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Hashtag Suicide: Social Media Correlates to American Adolescent Suicide Deaths

Introduction:

As the second leading cause of death for young adults, suicide rates are on the rise in the United States and strike many as a cause for concern. With the ever-increasing amount of social media present in today's society – especially among the young adult population, there are correlations between the negative aspects of social media and the overall well-being and mental health decline of U.S. adolescents. However, the discrepancy is that many teenagers use social media as a coping mechanism or as a means to seek support from their community, potentially through an anonymous state. Yet, the link between social media and youth suicidal tendencies has been connected to negative social media usage and the depressive or harmful symptoms that result from using media for destructive purposes. Although social media can be used for both beneficial and destructive means, the increase in suicide rates of U.S. adolescents suggests a correlation between harmful social media usage and despondency in youth mental health. Potential risk factors that lead to deliberate-self harm (DSH) in adolescents are the heavy usage of social media, detrimental uses of media platforms, cyberbullying experiences, or exposure to violence and self-harm. Nevertheless, valuable connections can overcome the damaging media through the use of online platforms for social support, community outreach, and education or awareness within these platforms.

Background on Suicide Rates:

In the U.S., suicide is the second leading cause of death within the age group of ten to thirty-four (Biernesser et al. 2) and the cause of death among eighteen percent of fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds (Kim et al. 251). Similarly, “For teens in high school in the United States, the prevalence of suicide ideation is 17.2%” (Kim et al. 251), and for middle school students, suicides exceeded the deaths due to motor vehicle collisions (Kim et al. 251). With these shocking mortality rates, there is both a national and global need to address these concerns with the imperative to protect and safeguard future populations of young adults. In 2019 Rosemary Sedgwick and her research team reported that “Violent methods are associated with increased risk of suicide” (Sedgwick et al. 7), implying that an exposure to violence, suicide, self-harm, or aggressive actions can lead to increased rates of suicide and a desire to harm oneself or others. Other research suggests that suicidal tendencies can come from social interactions and how often one engages in acts of emotional connectedness and communication with others. The “interpersonal theory of suicide proposes that the desire for suicide results from the combination of two interpersonal risk factors: thwarted belongingness (i.e. social disconnection/alienation, loneliness) and perceived burdensomeness (i.e. feeling as though one is a burden on others)” (Twenge et al. 3). This theory ultimately explains the aspects of a person’s life that are distorted when suffering from suicidal symptoms, which can lead to them withdrawing from social environments, having mood swings, feeling hopeless, and initiating self-destructive activities. In addition, knowing the common characteristics of people suffering from suicide can aid in surmounting this worldwide problem.

Suicide and severe depression are major public health concerns among the high school and collegiate age group. In 2018, it was reported by Sean D. Young and Renee Garrett that “Approximately 15% of college undergraduates experience a depressive disorder, and suicide is a leading cause of death for university students in the United States” (Young and Garrett 2). Also, “The percentage of students with severe psychological issues seeking help at university centers increased from 16% in 2000 to 44% in 2010” (Young and Garrett 2), which shows that monitoring student psychological health and well-being is a top priority for all high schools and colleges to take action to prevent future suicidal occurrences. Having an increased awareness of youth suicide rates and overall suicidal tendencies can guide communities to collectively provide support and protection for adolescents suffering from mental health afflictions to effectively lower the rates of suicide and actions of deliberate self-harm.

Background on Social Media:

The level of mental health issues among U.S. teens and young adults began to rise in the early part of 2010, along with the increased use of social media beginning in the early 2000s (Twenge 2). Suicidal incidents were magnified after 2012, in which depression, suicide, self-harm, and unhappiness resulted in more adolescents feeling a decline in life satisfaction that correlated to the heightened use of smartphones and digital media (Twenge 2). Alongside this trend, “smartphone ownership exceeded 50% by the end of 2012 and reached 81% by 2018” (Twenge 4), and “daily use of social media increased among teens, from about 50% to more than 80%” (Twenge 4-5), which leads researchers to study how the abrupt increase in mental health issues may be connected to the rise of social media within the last decade. Many studies have shown that suicide risk stems from being bullied by others both in school and online.

Cyberbullying is “defined as intentional and repeated harming behavior targeting another individual (victim) inflicted through the use of using electronic means such as computers, mobile phones, and other electronic devices” (Kim et al. 251), which is becoming more evident in adolescent populations through the advanced use of technology and media platforms.

Cyberbullying is an important factor of teen suicide rates because it is difficult to escape and can affect students through the use of anonymous profiles. This allows the bully to hide behind a screen and inflict harm on others, possibly due to the mental distress that he or she is feeling themselves. Therefore, social media can have an impact on both the perpetrator and the victim due to the symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, isolation, and rejection from peers that leads to these harmful outcomes.

Although social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube, have been increasingly advertised to the young adult population to enhance social interaction, friendship experiences, forming identities, and escaping from difficult realities, some aspects of social media may be detrimental to one’s behavior, mental health, and social identification. In a 2011 report by the American Academy of Pediatrics, they observed “Facebook Depression” developing in youth populations by using social media for extensive time periods (Berryman et al. 308). Another social media phenomenon is “vaguebooking,” which “refers to social media posts that contain little actual and clear information, but are worded in such a way as to solicit attention and concern from readers” (Berryman et al. 308). Researchers say that vaguebooking may be used as a cry for help for anonymous people to receive concern from others in their community or friend group. In addition, vaguebooking may be seen as a warning sign for those experiencing mental distress or social anxiety and depression.

Another cause for suicidal risk in young adults on social media can come from the exposure to violence or graphic content that may be in the form of self-harm or self-destructive behaviors. The study by Amanda Marchant and her research team shows that “self-harm websites may normalize and reinforce self-harm” (Marchant et al. 7), which is extremely detrimental to the minds and behaviors of teenagers facing mental health problems, identity crises, and vulnerability stages. Vulnerable youths may identify as similar to those that they view on their screens and this may “heighten differential identification, conveying subsequent increased risk of identification and suicidal behaviors” (Swedo et al. 314). Differential identification is when teenage viewers see a celebrity or model on social media that is similar in age, sex, and other characteristics, and they relate to them on a personal level, which can lead them to imitate their actions (Swedo et al. 314). These actions can lead to self-harm or suicide, which can promote suicide clusters that incite major concerns in various communities. Suicide clusters are defined as “nonrandom increases in suicide (or suicidal behaviors) occurring in close temporal or geographic proximity” (Swedo et al. 309). Even though suicide clusters are complex and not fully understood, the contagion of suicidal tendencies may arise through instances where one’s suicidal behavior triggers another person’s suicide, which may be common in the lives of depressed teenagers. “Evidence suggests that knowledge of peers’ suicidal behaviors increases youths’ risk of subsequent suicidal behaviors” (Swedo et al. 309), which can become a central risk factor for a whole population of adolescents. This notion can explain the impact of how social media can negatively affect the mind of a young adult through viewing graphic or violent content and how they may be inclined to follow the actions of others, even if they result in injury or death.

Although it has been established that social media can lead to detrimental outcomes for the population of U.S. adolescents, these events can differ between male and female genders due to how negative media can impact them. It is reported that “15% of girls and 26% of boys” displayed self-harm behaviors after social media influenced them (Marchant et al. 6). Both male and female students who seriously considered suicide were “more likely to engage in frequent computer/video game use compared with students who did not have these forms of suicide ideations” (Rostad et al. 2289), which shows that social media and screen-time can affect both girls and boys by intensifying their mental distress. However, males were affected differently than females, in which males reported higher rates of teen dating violence after being exposed to violent media or graphic video games. This concludes that repeated exposure to violence in video games in boys may lead to victimization and harassment in their real-life relationships (Rostad et al. 2297). Yet, another study by Candice Biernesser and her team shows that in the U.S., girls are more likely to experience cyberbullying than boys, “whereas boys are more commonly reported to engage in cyberbullying than girls” (Biernesser et al. 18), potentially due to victimization experiences that they have previously encountered. Due to these severe victimization experiences, beginning in the early 2010s “self-poisonings among 10- to 12-year-old girls quadrupled; hospital admissions for self-harm tripled among 10- to 14-year-old girls; major depressive episode among 12- to 17-year-old girls increased 52%, from 13.1% in 2005 to 19.9% in 2017...; and suicide among 10- to 14-year-old girls doubled” (Twenge 3). Differences in these findings show that girls spend more time on social media and boys spend more time playing video games which exemplifies how these actions embody gender-specific consequences. As a result of heavy social media use, increased feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts amplified suicide rates in both genders, but especially in girls. Nevertheless,

both social media and violent video games have adverse consequences for adolescent mental health and are correlated to worsening mental illness.

Screen-Time and Offline Activity:

Social media through online websites and cellphone use contributes to the extreme number of hours that adolescents spend online every day. On average, teens and young adults “spend nearly 9 hours a day using media, outside of school or homework” (Rostad et al. 2283), which continues to steadily increase with the growing use of technology among young adults. It has been reported by Whitney L. Rostad and her research team that “frequent media use (5 or more hours/average school day) was significantly associated with increased victimization and suicide risk” (Rostad et al. 2295). This proves that the heightened use of social media by adolescents has damaging consequences that ultimately correlate to the rise in depression and suicidal behaviors. In contrast, it has also been reported by Whitney L. Rostad et al. that “2 hours or less per day of media use was not associated with suicide risk” (Rostad et al. 2297), illustrating that limiting the time spent on social media platforms would be advantageous in decreasing the risk of suicide. In addition, limiting online activity would protect youths from other victimization experiences. An excessive use of social media can lead to negative experiences through diminishing social interaction time, lessening interpersonal relationship skills, and creating social isolation between family members, peers, and dating partners. In these manic situations, an increase in loneliness, lack of hope or happiness, and thwarted belongingness, ultimately escalates suicidal tendencies.

Similar to the rise of social media among U.S. adolescent populations in the past decade, overuse of these platforms is associated with the “normalization of self-harm behavior”

(Biernesser et al. 3) and increased risk of “maladaptive behaviors” (Biernesser et al. 3). Consequently, it magnifies future cases of deliberate self-harm and suicidal actions. Studies on human neural architecture depict the scientific reason for social media’s effect on detrimental emotional decline. Since the neural connection to emotions in the human body is linked to interpersonal or face-to-face contact, “a decrease in or removal of a system’s key inputs may risk destabilization of the system” (Twenge et al. 4). This signifies that a decrease in person-to-person interactions due to heavy social media use may cause mental suffering to numerous adolescents. In addition, it is reported by J. M. Twenge et al. that “adolescents in the 2010s spent more time on electronic communication and less time on in-person interaction than their Millennial and Generation X predecessors” (Twenge et al. 4). In the last ten years, this contributes to the rise in depressive symptoms, self-harming actions, and suicide deaths. Between the years of 2010 and 2015, “33% more adolescents exhibited high levels of depressive symptoms” (Twenge et al. 8) and “31% more died by suicide” (Twenge et al. 8). These frightening numbers fully capture the trend of increased social media use causing more feelings of depression and loneliness, which leads to a greater risk of suicidal outcomes in U.S. adolescents.

Over the years, adolescents have spent less time on in-person activities and more time distracted with online ones. Due to the decline in offline activities, social media has managed to control and disrupt the lives of youths. It is supported that heavy media use, not using technology itself, has contributed to the rise of depression and suicide (Twenge 5). More hours spent on social media can disrupt time spent on homework, valuable time with friends or family, and hours of sleep that one gets per night. Specifically, lack of sleep from social media use can come from the blue light that is emitted from a person’s phone, which “suppresses melatonin

production” (Twenge 11) and can affect how long it takes to fall asleep and the quality of sleep a person gets each night. Other research suggests that even if individuals spend less time on social media, there is still a correlation between social media and suicide through harmful viewing experiences that can affect one’s mental stability. Many vulnerable teenagers desire belonging and popularity so desperately that they “reflect an over-eagerness to identify with others to gain their approval” (Berryman et al. 313), which could result in unfavorable and injurious consequences. Overuse of social media has been associated with several health risks, such as adolescent alcohol use, physical violence, substance use, and early onset of sexual behaviors (Rostad et al. 2284). Due to repeated social media exposure of teen drinking, drug use, sexual behavior or aggression, and physical fights, constant use of social media negatively impacts the lives of young adults through altering their behaviors and teaching them to copy others in order to belong. As a result of adolescent vulnerability, these factors can all contribute to sadness, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors in a young person’s life if they are constantly subjected to the harmful aspects of social media.

Solutions:

Although frequent social media use has contributed to adverse consequences in the daily lives of teenagers and young adults in the U.S., there are various aspects of online platforms that can be beneficial for the youth population. Through the technological advancements in the last decade and the rise of online activity, social media has offered many solutions to counter the problems that it causes. These solutions come from using social media as a means to connect with others and form a community outreach group. This gives teenagers the opportunity to openly address crucial problems such as how to combat the rising suicide rates. Due to the

vulnerability of many young adults on social media platforms, positive celebrity influences may also be advantageous to the cause of protecting future youth generations by promoting self-care, sharing stories of overcoming suicidal thoughts or depression, and encouraging healthy interpersonal connections with others. Support groups organized by parents, teachers, and health professionals are essential in overcoming teenage suicide through the positive representation that inspiring or motivational adults may provide. Allowing adolescents who are struggling with mental health afflictions to trust the support groups online and around them can allow social media to become a protective factor in preventing suicide and can encourage mental stability.

Reducing the negative influences of cyberbullying and exposure to graphic content on social media can be overcome through education and awareness. Many people are unaware of how often social media can negatively impact the lives of young adults if used improperly. First, increasing the amount of mental health services that are available to young adults and their families could address and problem-solve exposures of online violence. Secondly, it will allow youths to openly share their experiences with cyberbullying in a safe environment. Emotional support and social connectedness serves as a powerful tool to address the increase of young adult suicides by promoting the benefits of social media and using it for positive outcomes. The study done by Frost et al. reports that one-third of young adults with a history of self-harm and depressive behavior used the internet and online platforms to seek help from dangerous situations (Sedgwick et al. 8). It is also stated that “Over half of these online help-seekers perceived that they had more support available to them online than offline” (Sedgwick et al. 8), which shows how crucial positive media environments can be in aiding helpless teenagers. In addition, this allows adolescents to stand up to online bullies and encourages them to share their voice to help others that may be struggling with similar afflictions. Similarly, the anonymous

state of social media platforms allows mentally distressed youths to comminate difficult emotions and inspires them to begin the road to recovery. The presence of positive social media resources is extremely beneficial to vulnerable teens because it allows them to “feel a sense of belongingness, acceptance, and an ability to express themselves freely” (Biernesser et al. 19). Supportive affiliations allow adolescents to overcome situations of mental distress or suicidal tendencies.

Education is a crucial resource in overcoming the pitfalls of social media. To foster a sense of community outreach and healthy social media use, many classrooms are initiating strategies such as a “Family Media Use Plan” and “Digital Literacy” that are being taught to students in an attempt to increase social support, guidance for families, and to ensure protection for the future generations (Sedgwick et al. 2). Since many suicide attempts remain unreported, an immediate awareness of these problems is needed to diminish young adult suicide rates. If a person is showing signs of suicidal behavior such as “feeling hopeless, having no reason to live, increased use of alcohol or drugs, isolating from family and friends, sleeping too much or too little, visiting or calling people to say goodbye” (“Risk Factors and Warning Signs par. 7), these warning signs need to be properly understood to effectively seek help for the protection of this individual. It should be known that help is always available through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (through the phone number 800-273-8255) in which it “provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals” (“Home” par. 1). Overall, in the midst of a mental health and suicide crisis among the young adult population in the U.S., more resources are necessary to safeguard the lives of adolescents in the future. Therefore, digital media and

educational outlets act as protective factors to initiate a critical response in this ever-growing epidemic.

Conclusion:

Despite the increased efforts for prevention, suicide rates within the U.S. young adult population continue to remain exceptionally high. With the rise of advanced technology and online social media platforms, teenagers are currently filling their days with activities on their phones, computers, and video games instead of fostering valuable interpersonal connections with friends, family members, and their communities. Lacking these emotional stabilizers renders many adolescents feeling hopeless, depressed, anxious, and unable to cope with their mental traumas. Consistently, social media has aided in exposing youths to cyberbullying, self-harm, graphic content, and harmful behaviors such as early sexual initiation, dating violence, and drug and alcohol use. These factors all contribute to detrimental side effects in the adolescent population, which correlates to the heightened numbers of suicidal events in the last decade. Even though young men and women use online technology for different purposes, both genders suffer exceptionally high suicide rates – most notably the female population. Yet, the fact still remains that social media can damage the minds of young adults if used too frequently or for toxic means.

To overcome the teenage suicide epidemic, crucial steps need to be taken to address and counteract the problem. First, more research needs to be done to address the harmful effects of social media on the minds of youths. Often, the results of these studies are left inconclusive due to the lack of reports of suicide attempts from adolescents. Many suicide attempts remain unknown and unreported, which renders gaps in the results. Nevertheless, multiple studies have

shown that limiting the amount of social media a young adult uses per day can increase happiness through creating important social and in-person connections with others. Education is essential in addressing the dilemma of teen suicide because many are unaware of the warning signs or how to help those that are in need. Reporting any signs of suicide to a trusted adult, teacher, physician, counselor, or to the National Suicide Hotline is critical in preventing future cases of suicide. In addition, by starting the conversation early on, comfort and assistance can be provided to those in need and can save countless lives and prevent suicides. Everyone can take action against this crisis that continues to grow indefinitely. Understanding teenage suicide as a threat to our loved ones and future generations can open the door to necessary conversations and prevention efforts. Ultimately, as Desmond Toto once said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness,” and with this hope we can win this fight against adolescent suicide and save those that have fallen to despair.

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