

# Decentralized Social Media and Teen Well-being: A New Frontier or a False Hope?

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In this position paper, we conduct a comprehensive literature review discussing the prospect of decentralized social media as a solution to the risks to teen well-being specifically caused by traditional and popular social media. We delve into the advantageous features of the new approach as well as its current limitations. We propose that despite its shortcomings, decentralized social media has the potential to help improve the social media experience to support teen well-being, with further research being essential to fully understand and harness its potential.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Decentralized Social media**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Teen Well-being, Mental Health, Algorithm-Free User Experience, Decentralized Governance

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## 1 Introduction

Despite the many benefits of social media in the lives of teens, its role in shaping their experiences and well-being remains a growing concern. Research indicates a significant correlation between social media use and mental health challenges, particularly depression [46]. This depression can result from factors such as social isolation, reduced participation in healthy activities, and inadequate sleep, all of which are often seen as by-products of excessive social media use. Teens are increasingly shifting to online interactions, and while social media has helped to form meaningful relationships [41], it reduces the perceived need for in-person relationships [40]. Research has shown that the social support provided in real life is stronger than that provided via social media [31]. So, the risk of social isolation intensifies.

Further studies like [15, 16, 25] indicate that there is a higher relative concern of harm to teen girls in the form of eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Additionally, young, impressionable minds are easily influenced by the glamorization of risky behaviors on social media, which normalizes harmful activities—such as substance abuse and excessive alcohol consumption [44, 50]. These risks are further intensified by peer pressure and a pervasive fear of missing out [10, 35].

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To combat some of these issues, social media companies, policymakers, and governments have initiated protective measures. For instance, Australia recently banned teens under 16 from major social media platforms, while the UK prohibited the sale of smartphones to those under 16 [6, 24]. The EU has also tightened regulations, requiring platforms to enhance safety features for minors [2]. In line with these regulatory shifts and growing public concern, companies like Instagram have introduced improved “teen account” features that limit profile visibility and restrict accessible content [3].

However, these measures may inadvertently restrict teens’ access to social media. When similar policies are applied at home, parents often act as enforcers, limiting screen time, banning certain platforms, or closely monitoring content. This can lead to teens becoming secretive and even increasing their mobile usage [19, 22]. Modecki et al. [33] argue that instead of relying on these control strategies, parents should adopt solicitation strategies, actively engaging with their teens to learn about their lives and experiences.

Consequently, there is a gap to fill – a need for more diverse and updated approaches that foster teens’ autonomy while encouraging healthy digital engagement. In this paper, we explore a new perspective: decentralized social media. This refers to platforms built on distributed information management systems, such as peer-to-peer or blockchain networks that, unlike traditional social media, distribute their major functions: data storage, content distribution, identity management, governance, moderation, revenue models, and network topology [11, 43]. Recently, platforms like Mastodon and Bluesky [4, 26] have risen in popularity, attracting many users from Twitter (now X) following recent managerial changes [20, 39]. This emerging model gives users enhanced control over their online experience; for instance, decentralized platforms enable individuals to create their own servers, fostering independent communities with their own rules [21]. The unique framework of decentralized social media has helped marginalized voices build a safe ‘haven-like’ community for themselves [49]. With these prospects in mind, we further examine whether decentralized social media can address the challenges associated with the use of mobile devices by teens.

## 2 Advantages of Decentralized Social Media for Teen Well-being

### 2.1 Content Moderation and Self-Regulation

Unlike centralized platforms, decentralized platforms operate under a distributed governance, which means they are not controlled by a single private entity. This makes room for better control of content moderation and data, as the network infrastructure is distributed over multiple participants [49]. In the case of Mastodon, with the use of “blocklists” – lists of servers that are blocked [1] – the task of content moderation becomes segmented, making it manageable. As a result, users of the server do not see content from the blocked server, thereby breaking any connections with members of the blocked server. This allows parents to host a server of a certain community (e.g., the neighborhood, school community, or religious community). Being the server administrators, there is greater parental control over what content is being circulated on the server. Parents would block servers that they deem inappropriate, such as those encouraging irresponsible alcohol use or dangerous eating habits, and could keep a watchful eye over the teens’ activities, intervening when something harmful occurs, such as cyberbullying or glamorization of substance abuse.

The decentralization of governance brings forth another opportunity – allowing teens to take an active role in moderating content. Moderating themselves is a way to implement the much-researched self-regulation practices [47]. Research has shown that teenagers are not passive and are aware of the harm social media can cause to them [34]. Being patronized and belittled by public commentary on social media addiction, teens understand that excessive use of social media is harmful. Studies have also found that when it affects aspects of their lives, such as academic performance, they

are willing to self-regulate, such as leaving their phone outside their room or using self-locking features for a set period [34]. Self-regulatory practices boost their personality development and growth [47], and also help mitigate the tension added to the parent-teen relationship by encouraging trust and independence [19, 33].

There are many ways in which decentralized social media promotes self-regulation. Firstly, self-regulation means self-monitoring, impulse control, and risk-coping [47]. Decentralized social media has features that enable self-regulation practices. The Mastodon federated network model, for instance, allows users to set their servers with specific moderation policies [4]. This allows teens to make servers of their communities and govern their content independently. Despite the risk that an independent community of teens might present [37], self-moderating has been shown to improve healthy relations and conflict-resolution skills, albeit on Discord and Minecraft [23, 48]. The same concept can be extended to decentralized social media, where teens can explore and meet new like-minded individuals, which the Discord framework does not allow.

Bluesky offers a “marketplace of algorithms,” where one can pick their own recommendation algorithm [9, 17]. Bluesky also allows users to pick or make their own starter packs, which are recommended custom feeds and new users to follow. When users make a starter pack, they can share it with other users and enjoy the same curated experience [3]. These features of Bluesky allow teens to practice impulse control, introducing a new dynamic to self-regulation and enabling teens to be more thoughtful and intentional with their social media use.

## 2.2 Audience Management and Non-addictive Framework

User privacy is a major focus of decentralized platforms, unlike centralized ones that often compromise it, whether intentionally or unintentionally. One of the many aspects of privacy is audience management. Often, social media platforms like Instagram [36] recommend a user’s account to others, even when the account owner does not want that kind of promotion. Decentralized platforms do not have this kind of recommendation algorithm. The audience of each user is shaped by the servers they join. So, accounts are only recommended from the server and to other members of the server [3, 14]. This is a suitable option for teen users, whose profiles should not be randomly recommended to strangers. This characteristic of decentralized platforms helps teens feel safer while browsing.

Another significant advantage of decentralized platforms over centralized ones is the user experience they provide. The experience provided by platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is intentionally crafted using “behavioral design”—a concept aimed at influencing human behavior[28] —to captivate users in a manner akin to the addictive nature of painkillers [45], which helps explain why teens often struggle with social media addiction. Research has found that social media features such as notifications, likes, and a constant stream of new content create a short-term feedback loop in the human brain with the ‘pleasure’ hormone dopamine [29]. This feedback loop is what fuels addictive behaviors. More specifically, the impact of elevated dopamine levels is more dangerous on the teen brain, as it is still developing. Research has shown that excessive dopamine stimulation can lead to higher impulsivity and tendencies of addiction, and poor risk management [5]. Decentralized platforms combat this by giving users an algorithm-free experience [49]. With the example of Mastodon, the lack of algorithmic manipulation means that users curate their feeds by following certain hashtags or other users [32], updating their feeds only when someone posts something new and not stimulating them with an endless stream of content. Therefore, when decentralized platforms propose a model that does not fuel the dopamine feedback loop, it can foster healthier social media habits among teens.

### 3 Challenges and Limitations

#### 3.1 Current Research Landscape

The majority of research and development for the decentralized platforms has been on privacy and data protection [7, 18, 27, 30]. Much work has also been done on developing systems that are based on decentralization, such as an application that allows car sharing [38], an application that allows democratic crowd journalism [42], and a typical social media application centered on block-chain technology [12]. Evidently, the research focus is not the same as that for teen well-being and social media. This makes the research space surrounding decentralized platforms and teen well-being very barren. Making further improvements might be a slow and time-consuming process.

#### 3.2 Will Teens Prefer Decentralized Platforms?

Teens use social media to stay connected with friends and their favorite influencers [8], which decentralized social media platforms fail to provide. Users of Mastodon, the more famous decentralized platform, complain that it feels very ‘empty’ and ‘quiet’ [49]. As teens are motivated by the need to stay connected and the fear of missing out [10], encouraging them to move to decentralized platforms will be quite challenging.

This challenge will be exacerbated by the lack of flashy and capturing recommendation algorithms. As discussed earlier [49], while an algorithm-free experience has its benefits, its major drawback is that it cannot serve as an alternative to the quick-paced social media experience they are used to. This would only engage them to a certain extent, after which the inability to find new relevant content might push them to revert to the other platforms.

Another hurdle in unlocking the full potential of decentralized platforms is the difficulty of understanding the user interface and navigating all its features. For instance, the options for multiple servers in Mastodon can be confusing [13, 26] as choosing the right one can be intimidating and time-consuming, and for teens, it may be more so. Multiple accounts of similar experiences have been discussed on Reddit [13], stating that the onboarding experience felt very unwelcoming, unlike that of Bluesky, making it the only decentralized platform without this issue. Despite many discussions on the matter, not much action has been taken towards resolving it. This steep learning curve and multiple UI hurdles would greatly discourage teens from leaving their very comfortable and welcoming platforms.

Conducting user-testing with teen groups would be instrumental in better understanding their preferences and addressing the aforementioned challenges. By gathering direct feedback, developers could identify specific pain points and potential improvements tailored to teen users, such as enhanced on-boarding experiences, simplified navigation, and community discovery features. This approach would not only clarify teens’ needs but also guide future design iterations, making decentralized platforms more appealing and accessible for younger audiences.

### 4 Conclusion

Based on the review conducted during this study, we can conclude that if decentralized social media were to be used to promote teen well-being, there is a long road ahead. Much research, user testing, and marketing strategies are required to push decentralized social media to teens. However, this system of social media has many promising traits, as outlined. With the right efforts to overcome the aforementioned shortcomings, including, but not limited to, user studies with teens, it could be a plausible solution to the crisis at hand.

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