

Effects of Social Media on Millennials Mental Health

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the effects that social media platforms and networks have on the overall millennial generational cohort. Social Media usage is on the rise as new networks are constantly emerging and common/popular sites are experiencing an increase in users. According to the dictionary definition, social media is websites and/or applications that enable users to create and share content or allow users to participate in social networking. Social media affects millennials in more ways than one. Users can typically associate the effects with either a positive and/or a negative effect on mental health.

Millennials, aged now between 16-30 years old, are currently the main age group affected by social media. They are the most prevalent age cohort active on sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Many millennial consumers are easily influenced by the followers and content found on social media platforms.

The increase seen in the use of social media networks such as Instagram and Facebook among the millennial generation is more prevalent today as compared to those in the past. This increase in the use of social media seems to tie back and be related to the rising numbers of millennials experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. While often associated with mental illnesses, social media does aid in promoting mental health benefits as well, such as connections, awareness, and reliability. Social media sites are constantly evolving and paving way for potential opportunities and/or threats.

Introducing Social Media

Social media networks have been growing at exponential rates since the beginning of its time, starting in the late 1990s. Blogging through the internet was one of the earliest forms of

what social media is like today. Blogging allows individuals to write about an event, a situation, a topic, either personal or external, and it allows for others to read and access the information. No physical contact needs to be made to read a blog via the internet. From blogging, social media networks soared. Facebook was announced in 2004, in which it began as what you can say as a more advanced blog. Chief executive officer now, Mark Zuckerberg has said that he created this platform, in between classes while attending Harvard University. The site allowed users the ability to add an account on Facebook and create a personalized profile of themselves. On the platform, they can write about virtually anything, including writing about their day, connect with other Facebook users, and sharing information. From the start of Facebook, the site has grown tremendously. "Facebook, with just 150 million users at the beginning of 2009 and coming off a year with only \$270 million in revenue, was considered as uncertain a business as MySpace, which was still the largest social network in the United States. By the end of 2015, Zuckerberg was feted as one of the greatest CEOs and philanthropists ever." (Mike, 2017, pg 1). The site has surpassed MySpace, currently serving 2.7 billion active users. Similarly, Instagram serves as another highly used and popular social media platform. The site strives for its ease of use and innovative technology. Having been developed in only 2010, the platform has approximately only been used for the past 10 years, and now serves over 1 billion users. "From the beginning, the primary focus of the app was to feature photographs, specifically those taken on mobile devices." (Blystone, D. 2020). The app stays true to featuring photos, but throughout the year has added more available space for content, like videos, direct messaging, live photos, and much more.

There are countless other social media sites aside from Facebook and Instagram. Some additional sites include Twitter, Snapchat, VSCO, and Tik Tok, in which these fall into a more

leisurely used category. Some networking sites are sites that are geared towards work-related networking and can assist individuals seeking employment and/or communicating with other employers in a more professional atmosphere. Examples of these sites would include LinkedIn, Indeed, and Glass Door. House hunting networking sites exist, like Zillow, Realtor, and Redfin. Overall, social media has expanded into just about every market and/or industry and has aided in creating a sense of ease with communication. Through apps and websites, words are easily communicated via text, and there is a lack of physical communication. While numerous positives are coming out of all the increase in social media sites and networking platforms, like anything, many positives come with some negatives. It is easy for an individual to hide behind a computer screen as opposed to confronting someone in person. The increase in media sites make it easier to hide. With that, other issues arise, users can portray themselves as others, as privacy is a large concern common within many social media sites/platforms. Anxiety levels can increase, and body image consciousness can shift, leading to overall mental health concerns.

Social Media Impact

Social media networks and sites have been seeming to create larger impacts as the user population increases. As the popularity of sites such as Facebook and Instagram increase, more studies are conducted recording the effects. According to *The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health* from the North Carolina Medical Journal, "Research on social media and adolescent mental health has proliferated in recent years, with many studies exploring whether more frequent use of social media is associated with various mental health concerns, including depression, body image concerns, and disordered eating, and externalizing problems." Often, people become "addicted" to social media, sharing their everyday life with their friends and/or

followers, posting about their daily activities and/or thoughts. Some posts may be viewed in a more positive light than others, but just about everything can be perceived in different ways when posted over social media. From a study conducted and published by the North Carolina Medical Journal, findings have been mixed, with many revealing a significant negative effect of social media use on mental health." (Nesi, J. 2020). Mental health conditions can be tied back to some engagement on social media, potentially stemming from just one post.

Mental Health

Mental health is something that is a significant part of every life stage. "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices." (What is Mental Health? 2020). There is positive mental health which can equate to an individual with encouraging emotions and an optimistic outlook on life. There is also negative mental health, which is typically discussed more than positive as it often leads to negative thoughts and emotions, as well as increasing the risks of mental illness disorders. "Nearly 45 million adults in the United States (U.S.) are affected by mental health issues, and roughly 75% of issues start during adolescence or young adulthood." (Lucero, J. E., Emerson, A. D., Bowser, T., & Koch, B., 2020). Millennials are the first cohort population to be heavily affected by social media and due to that, social media usage is often tied back to mental health conditions within this generation. "Growing concern for the physical and mental health of contemporary young adults has been documented and a call to action established. As the largest living cohort, it is important to monitor the health of the Millennial population to avoid the need for substantial, national health resources as they age." (Lucero, J. E., Emerson, A. D., Bowser, T., & Koch, B., 2020).

Resources are becoming more available for those struggling with mental health issues, and those that are affected. Countless leading factors can potentially affect one's mental health state, either in positive and/or negative ways. Social media networks are one distinguishing cause that has been directly linked to mental health states upon millennials specifically.

Potential Mental Health Risks

Social media is repeatedly linked to one's negative mindset regarding mental health. As previously discussed, it is extremely easy to hide behind a computer screen as opposed to saying something in person. Millennials have grown up and are still growing with social media often being a large part of their lives. Social media environments can lead to cold and dark places, perceived differently depending on the user and/or audience. Negative actions can easily be conducted via media sites. The Displaced Behavior Theory is one that may aid in explaining why social media shows a connection with mental health. Theories find that social media affects how users view others outside of social media sites, which in often cases, is negative. One common act of negative actions influenced by social media sites is "Cybervictimization, or the experience of being a victim of bullying by peers online, has been consistently found to be associated with higher rates of self-harm and suicidal behavior, as well as internalizing and externalizing problems. Other types of social media peer experiences, such as social exclusion and online conflict or drama, also may put youth at risk." (Nesi, J. 2020). What is done and portrayed over the internet can strongly influence one's self-esteem, causing one to think negative and/or suicidal thoughts. Peer pressure is another common action among sites such as Facebook and Instagram. It becomes easy to believe someone when listening to their words as opposed to looking directly at them and seeing their actions.

New experiences can also be observed over social media, things someone, especially the younger millennial population, may not be exposed to in person yet. "Youth who are exposed to social media content depicting risky behaviors (ie, alcohol and other substance use) may be more likely to engage in these behaviors themselves. Content related to suicide and self-injury may also be readily available online, potentially increasing suicide risk among youth who are already vulnerable." (Nesi, J. 2020). What is seen over the internet and especially social media profiles, cannot always be censored, seeing an abundance of one thing can trigger a negative effect within an individual's mind? For example, if a 16-year-old is scrolling through their Instagram feed and a post appears of another individual, similar in age, drinking an alcoholic beverage, thoughts are likely to go through their mind, curiosity kicks in, and it is very easy for them to desire the want to try the beverage at a young age even though this is illegal. The same thing can go for self-harm, according to, *The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health*, from The North Carolina Medical Journal, "In a recent study of over 400 youth who were psychiatrically hospitalized due to risk of harm to self or others, a small but meaningful proportion of youth reported viewing online content that promoted suicide (14.8%) or self-injury (16.6%) during the two weeks before their admission. (Nesi, J. 2020). Social comparison can serve as a reason for these rates, as social media increases the ease of comparing oneself to another. Oftentimes people can edit themselves to reach their desired vision of themselves, creating an unrealistic depiction of one's body. People typically aim to portray themselves in the most positive light possible, making their profiles more appealing. "Studies have shown that higher levels of online social comparison are associated with depressive symptoms in youth and that appearance-specific comparisons on social media may heighten the risk for disordered eating and body image concerns." (Nesi, J. 2020). Although social media posts cannot physically force behavior

upon individuals, as discussed, it can have a strong influence on it. One's mind processes sight, and if someone sees something repeatedly, typically through a social media platform, the image will remain in their mind and can shape their thoughts. For example, continuously logging onto a site such as Instagram, and seeing petite model/influences, can take a toll on one's body image, feeling as though their body is abnormal, or too large. This creates inadequacy about one's life and/or appearance. Even knowing that social media posts are easy to manipulate, they still can affect one's mental health, causing feelings of insecurity towards oneself and/or the life they are living. Individuals tend to share their life's highlights, rarely capturing their low points that everyone experiences. This is causing many to dream of living in others' false reality, as they are only projecting the good, leaving out the bad. Aside from life experiences, appearance is easily altered through social media. This leads to body image issues, which can negatively affect one's intake of food consumption, potentially increasing the risk of an eating disorder such as bulimia and/or anorexia. As explained, one thing can quickly escalate and lead into another, stemming back from the root of social media.

Anxiety and depression are two of the most commonly known mental health conditions, and social media usage can influence both. According to *Is Social Media Screen Time Associated with Poor Adolescent Mental Health? A Time Use Diary Study*, from ScienceDirect, found "for females, increasing time spent on social media was associated with a greater number of depressive symptoms." (Barthorpe, A., Winstone, L., Mars, B., & Moran, P. (2020).

	Females			Males		
	Unadjusted β (95% CI)	Adjusted for age, income and ethnicity β (95% CI)	Additionally adjusted for previous internalising symptoms β (95% CI)	Unadjusted β (95% CI)	Adjusted for age, income and ethnicity β (95% CI)	Additionally adjusted for previous internalising symptoms β (95% CI)
Weekday social media use (Females, $n =$ 1810; Males, $n = 1458$)	0.43 (0.28 to 0.57)	0.39 (0.24 to 0.54)	0.36 (0.22 to 0.50)	0.10 (-0.11 to 0.31)	0.08 (-0.12 to 0.28)	0.10 (-0.10 to 0.30)
Weekend social media use (Females, $n =$ 1814; Males, $n = 1450$)	0.25 (0.13 to 0.37)	0.22 (0.09 to 0.35)	0.19 (0.06 to 0.32)	-0.01 (-0.22 to 0.21)	-0.02 (-0.24 to 0.20)	-0.01 (-0.23 to 0.20)

Results are weighted estimates.

(Table 1)

This data can also be seen in table one from the same source, *Is Social Media Screen Time Associated with Poor Adolescent Mental Health? A Time Use Diary Study*, from ScienceDirect.

Similarly, "Anxiety disorders are collectively the most prevalent mental health problems affecting youth." (Bry, L. J., Chou, T., Miguel, E., & Comer, J. S., 2018). There is a strong linkage between heavy social media usage and increased risk for anxiety due to it. Since the technology on social media sites is new and innovative, features on sites such as Instagram and Facebook are constantly changing. Millions of posts are posted every second on platforms, and this can intensify anxiety, from FOMO (fear of missing out). The feeling of FOMO has been around long before social media, and it creates a feeling that others are having more fun than you, and you are missing out on experiences. People tend to only post the good in their life, they tend to leave the negative, unkempt parts of life private. This stimulates the act of jealousy and a need to be better, as one tries to match another's energy. The feeling of FOMO can directly inflict anxiety and impact self-esteem, as one can easily find oneself constantly picking up the phone, checking to see what others are doing, checking for updates, and compulsively respond to

each and every alert. This can cause a distraction to what one is doing in the present, such as driving a car or being with family. As determined, these negative mental health issues, depression, anxiety, body image issues, and FOMO, are all linked to substantial social media usage.

Potential Mental Health Benefits

As social media can typically connect with negative connotations concerning mental health, that is not always the case. "The dissemination of positive messages about mental health is a key goal of organizations and individuals." (Sumner, S. A., Bowen, D. A., & Bartholow, B. 2020). Positivity and optimism are the main factors contributing to living life with low negative mental health risks. There are innovative and unique features incorporated within social media sites that encourage positive mental health. "In general, there is a range of potential benefits associated with social media use, including possibilities for humor and entertainment, identity exploration, and creative expression One of the most clearly established benefits of social media use is that of social connection, with 81% of teens reporting that social media allows them to feel more connected to their friends." (Nesi, J. 2020). Many users, especially millennials utilize social media sites to stay connected. With Instagram, one can post photos and videos to share with their friends and followers on their feed, a new story feature option is now available as one can post a quick photo or video of what they are doing at the moment. Friends and followers can be from anywhere around the world. Social media allows connections to grow and continue within being physically together.

With an increase and ease to stay connected, new opportunities can become present. Social media platforms hold endless opportunities. They are a way for people to speak out, and

potentially gain support by following accounts who share similar beliefs and/or feelings. "For example, youth identifying as LGBTQ are more likely than non-LGBTQ youth to have online friends and to identify these friends as an important source of emotional support." (Nesi, J. 2020). Gaining the ability to connect and share thoughts/feelings with others easily and effectively can aid as an essential source of emotional and/or mental support. Utilizing sites like Facebook limits the physical interactions someone can build anxiety. Similar sites can play a vital role in protecting adolescents and/or millennials from developing a mental illness. As found in, *The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health*, from The North Carolina Medical Journal, "The receipt of online social support may also play a protective role for youth with mental illness, including depression and suicidality. Indeed, one study suggests that more than half (57.0%) of psychiatrically hospitalized youth report receiving social support or encouragement on social media during the two weeks before their admission." (Nesi, J. 2020). As social media is continuing to grow and develop further, more thought and techniques are being implemented and thought out to increase the positive effects. Social media sites can promote special days and allow one to share memorable moments. There is more of a spotlight on some days, such as Facebook promoting mental health awareness day. The site does this in hopes to spread knowledge to users and inform them on topics they may not be aware of. New media is expanding, and more novel health care applications are becoming more available and accepted. Tools such as screenings, hotlines, and treatments are more commonly seen via social media. "On a larger scale, increasingly sophisticated machine learning algorithms have been developed to detect social media-based signals of mental illness, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidality. Social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram have already implemented screening and intervention procedures when users exhibit signs of

emotional distress or suicide risk." (Nesi, J. 2020). As social media sites are popular among millennials and adolescents, they become the perfect platform to evocate positivity and spread optimism through social media

Modifying Social Media Use

As proven, there are both positive and negative effects on substantial social media usage within millennials' growth throughout life. There are ways one can modify their social media usage to aid in approving their mental health. One way is to reduce time online, "A 2018 University of Pennsylvania study found that reducing social media use to 30 minutes a day resulted in a significant reduction in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep problems, and FOMO. But you don't need to cut back on your social media use that drastically to improve your mental health." (Robinson, L. 2020). The same study concluded that being more mindful of your social media use can have beneficial results on your overall mood and focus. Focus poses as another key. Many millennials mindlessly scroll through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook numerous times per hour. It is often a way to pass time when procrastinating and/or during downtime. Changing one's focus can influence one's outlook, ask oneself why you are going through social media at the moment you find yourself scrolling. Pausing for a moment and clarifying motivation for doing so may aid in filtering what is seem or influencing the use of social media. There are many activates and/or actions that can aid in filtering out unhealthy social media habits, overarchingly bettering one's mental health. It is important to find tips and tricks that work for oneself and stick with them, it can greatly influence life down the road.

Conclusion

Social media has significant effects on millennials' mental health and their growth throughout life. Social media has grown tremendously over the last 20 years and is continuing to grow. New platforms are constantly emerging, and new sites are gaining users. Like anything, there are both positive and negative situations in which social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram stand on. The majority of the millennials at this point in life are young adults, with some adolescent/teenager ages. With that being the case, millennials are the most active on these social media sites. The reasons for use vary, staying connecting, networking with others, and gathering new current information/news is of importance among social media sites. Having grown up in the boom of social media culture, watching sites evolve, and seeing the effects helps shape oneself. The opportunities affiliated with positive mental health are relevant as connections, awareness, and reliability can be promoted. Utilizing social media productively and effectively can make a large difference in one's life. It can be seen as positive offering opportunities and new ways for growth. Overusing and abusing social media platforms tend to spark an increase in poor mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, body image issues, and FOMO (fear of missing out). These conditions can all be sought within everyday life but increased social media usage has a direct correlation to higher risks of these mental health hazards. As social media sites are constantly evolving and technology becomes more and more innovative, the future of social media users and the sites themselves are difficult to be predicted. With the boom of technology recently, there are more available resources than ever before. These resources can be used to seek help if needed. The internet is an enormous space with new information being updated every second. Seeking out tips and techniques on how to modify

negative social media use is important. The times are changing and improvements in emerging research will continue to identify social media experiences.

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