be casual TikTok comments or trending jokes. First scenario: imagine a teenager and their friend(s) sitting in a living room or bedroom. They are all scrolling through social media, laughing occasionally at funny videos. Instead of going over to their friend sitting on the opposite side of the room, they send the video over private messages. This has become way too common amongst teenagers, and I don't classify it as laziness, but rather the loss of necessity to make intentional, simple gestures. Another scenario: a young teenage girl is walking in public by a group of girls. Instead of just looking ahead and keep walking, she looks down at her phone while scrolling furiously on TikTok and writing, "Ignore this. I'm just writing this comment because I'm walking by a big group of girls." It seems absurd to even write this story out here, but I have seen this comment way too many times. How has it become normal, in awkward or uncomfortable social settings of any sort, that we resort to our cell phones?

Don't get me wrong, I think that teenagers using social media to have fun isn't a bad thing with moderate usage. People bonding over TikTok dances, making creative Instagram stories, or silly Snapchat filters is an easygoing and wholesome way to utilize social media platforms. It is when I have witnessed social media overtaking other parts of relationships; such as in-person communication, social skills of confrontation, combatting awkwardness and silence, and meeting new people that I believe it to be a problem.

### **2.4 My Opinion on Screentime**

I decided to circle back on my brief mention of screentime in my introduction after my conclusion. I don't think the limits of screentime played a large enough part past middle school, when I began to be really affected by social media, to be discussed with my other points. However, despite my initial (and very severe) annoyance of the Apple Screentime

feature, I can appreciate my mom's efforts and intentions when setting limits in place. There is no concrete or "right" way for a parent to maintain their child's screentime. I think what needs to change is that parents give limits with the misled idea that it will stop their kids from becoming addicted to their phones.

On the contrary, suppressing young people from something they really want, or see other people having, will only make them want it more. I know, at least in my middle school, kids with screentime would resort to social media on their computer browsers or iPads. It only fuels their addiction and by restricting them, it gives the wrong impression that once they don't have it they should use it as much as possible. Parents cannot protect their kids forever from the evils of social media, but they can foster a healthy and understanding environment for their child's usage.

In middle school, I do think kids should have content restrictions, reasonable social media limits, and have honest conversations with their parents about usage. Looking back on when I first got social media, I wish that my mom had given more explanation rather than "waste of time" and "bad for you" when setting limits. There are many things that are wastes of time that kids love, such as video games, or parents might even consider certain hobbies a waste of time; so how will kids discern a difference between the two? And "bad for you" can be something as simple as too much ice cream, to dangerous, like walking alone at night. There needs to be reasoning and patience from parents, so that when kids do have access to their social media they don't see it as something to get as much as possible out of. I find social media to be best enjoyed when it's used with intention, not as a habit or choice out of boredom. I was at the unhealthiest point of my relationship with social media when my mom would turn off limits briefly and I would overuse it.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Generally, my relationship with social media has been a tumultuous but surprisingly rewarding. My points of detailing its impact on my mental health and attention, setting unrealistic standards and hindering my interests, and observations of derailing in-person connection are the most prominent effects I have experienced. I didn't mention the parts of social media that I fully appreciate, that haven't been available before social media was introduced but that have lessened in my perspective because of all the other negative points. I would like to point out the ability to spread awareness; millions of teens worldwide, including myself, have access to real perspectives from current social movements and conflicts. Teenagers don't have an excuse to not be informed, with the plethora of information spread on social media platforms, as condensed as they may be. There are also many diverse, available communities across the Internet, providing a safe digital space for anyone and everyone (a few I have appreciated and utilized the most are #eBookTok, normalizing reading again, and mental health creators, represent and educate on mental health for our generation).

Otherwise, there are many negative perspectives associated with social media, including but not limited to the ideas that I listed. I believe that to help others like myself, who struggled with social media addiction and its impacts on other parts of my life, the solution is not to be completely cut off. Rather, opening the conversation to inform both parents and young adults about their usage and how it can positively and negatively impact their wellbeing and futures.