

Social Media and Its Implications on Mental Health

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the relationship between social media and its impact on the mental health of young adults, ages 15-24. A wide variety of sources are examined to determine the mental health issues that stem from social media use. In addition to exploring the types of social media and their differences, this paper also takes into account the different social media habits including addiction, passive use, and active use. Understanding the negative side effects of social media helps young adults mitigate their negative experiences and become more conscious users.

Keywords: Social media, mental health, young adults, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, body dissatisfaction

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the use of social media has drastically increased among all age groups, especially young adults. It is estimated that 90% of teenagers from ages thirteen to seventeen years old are using social media, 71% of which use more than one form of social media (Lenhart, 2015; RSPH, 2017). During this same time, there has also been a dramatic increase in mental health issues among youth such as depression and anxiety. In the United States alone, there has been a 52% increase in the number of young people exhibiting symptoms of depression from 2005 to 2017 (McCrory, Best, & Maddock, 2020). The rise of both social media use and mental health issues in young adults does not appear to be a coincidence as a myriad of studies have found a link between social media use and mental health issues including depression (Seabrook, Kern, & Rickard, 2016), social anxiety (CITATION), and body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Rajamohan, Bennett, & Tedone, 2019),

Young adults, ages 15-24, fall into an age range in which their brains are not fully developed. In fact, the part of the brain that controls decision making and other cognitive abilities does not finish fully developing until the age of twenty-five (Arain, et al., 2013). This leaves the brain very vulnerable to outside influences, which can lead to many misguided decisions. In an increasingly technological world, these misguided decisions often stem from social media, especially highly visual social media (HVSM) such as Instagram and Snapchat, which can result in more permanent mental and physical damage such as depression and eating disorders (Yazdavar, et. al., 2020; McCrory, et al., 2020).

Mental health is integral facet of life because without a healthy mind, it can become difficult to perform even the simplest of daily tasks. According to the definition by the World

Health Organization (WHO), mental health is the state of well-being in which we are able to appropriately deal with the typical stressors in life, while also being fully-functioning and contributing citizens of our societies (WHO, 2018). It is important to seek out what can be damaging to mental health and develop a course of action to mitigate that damage.

Understanding that social media is one of the sources linked to the increase in mental health issues allows researchers to discover ways to lessen the effects of social media on a young adult's mental health.

The purpose of this research paper is to further explore the relationship between the use of social media among adolescents and their decline in mental health. As the concept of connecting virtually is becoming increasingly prominent in our society, there is a vast need for understanding how interacting virtually can impact one's mental health. It is understood that there are many benefits from the use of social media, including the improvements in mental health from positive engagements on social media (Rajamohan, et al., 2019), however there needs to be a more in depth understanding of the dangers that exist. Gaining knowledge on both the positives and negatives of this topic can lead to forming a well-needed understanding that will help the young adults of our society avoid the negative consequences of using social media at such a vulnerable age.

What is social media and how is it being used by young adults?

Social media is considered to be a rather broad term, as there are many platforms that fall into the category, yet greatly differ in the concepts they are based on and the way they are used. For some, social media is important for gaining knowledge and exchanging ideas with others, however for young adults, social media is crucial in developing social identities among their peers (Fabris, Marengo, Longobardi, & Settani, 2020). In fact, the feedback that is received from

peers via social media can often play a major role in the development of mental health issues, and even just ten minutes of social media use is enough to impact one's feelings (Sharma, John, & Sahu, 2020). It has been found that a vast majority of young adults are using between four and eight different platforms (Ilakkuvan, et al., 2019). In addition to the fact that young adults are using a wide range of platforms, there are many differences in the way in which each one is designed, which can greatly impact the effects each one has on the mental health of young adults.

Platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat fall into the category of highly visual social medias (McCrory, et al., 2020). HVSM platforms allow their users to distribute visual content in the form of photographs or videos and share it to thousands in a matter of minutes, typically with the goal of approval from others (McCrory, et al., 2020). Platforms such as these allow their users to heavily edit and manipulate the images they share, which can create a hyperreality (McCrory, et al., 2020). Hyperreality, as coined by Baudrillard, is the blending of reality and fiction have been blended together, making it difficult to tell the difference between the two (McCrory, et al., 2020). It is arguable that the increasing popularity of HVSM could be to blame for mental health issues in young adults such as anxiety and body dissatisfaction, among others (Marengo, 2018).

On the other hand, there are other kinds of platforms, such as Twitter, and arguably Facebook, that are primarily based on the sharing of words and facilitating minor conversations based on shared interests (Ilakkuvan, et al., 2019). Although these platforms do not share images that could potentially be manipulated, they do allow for the connection with peers that could be equally as damaging as HVSM. Social medias that are more word-heavy than content-heavy are more likely at fault for the issues of social anxiety and depression, especially in vulnerable young adults.

Putting the differences of the platforms aside for the moment, there are two distinct ways in which just about every platform is being used, active and passive. Active social media use involves actual interaction with others, be it via private messaging, liking, or commenting, whereas passive social media use is the act of scrolling without engaging (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). These two ways of using social media can make all the difference when it comes to how the platform impacts the individual. It appears that of the two types, passive use can be more damaging as the mind-numbing exposure has been linked to higher risk of depression (Escobar-Viera, et al., 2018).

In addition to the differences in the way social media platforms are used, it is important to include that the concept of social media addiction, which is more commonly referred to as problematic or pathological social media use, exists with an estimated 5% of young adults being affected by it (RSPH, 2017). Essentially, this term is referring to a dependency that some have developed on their social medias, individuals will often feel distressed if they are not allowed to use social media for a period of time (Sharma, et al., 2020), often resulting in the lack of ability to control how often they use various platforms (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Social media has become an increasingly popular place for young adults to build their identities and their relationships with their peers, which are two very important things at this point in their lives (RSPH, 2017). With the need to fit in with peers being such a prominent factor in the lives of young adults, problematic social media use becomes even more prevalent as they try to fit in both online and in-person (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Fabris, et al., 2020).

Mental Health Issues

Depression

Depression is a very serious mental illness that can severely damage quality of life, and some symptoms of it can be seen through feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fatigue or loss of energy, and even suicidal ideations, plans, or attempts (Mahli & Mann, 2018). According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), depression is among the most common mental disorders in the United States, and can be caused by a number of things, including environmental factors (NIMH, 2021). Being that it is one of the most common mental health disorders, it comes as no surprise that the percent of young adults that have reported experiencing depressive symptoms or episodes are 13%, a number which has increased dramatically from the year 2007 to 2017 (Geiger & Davis, 2019).

Unfortunately, the use of social media has not affected this mental illness in a positive manner, as a number of studies have found links between greater social media usage and higher risk of depression (Seabrook, et al., 2016). A number of things are affecting this correlation including how often social media is being used, and in what manner, as well as the experiences that are had while using the platform.

The frequency of social media use, as well as the purpose for using it plays a pretty big role in the association between depression and social media. Research studies have found that the more platforms one is using, the greater chance they have of experiencing depressive symptoms (Escobar-Viera, et al., 2018). In addition to the number of platforms being used, the way they are being used can also be detrimental. Passive use of social media is shown to worsen the experience of depressive symptoms, and the more passively one uses the platforms, the more likely they are to increase the in symptoms of depression by an estimated 33% (Escobar-Viera, et

al., 2018). In addition, if the desired experience on social media is not met, it could contribute to a higher rate of depressive symptoms (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). For instance, if someone goes onto their social media with the hope of receiving emotional support, and they do not receive that, which they especially won't if they are passively scrolling, they are more at risk to experience depressive symptoms (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Escobar-Viera, et al., 2018).

Bullying is a huge problem among young adults, and with the increasing use of technology, there has been an increase in cyber bullying as well. Cyber bullying is the display of aggressive behaviors over a technological device such as a phone or a computer (Miller, 2010). The frequency of cyber bullying has increased dramatically across social media platforms that young adults use, with an estimated 7 out of 10 youths have reported experiencing some form of cyberbullying (RSPH, 2017). Negative interactions on social media, such as cyberbullying have been associated with higher risk depression because individuals feel less supported as a result of rejection from their peers and they may also experience greater feelings of isolation and sadness (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

Constantly being exposed to images of others, especially edited images that do not portray reality, can be damaging to one's self-esteem which can lead to depressive symptoms (Marengo, Longobardi, & Fabris, 2018). The concept of upward social comparison, which occurs when comparing oneself to someone they believe is superior to them (Wang, Wang, Gaskin, & Hawk, 2017), holds a great influence over the relationship between social media and depression (Seabrook, et al., 2016). Upward social comparisons tend to generate more negative feelings overall, which can impact one's self-esteem resulting in poorer psychological well-being, and potentially depression (Wang, et al., 2017). Although upward social comparison via social media affects the risk of depression in young adults, it appears that the individuals that are

the most likely to engage in upward social comparison are those that suffer from social anxiety (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

Social Anxiety

In addition to experiencing depressive symptoms, social media has also resulted in a spike in social anxiety in young adults. Social anxiety, previously referred to as social phobia, is a mental health disorder in which people feel fearful or anxious when it comes to social situations, and they often worry if their actions will be evaluated poorly by their peers (NIMH, 2021). Social anxiety can be especially debilitating as individuals that suffer from it can become easily overwhelmed and as a result their ability to function normally is greatly damaged (RSPH, 2017).

The frequency and type of social media use also seems to factor into levels of social anxiety, as more frequent and passive uses of social media were linked to higher levels of social anxiety (Seabrook, et al., 2016). Being that social media creates an environment that almost welcomes social comparison, it makes passive use even more detrimental to social anxiety as this type of use makes people feel lonelier and ultimately heightens social anxiety (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). When young adults are spending too much time online, they are limiting their opportunity to create deep and meaningful relationships offline, which may also result in an increase of social anxiety when having in-person interactions with peers (Rajamohan, 2019). In addition, the number of social medias that you are using at one given time, for instance changing back and forth between Snapchat and Instagram, has caused increases in social anxiety (RSPH, 2017).

For young adults, the societal pressure to use social media can sometimes generate a great deal of social anxiety around having the perfect profile. To some degree, popularity among

young adults is measured by social media (Fabris, et al., 2021), which means the number of likes, comments, and followers that you have is a determinant of how well you fit in. As previously mentioned, this pressure can lead to increased use of social media to compensate for the lack strong or perfect social skills in-person (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Unfortunately, there is a strong chance that the opposite might occur, and instead of having a positive experience with peers on social media, they might have a negative one in which the photo they posted may not have received “enough” likes. In this case, the individual is likely to feel worse, and even more socially isolated than they did in the first place (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

It has been found that individuals with pre-existing social media are likely to use social media more frequently than those that do not, in an attempt to create the relationships that they otherwise are unable to create in-person due to their crippling anxiety (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). However, the pressure to fit in and be evaluated by peers in a positive manner still exists online, and not receiving this desired outcome, be it through likes or comments, could potentially worsen the existing social anxiety (Fabris, et al., 2021). Comparison via social media has been shown to worsen social anxiety, but it is arguable that body image and dissatisfaction are greatly impacted by it as well.

Body Dissatisfaction

Another major mental health issue existing in young adults that stems from social media is body dissatisfaction. Our ideals for body image come from our family, friends, and the media (Jiosta, et al., 2021), and social media just so happens to encompass all three of those. Body image, which is the thoughts and emotions one has about their body (Jiosta, et al., 2021), is a very important part of a young adult's life. While body image is important to both women and men, it appears that young women are more at risk to develop negative thoughts about their

bodies as modern culture reinforces that thinness is imperative for beauty and perfection (Rajamohan, et al., 2019; Marengo, et al., 2018). This development of negative feelings towards one's body can actually lead to many other issues such as eating disorders and can also be linked to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Marengo, et al., 2018).

Although there is not a great deal of research that focuses on the length of time spent on social media and its effect on body image, there is a great deal on the type of social media. As can be expected, HVSM has a greater impact on the body image of young adults as these platforms consist of heavily manipulated photos (McCrory, et al., 2020). However, many social media platforms that are not as saturated in visuals, such as Twitter, could definitely still contribute to the negative body image, they are just less likely to as they are primarily word-based platforms.

The easy manipulation of photos greatly contributes to the rise in body dissatisfaction, and HVSM platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, are reported to have the worse affects (Marengo, et al., 2018). A study conducted in 2014 estimated that about 50% of people are editing their photos before posting to their social medias (The Renfrew Center, 2014). This statistic means roughly every other image you see on Instagram is likely edited in one way or another. With an environment full of unrealistic and edits images, it is nearly impossible for young adults to develop healthy attitudes toward their bodies.

The manipulation of photos can create a hyperreality in which it becomes difficult for young adults to tell the difference between a raw photo of someone and their edited one (McCrory, et al., 2020). Upward social comparison only worsens the effects of social media on body image as young adults view people that they idolize and view as superior to themselves, in their most perfect state (Marengo, et al., 2018). For instance, a young adult goes on Instagram,

and sees a Victoria Secret model that they look up to showing off their latest photo shoot, one in which is very edited and portrays a body image that is unachievable. That individual is likely to make mental note of the image of “perfection” and hold themselves to that standard of body image. Social media fosters unrealistic body image ideals, often stemming from comparison of oneself to manipulated photos, that could ultimately lead to the development of eating disorders (Jiosta, et al., 2021).

The Positives

While there is plenty of arguments that support the link between social media and mental health issues in young adults, there are also some benefits. Social media platforms provide a space for young adults to connect in communities with their friends, family members, and even celebrities if they choose to do so (Seabrook, et al., 2016). Some studies suggest that these connections actually provide relief to some of the mental health issues discussed such as depression and social anxiety (Seabrook, et al., 2016; Rajamohan, et al., 2019). For instance, individuals with social anxiety seem to prefer communicating with peers via social media as it alleviates some of the stress related to social cues and allows them a little more control of the communication (Seabrook, et al., 2016; O’Day & Heimberg, 2021). In addition,

This positive side of social media became even more apparent in the year 2020, as the world faced the global pandemic, COVID-19, and was forced into lockdown limiting face-to-face contact with others. COVID-19 forced people to rely on internet services to learn and work from home. As a result of the lockdowns, people were craving social connection and in typical circumstances, people connect via common experiences (Molla, 2021), and this pandemic was a shared experience for the entire world. During the pandemic, people reported increasing their use of social media to communicate with those that do not live in their household by 35% (Nguyen,

et al., 2020). This increased use made people feel more connected with their peers and family members during an especially difficult time.

Recommendations

While there exists a great deal of research that explores the relationship between social media and the mental health of young adults, social media is constantly evolving so the need for continued research is increasingly necessary. In the meantime, it is important that young adults educate themselves on the potential negative side effects of social media, including the dangers of passive use (Escobar-Viera, et al., 2018). Knowing the difference between passive use and active use will enable young adults to decrease the amount of time spent passively using and increase the active use. In addition, since using social media very frequently provides more opportunity for comparing oneself to others (Marengo, et al., 2018), which in turn could lead to a number of mental health issues, decreasing the amount of time spent on social should have the opposite effect.

Conclusion

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, have become increasingly popular among young adults. Social media provides an environment for them to connect and form relationships with their peers (Rajamahon, et al., 2019), even when they are not seeing them in person. During young adulthood, the brain is still developing, making these years some of the most formative, and feeling connected and a sense of belonging amongst peers is crucial to that development (Arain, et al., 2013).

The increased use of social media, along with its importance in fitting in as a young adult, has been linked to a number of mental health issues. Firstly, social media has been linked to lowering self-esteem and self-confidence which can result in depressive symptoms (Marengo, et

al., 2018) and body dissatisfaction (Jiosta, et al., 2021). Further, the upward social comparison commonly occurs during social media use, especially passive social media use, which can also lead to body dissatisfaction as well an increase in social anxiety (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

With today's society becoming increasing technological, it is imperative that we study and understand the potential negatives of this technology. Understanding the downsides of things like social media, allows us to become more conscious users, and it frees us from the mental health issues we are seeing today. Further research will increase societies knowledge on the dangers of social media and will allow for the mitigation of these negative side effects.

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