

Social Media and its Effects on Society

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**What is social media?**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, social media is defined as, “forms of electronic communication, such as websites for social networking and microblogging, through which users create communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos” (Merriam-Webster). Due to social media’s virtually endless possibilities, it is a rather intense communication tool in which society has set standards for. Social media now serves as a mask for the majority of individuals that regularly use these platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, Pinterest, and TikTok. There are about 3.8 billion social media users worldwide that utilize these platforms daily (Clement, 2020). These individuals ultimately end up impersonating the individual they want to be, rather than accurately portraying who they actually are. Users gravitate towards posting their lives in a “highlight reel” fashion; the best moments are posted but may lack the authenticity that make them “real” or untouched. Due to these posts being “highlight reels”, the reality and circumstances behind situations are typically not portrayed for all to see when a post is created. Though these high points in one’s life may seem fascinating, the lack of authenticity explains why daily struggles are not publicized. Though these struggles may be personal information that the user does not want to publicly share, individual’s timelines then become a space for false illustrations of their lifestyle. In turn, the authentic true self is not known through the amount of ‘friends’ or ‘likes’ that appear on each profile.

**Social Media and Culture Change**

Since Facebook was publicly introduced in February of 2012, there has been a dramatic culture change that can be seen around the world (Encyclopædia Britannica). A culture change occurs through variations within sociopolitical trends, economic trends, and technological

advancements. A dramatic cultural shift was to be expected with a major technological advancement like social media. Since the introduction of major social media platforms in 2012 and smartphone technology a few years prior, there has also been a dramatic decrease in the psychological well-being amongst American adolescents due to the lack of authenticity, constant comparisons of different economic classes, and ‘doom scrolling’.

Psychological well-being includes concepts such as happiness, life-satisfaction, domain satisfaction, self-esteem, and self-satisfaction (Twenge & Martin, 2018). Though this decrease in psychological well-being can be accredited to the introduction of social media, it was almost unavoidable due to the curious mind of the human body and the overwhelming desire to fit in with the trends set within and amongst the rest of society. For adolescents, this smart technology and social media now holds a very prominent presence within the education systems as well. These technological advancements have been proven to increase enrichment due to them being highly interactive, efficient, and almost automatic, but they are also known to “wear and tear” on a developing brain (Twenge & Martin, 2018). Considering that education is a mandatory aspect of an adolescent’s life, it is impossible to completely shield their life from these advancements. Shielding adolescents from these advancements may cause bingeing later in life, however like most things in life, things should be done in moderation.

### **Adolescence and Mental Health**

Adolescence is a crucial time period for development and identity. According to the article *Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing?*, adolescence is defined as, “a significant period of psychological, biological and social change for young people as they adjust to their emergent needs and develop new skills, responsibilities and intimate relationships” (O’Reilly et. all, 2018). This crucial time period is a valuable one for development. This time

allows for an increased amount of freedom and autonomy for teenagers, which can ultimately lead to them finding their identity and role within society and their local environment. This challenging time period can be difficult for adolescents to navigate through, especially if they are doing it solo. In addition to this challenging time, most mental health diagnoses tend to start presenting themselves throughout the adolescence phase as well, which sometimes has a profound impact on autonomy. Decisions may be made with cloudy judgement, but clarity may follow shortly after when the consequences have already been put in place.

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health disorders that are diagnosed amongst the adolescent population. Depression is a disorder that can be characterized by depressed moods that are persistent or the general loss of interest in participating in activities (Mayo Clinic, 2018). This persistent depressed mood causes a significant impairment within the individual's daily life. Anxiety occasionally accompanies a diagnosis of depression. Anxiety is a mental health disorder that is characterized by consistent feelings of worry, anxiety, or fear (Mayo Clinic, 2017). These feelings become so overwhelming that they also significantly interfere with the individual's daily life.

### **How does social media affect adolescents?**

After a thematic analysis was conducted, results showed that social media serves as a severe threat to the mental health and well-being of adolescents as they continue to develop. Social media has been proven to cause multiple different mood disorders within some adolescents, served as a rather ideal platform for cyberbullying, and facilitated an addictive behavior that can be easily overlooked and ignored if it is not observed on a daily basis (O'Reilly et. al, 2018).

If an adolescent experiences any form of cyberbullying, this greatly increases their chance of developing a diagnosis of anxiety and depression. Cyberbullying is the use of any form of digital media, such as social media, to post messages that appear threatening, pictures that cause embarrassment, and rumors that ultimately end up causing harm to others (O'Reilly et. al., 2018). Though this does occur through social media commonly, it is difficult for a teen to completely remove themselves from the internet platforms due to a profound feeling of "FoMo". FoMo is an acronym that is commonly used amongst the younger generations; this acronym stands for "fear of missing out". This fear of missing something drives an individual self-consciously to continuously check their social media feed for updates their 'friends' posts or updates from the top celebrities.

With the freedom and autonomy that comes with adolescence, comes great responsibility for each individual. Like all new elements in life, there is a learning curve that occurs when a new subject or skill is introduced. This learning curve can be skewed one way or another based off the specific situations an individual is presented with or acts upon. Balance and time management are two life-concepts that adolescents commonly struggle with. Both of these concepts contribute to the overuse and addictive behavior that social media tends to facilitate. Every time an individual checks their feed and refreshes it, a new post or update pops up occasionally. Though this does not happen each time the individual refreshes, there is an instant release of serotonin when something does appear (O'Reilly et. al., 2018). This is what contributes to the addictive manner of social media.

However, this release of serotonin does not overcompensate for the damage that tends to occur within the time frame of each update. Within this time frame, it is not uncommon for individuals to be exposed to uncensored posts, phrases, or graphics that can easily be argued and

deemed inappropriate for their age group. Specifically, online pornography is readily accessible and can be viewed by those who are not of age. Body advertisement can also be seen on these platforms. Though it may be posted with the intention of being considered as a “movement” or as “boosting confidence”, it may still be seen as provocative and even dangerous for individuals who possess a less mature mind, body, and spirit. Among this, peer-to-peer behavior can be seen as abusive in a sexually provocative fashion. Curiosity may then drive the individual to investigate further into situations like those presented whether it is viewing profiles that were involved or also engaging in that behavior later on. Privacy violations also commonly occur on these social platforms. Since not every profile is censored or private, it is easy for others around the world to impersonate other individuals or users. This is then called catfishing and is the cause of many internet-driven felonies (O’Reilly et. al., 2018).

### **Constant Internet Use**

An overuse of the internet leads to constant stimulation within the brain, leaving what was just observed on the forefront of thoughts within the brain. With these thoughts slowly being processed in an in-depth manner, it leads to comparisons within lifestyles and uncertainty. This constant stimulation from high internet use, or total overuse, leads to a phenomenon known as social media fatigue. Social media fatigue is defined as “a situation whereby social media users suffer from mental exhaustion after experiencing various technological, informative and communicative overloads through their participation and interactions on the different online and social media platforms” (Dhir & Yossatarn, 2018). With this knowledge, it is safe to infer that social media fatigue within adolescents may lead to an early, but sudden onset, of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression from technological, informative, and communicative overloads.

### **Beyond Adolescence**

Though it is common for adolescents to experience the consequences of social media, these consequences are not strictly limited to that age group. It has been observed that mature adults also experience social media fatigue and social media driven anxiety and depression. This phenomenon has been named 'Facebook depression' (Blease, 2015). Like social media fatigue, Facebook depression also occurs from the overstimulation of social media sites, like Facebook. Individual's self-worth is suddenly measured by how many 'friends' they have or how many 'likes' they get on each post. If it is not meeting the standards society set within social media platforms, the post may be deleted and become overexamined- seeing every imperfect aspect of it. Constant comparisons are also once again made regarding lifestyles and this information is stored in the human brain, which may reach a point that is overwhelming and ultimately weigh on a person's sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and self-worth.

### **Medical Attention for Consequences Induced by Social Media**

As stated prior, social media fatigue may lead to depression and anxiety. There comes a point when the anxiety and depression interferes with daily living activities. When it reaches this point, it is imperative for individuals to seek out medical attention before these mental health disorders progress and become debilitating. These medical interventions may be nonpharmacological or pharmacological. Not every regimen works for everyone, so it is important for each individual to work with a medical professional to find what works for them.

Nonpharmacological interventions are first utilized. These interventions may be highly beneficial for some individuals and may be able to manage their feelings, signs, and symptoms with these tactics. For example, breathing techniques may be utilized. Encouraging someone to center themselves through their breathing allows for them to slow their heartbeat and separate

themselves from the added stress they may feel or be able to manage it comfortably. An exercise regimen may also be helpful that is accompanied by proper nutrition. This fuels the body with the proper nutrients and releases chemicals in the brain that override these depressed feelings. These actions also contribute to the over-arching concept of self-care, but self-care as a whole should be taken into consideration and practiced regularly. Consistent meetings with a counselor may also be needed. The counselor can then provide their professional skills to aid the individual back to a stable mindset and lifestyle.

Pharmacological interventions may also be utilized if these nonpharmacological interventions are unsuccessful. Medication is a great tool that helps stabilize an individual's mood swings and overwhelming feelings. However, unpleasant side effects tend to occur with these medications so close monitoring has to occur throughout treatment. Medication for mental health disorders is not always affordable for individuals depending on the insurance company utilized or variations of insurance plans that one may possess. This then leads to an obvious disadvantage for those individuals of a lower social and economic class.

### **Social Media and Social Class**

When looking at the domestic statistics of users on social media, it showed that individuals of low-income classes are more likely to use social media than those who have a higher income. Though the reasoning cannot be solidified, psychologists believe that this is due to the lower self-esteem and self-efficacy that those in a lower social class possess (Yates, 2018). This then leads to the active search for validation and approval from others. High-income individuals do not tend to post for approval of others, but rather to flaunt and share their choices or personal experiences that would be exotic to others.

Low-income individuals actively participating on social media platforms ultimately leads to a domino effect if individuals are not utilizing these platforms in moderation. As stated earlier, an increase in the usage of social media allows for constant stimulation and comparison. This constant stimulation and comparison often leads to social media fatigue when individuals start doubting their self-worth. With this fatigue, mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression start to present themselves. When these feelings become debilitating and interferes with daily living, medical attention is sought out, however those who are low-income may not have access to these resources and ultimately stay in a vicious battle with mental illness.

Mental illness in the lower social class has been deemed one of the self-reinforcing contributors that are associated with the cycle of poverty as a whole (Grohol, 2019). Those who are poor often do not become poor by choice; tough circumstances may present themselves through a job loss, prior health concerns, or inherited poverty. For adolescents specifically, battling a mental illness solo effects educational performance. A less than average academic performance is also a contributor to the cycle of poverty. Living in poverty in general already has predisposing factors for a mental illness to develop, so social media is no help to this cause. Poor nutrition, increased stress, and harmful living arrangements are just three concepts of living that contribute to these predisposing factors.

A decrease in wealth allows for a much tighter budget when grocery shopping. The more nutritional choices that are rich in vitamins, proteins, and other nutrients needed for a healthy body, are more expensive than foods that are processed. Though these processed foods are cheaper, they have limited nutrients needed to nourish the body, or lack any sort of nutritional value at all. Increased stress due to the lack of funds to pay bills or afford resources also puts unwanted strain on the human body. Various cardiac diseases may present because of this but

may go untreated because of the lack of funding from insurance once again. Due to the lack of personal funds as well, the individuals may have only have enough funding to live in a neighborhood that possess high violence statistics and poor living conditions. Areas of high violence pose a risk for individuals to have an increased exposure to violence. This violence may lead to emotional trauma which also leads to many mental health disorders. The increased exposure to violence can also pose a risk for individuals to increase their personal violence to protect themselves or make themselves present in their neighborhood. Many of low-income these neighborhoods are also considered food deserts. Food deserts are areas where food may not be readily available due to geographical placement or lack of public transportation to grocery stores.

As stated earlier, individuals of a higher social class are less likely to use social media in general but are especially less likely to seek approval of others for their daily living, but instead searches for affirmation when traveling. Those of a higher class are more likely to post about their trips to exotic places than anything else (Sedera & Loguge, 2017). Prior to traveling, many individuals post their plans for family and friends to see and seek the affirmations posted in response. Once the affirmation is gained, the cycle repeats and becomes a toxic distraction from the present moment.

### **Benefits of Social Media Cessation**

Researchers developed a quantitative exploration of the benefits of quitting social media and the results were profound. Every cessation comes with positive and negative aspects, however the positive outcomes for social media cessation greatly outweighs the negative outcomes. Those who participated in social media cessation reported that they now possess enhanced relationships with those who were close with them. (Pennington) This was accredited to the increase in face-to-face contact and genuine interactions. These genuine interactions lead

to a deeper, more intimate connection that is far more valuable. On the flip side, the individuals did lose or weaken relationships that were relatively minimal, but only maintained through social media.

An increase in proficiency of communication skills was also reported from individuals. This increase in communication skills had a large role in deepening the connections that were already formed between individuals. Good communication skills in general are important all throughout life in many aspects but are especially important when communicating a professional manner. Greater communication skills may also have a positive correlation with self-efficacy that allows individuals to gain confidence within the professional field. Face-to-face interaction with others can only increase an individual's capability of holding and facilitating a conversation.

After surveying the individuals with questions regarding their self-esteem, there was a dramatic positive increase in self-esteem when comparing their answers prior to social media cessation. Many of the participants contributed their improvement in self-esteem to the cessation of comparisons that were constantly being made when browsing through their social media feeds on a daily basis. Upon questioning about these comparisons, the participants reported that they were comparing themselves and their accomplishments to individuals who they had weak-tie relationships with or with influencers. Since many of the weak-tie relationships were lost when social media cessation was facilitated, this allotted for the improvement in self-esteem which is arguably much more beneficial than the weak-tie relationships were to the individual to begin with.

### **Conflicts and Barriers of Social Media Cessation**

Despite the detrimental effects that social media may have on adolescents, there are positive aspects to these platforms. Many adolescents find themselves in a community on social media, such as in a fan base for their favorite athletic teams or supporting their favorite celebrities. These connections with others and virtual friendships are formed over common interests. Social media also presents an opportunity to rekindle old friendships that may have been lost, specifically for adolescents who have a transient life (O'Reilly, 2019). Military brats, adolescents in foster care, or teens who had to relocate for another reason, can still stay connected with those that they formed strong bonds with.

Some teens also view social media as an outlet for stress. It provides them with one thing to focus on at a time. This aids the teen to distract themselves from stressors in their daily life. One teen went as far as saying that he is "relaxed" while watching YouTube videos (O'Reilly, 2019). Taking away this outlet, or limiting it, may cause some individuals to feel even more stressed and uncertain how to cope.

Though the easy solution and most direct route to accomplishing and experiencing these benefits of social media cessation would be for adolescents to delete social media entirely, it is relatively impractical because of the circumstance that society is experiencing today. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has increased social isolation dramatically due to local, state, and national quarantines mandated by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This has left social media as the most convenient and most used form of communication with others as society has been physically distant. Though physical distance is necessary to slow the spread of the coronavirus, it is unhealthy and detrimental to remain socially distant during this as well.

It is part of human nature to socialize and continue to build and strengthen relationships with those that individuals interact with daily. However, with this pandemic, many schools have reverted to remote schooling through online communication. Without in-person classes, adolescents do not have the opportunity to socialize in person with their peers. So, in this case, social media is indeed the main form of communication that is maintaining even the strongest relationships currently.

Quarantine has also caused a lack of activities for individuals to attend and participate in. For school age individuals specifically, this has caused a sudden halt of extracurricular activities that are otherwise enriching for students. Since this has suddenly allotted for a dramatic increase in free time among society, specifically adolescents, this has allowed for 'doom scrolling' to continuously occur. This act of doom scrolling allows for adolescents to get into the depths of their timeline and allow for the algorithm behind these apps to create a perfectly constructed timeline specific to each person. This perfectly constructed timeline feeds the addictive behavior of social media and makes it difficult to close the app when the individual continues to gain subconscious satisfaction with posts that spark interest.

Due to the isolation as well and lack of interaction with others, it increases the feeling of FoMo for adolescents. Without constant interaction with their peers throughout the day, it may feel like their peers may be accomplishing the next trendy thing without them knowing. This also leads to adolescents checking their peers' profiles for anything that may catch their eye or seem interesting during quarantine.

For a detox of social media to truly be effective, it must be longer than three months in order to truly experience the benefits of social media cessation. Three months is a generous amount of time which allows for a lot of time for something to happen. Three months is also a

very long amount of time for limited outside communication through quarantine which may also lead to anxiety and depression, which defeats the purpose of social media cessation.

### **Resolution**

Fixing this problem among adolescents may be relatively impossible at this point in time, but there is the overarching possibility of limiting feelings of anxiety and depression through simple acts that all add up in the end. As stated earlier, it is best for everything to be done in moderation. For example, adolescents may benefit from setting time limits on each social media app or for screen time in general. Apple initiated a setting on their devices that allows for each user to set time limits on each app that ranges from 1 minute of usage each day to the entire day. This allows for the individual to decide how much time they would like to dedicate out of their day to scroll through or utilize each application. Time limits will also inhibit the act of ‘doom scrolling’ and disengage the user from doing so if the time limit is reached during the act. Instead of spending a countless number of hours scrolling aimlessly, setting a time limit will encourage the individual to look at what they need to look at in the news, or want to look at on other profiles, and close the app to “save their time” for something else, or for casual scrolling later in the day if that is what they desire. Though this casual scrolling should not take up more time than necessary. Apple also has a setting on products that allows for “downtime”. This downtime entails limited usage of all apps of choice and is encouraged to be used as a tool for before bedtime. This allows the mind to relax and limit stimulation before bed, which will allow for better sleep.

For those who do not acquire any Apple products, individuals can consciously monitor their screen time and hold themselves accountable for their decisions to use their phone throughout the day. If a setback does occur for any individual, whether they have an Apple

product or not, it is important to keep trying to obtain the goal of social media cessation. Not every path to a goal is straight, so there will be days where setbacks to occur.

A social media detox may also be beneficial for adolescents. This concept can be compared to a concept such as intermittent fasting. Maybe someone does not use their phone within work or school hours to remain focused but can use their phone during their leisure time that is not during that time frame. A detox like this allows for social media to be out of sight and out of mind. It serves as a refresher and allows for the mind to rejuvenate and find stimulants of happiness and productivity elsewhere.

For the determined adolescents, it is possible and certainly still an option to limit social media completely and delete their profiles or apps. Though if that is a choice that is being considered, it is important to also seek out other forms of social interaction whether it is through face-to-face interaction, FaceTime or Zoom, text messaging, or traditional phone calls.

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