

Rachel Petti

Brian Stiltner and Sandra Young

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How the Use of Social Media Can Lead to Mental Disorders in Teenagers

Social media consumes our lives. Most people can not go one day without checking their phone or going on some type of social media platform. Many parents give their children a phone at a very young age, and some might think the age is becoming too young. Social media can affect many individuals in different ways. For some of those individuals, there can be positive outcomes from the use of social media. Unfortunately, social media affects teenagers in many different negative ways. With social media being so prevalent in our lives and society, it can cause mental health disorders in teenagers who are still in the process of developing into an adult. It can affect their social skills and they might experience anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, or develop body image issues because they are constantly comparing themselves to others on the platforms. The myth that social media and its influence affects only teen girls can be detrimental to understanding how it can contribute to all teenagers' mental health. Most people assume social media and the influence of it can only affect girls, but teen boys can also be affected just as much. In this paper I will discuss how social media and its influence can affect the mental health of teenagers.

Are there any positive outcomes relative to the use of social media, and how does it affect girls and boys differently? More action needs to be taken by parents and physicians to stop the negative impact of social media on a teenager's mental health and ensure that social media is a more positive place for teenagers to gain confidence, not have it torn down.

The effects of social media on teenagers

Under the peer pressures of our current society, it is hard not to get addicted to social media and let it control your life. There can be many different reasons for participating. A person might want to chat with their friends when they are not with them, talk with relatives who live far away, or be entertained by the many engaging videos found on social media. Social media is used for almost everything in society, and the pandemic of the past two years has definitely heightened the idea that social media can connect people when they feel lonely.

For teenagers though, always being on social media can affect their growth and development. In the early years of being a teenager, one is still developing physically and mentally. Teenagers have so much to learn, and being vulnerable on social media can stop their development because of the negative effects. Social media can cause anxiety, sleep deprivation, loneliness, low self-esteem, and in some cases can even cause them to act out violently. A study done in 2016, using more than 450 teenagers, found that the more they used social media the more upset they felt, the less they slept, and they reported having higher levels of anxiety and depression (Mayo Clinic staff). This data shows how using social media affects a teenager's mental state. The more they use social media the bigger impact it has on their mood and then everything spirals out of control, leading to sleep deprivation and heightened anxiety. Since teenagers decide to spend their free time on social media apps, research shows that they are more likely to share personal and intimate stories about themselves, which then puts them at risk of getting blackmailed or even bullied (Mayo Clinic Staff). In fact, social media "can easily affect the kids, the reason is sometimes people share photos, videos on media that contain violence and negative things which can affect the behavior of kids or teenagers" (Siddiqui, Singh). Many teenagers feel like they miss out on something when they see an event posted online. Sometimes

it affects them directly, because it is an event they may not have known about and they feel left out, or indirectly because it's something they wish they could be doing, even though they do not necessarily know the people at the event. Either way, viewing the post can make them feel like they are not good enough because there are individuals who are doing more exciting things than them, such as being with friends, going on better vacations, and other activities.

Many young kids or teenagers can get into trouble by communicating with someone they do not even know on social media through the use of direct messaging. If someone you do not know personally has a public Instagram account, then you can message them directly. You can actually have a conversation with a complete stranger and think you know them by what they post on their account, but in reality they can be posting anything and you do not even know the truth. It works both ways, and the scary part is that strangers can know everything about a teenager who posts personal things on their account which leaves them vulnerable to harassment and, in some cases, if their location is revealed, they can be in danger of a stalker finding them. It is not unheard of that there are “many cases registered in police stations where adults target young children and lure them into meeting them” (Siddiqui, Singh). They do not know these people so when they are completely vulnerable online they do not know that they can get into a dangerous situation that could have serious consequences.

Unfortunately, social media can also cause eating disorders and body image issues by the overconsumption of applications that compare ourselves to others. Twenty studies have found that social media causes body image issues and disordered eating. It especially affects girls who compare themselves to others. The study found that females were in a negative mood by just browsing Facebook for ten minutes, compared to someone who visited a neutral website. The study states that “participants who were high in appearance comparison tendency reported an

increased desire to change the appearance of their face, hair or skin after spending time on Facebook, in comparison with those who browsed the control website” (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello). This study shows just how a simple application can rattle a person’s confidence and make them feel that they have to change their appearance in order to impress others. It makes people feel like they are not good enough by comparing themselves to others. On Instagram, many teenagers feel the need to tear each other down and it is much easier for them to make negative comments behind a screen. “The nature of social media interactions, which are arms length, makes negative commenting both easy and more frequent than in-person interactions with peers” (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello).

Eating disorders can be mostly linked to Instagram because this platform is made up of galleries of pictures that you can like, comment on, edit, and perform other digital actions. A study found that the average person spends 12.2 minutes on Instagram daily, with the age group 18-29 spending an average of thirty minutes daily. “Body image refers to a person feeling anxious, distressed, or self-conscious, about particular body characteristics. Body image has cognitive, affective, and perceptual components, including thoughts (e.g., dissatisfaction) feelings (e.g., shame) and interpretations (e.g., distorted perception).” These issues can vary in each individual. Many scholars have examined that the use of Facebook for commenting and liking posts among female adolescents heightens exposure to images that are associated with body dissatisfaction and the thin ideal. “Social comparison creates a discrepancy between one’s actual and ideal body characteristics, creating discontent” (Marks, De Foe, Collett). On Instagram people can compare themselves to people way outside of their network which sets new standards of comparison, making the situation much worse (Marks, De Foe, Collett).

The hashtag “thinspiration,” which is a combination of thin and inspiration, has been banned on Instagram since 2012 and the platform is moving towards a healthier alternative. “Fitspiration” is a combination of the words fitness and inspiration. “There are currently 17.7 million posts tagged “fitspiration,” and 66.1 million posts tagged “fitspo” on Instagram. It normalizes exercise and spending an amount of time preparing food”. This hashtag is not just targeted towards women, it also emphasizes masculinity for men. It still emphasizes the importance of leanness, but also to be athletic. “Eating disorders are characterized by dietary restriction, obsessive thoughts about food and body, compensatory exercise, and psychological distress”. Exposure to ideal body types on social media can lead to these eating disorders. “Of those who have social media accounts, 54% of people use it to discover and share food experiences, and 42% use it to seek advice about food” (Marks, De Foe, Collett). Research has shown that Instagram has caused orthorexia-excessive preoccupation with healthy eating. The symptoms include obsessive compulsive disorder and anorexia. Turner and Lefevre conducted a survey online with 680 people who used social media and followed healthy food accounts. They found that 49% had orthorexia; the more social media used by these people, the more their symptoms. With the rise of Tik Tok there are many challenges of “what I eat in a day.” “On the surface this seems harmless, but the problem arises when eating habits promote extreme dieting or weight loss or jokes about only consuming coffee and nicotine in a day. Other trends related to body image and eating include weight-loss journeys and eating disorder recovery journeys” (Ross).

Tik Tok is becoming a phenomenon in this generation and it has a big impact on children. If they are seeing trends of eating something to make their body look a certain way, that is

already giving them negative thoughts about their body and they will try to change how they look.

The effects on boys versus girls

These mental health disorders can affect boys and girls in very different ways. Girls in their teenage years are still gaining their confidence and self-esteem. Many girls in their teenage years especially feel that browsing social media applications like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok have the biggest impact on how they feel about their bodies. In fact, “88 % of girls say they compare themselves to images in the media and half claim that they are negatively affected by this” (Solstice East). They take nutrition guidelines to the extreme because they feel they have to eat a certain way to then look a certain way, emulating the models they see posted. Young girls see this unrealistic standard and feel like they also have to look this certain way. The pictures posted and the standard set by “influencers” or friends can make them feel guilty about eating something that is not deemed “healthy.” Some girls even go to the extreme to try to fulfill the standards they see and change their habits of eating or working out excessively to try to achieve the body they see on Instagram or Tik Tok. “Studies show that girls who share more photos online and use Photoshop to edit their pictures feel worse about their appearance and exhibit greater eating concerns, which can include restricting their intake, removing certain food groups, or overeating to cope with negative body image and low self esteem” (Solstice East). Again, these findings indicate how comparing oneself to others constantly on applications can lead to a negative self-image of oneself.

Most people think body image issues are only associated with girls but boys can also be affected in different ways. The issue of body image for boys is rarely brought up in the media, or talked about publicly. This is a topic that should be brought up more in the media and in the

sports world so that boys who struggle can have someone to look up to, assuring them that they can get through it. One of the few men in the media, former Seattle Mariner, Mike Marjarma, publicly shared his own experience of developing an eating disorder, having body image issues and the need to have a perfect body because of what is portrayed in the media. Mike Marjarma would starve himself, which led to purging, resulting in having to go to in-patient treatment (Brown).

The biggest difference between teen girls and boys and their bodies is that boys want to gain more weight and bulk up while girls want to be the thinnest. Melanie Rogers, founder and Executive Director of Balanced Eating Disorder Treatment says, “The type of body image ideal dictates the behaviors they will then engage in to attempt to achieve that ideal, leading to starving and dieting in girls, bulking up and over-consuming protein, supplements, and steroids in boys” (Brown). Teen boys do not typically talk about their bodies as much as girls do, however it is an issue that needs to be addressed for boys as well.

Young boys and girls constantly comparing themselves to others is very unhealthy. Research has suggested that trans and non-binary youth are prone to more discrimination and harassment with lower self-esteem leading to having body image issues as well (Chang-Cook).

Influencers are a huge part of social media these days and teenagers look up to these people. A social media influencer is a user on social media who has garnered enough followers to get paid to endorse certain products since they have a widespread audience and can persuade that audience to buy those products or support a cause or other issues. These people have a huge impact on teenagers and can influence them in many ways including telling them how to act, what to wear, or what products to use. Influencers can easily persuade a person to change their way of life. An influencer’s style might not match that of the teenager, and this could be

damaging because the teenager could try to change their personality to match the influencer. Influencers have a lot of power and they can affect teenagers in many ways, persuading them into changing themselves or buying certain brands and products they may not need.

Social Media's heightened effects on teens during the pandemic

Since March 2020, many people have been consumed by social media more than they ever have before. The COVID-19 pandemic broadly forced people to stay home, practice social distancing, and get together with friends and family via social media apps. Children ages 4 to 15 spent seventy six percent more time on social media in 2020 than in recent years according to Parental Control, a software company (Chang-Cook). Before the pandemic, social media was mostly viewed as an after-school activity for kids and teens, but the Coronavirus pandemic has caused the use of social media to increase during school hours since the use of computers and social media platforms has become a more convenient way for teachers and classmates to communicate.

Over two decades ago, anthropologist and psychologist Robin Dunbar, proposed that a person can maintain 150 acquaintances but only be close with five friends because our brains can not handle more. She believes that humans can actually only have five intimate and real friendships that we would call in an emergency if we really needed them. "Researchers have attributed the benefits of those face-to-face relationships to the 'shared experience' effect: when you laugh or cry with someone, when you go to a social event or have dinner together, when you experience life together, there is a deepening of the social bond that cannot be replicated by social media" (Kardaras). When a teenager or anyone meets a person online and never actually meets them in person, it is not considered a real relationship because you can not experience real life instances with them and feel connected. "Online socializing may be interfering with our

face-to face encounters. That is troubling because we know that we can get physically and psychologically ill without real human contact. Indeed, several studies have shown that people can go insane if cut off from human interaction” (Kardaras). This is why so many teenagers especially have experienced more mental health problems and felt more lonely recently because during the past two years the whole world was forced to isolate themselves in order to stay healthy and protect themselves and others from getting this horrible disease that has killed so many people. Individuals have felt fear and anxiety they have never felt before. “A survey by the US Census Bureau showed that the prevalence of anxiety or depression symptoms in December 2020 was nearly four times as high as that in the previous year. A national study in the UK showed that the prevalence of depression symptoms in June 2020 was twice as high as that before March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic” (Zhang,Liu, Li, Chung).

This data totally makes sense because teenagers are so used to socializing with their friends, communicating with their teachers in school, and staying after school for extra curricular activities or sports. The pandemic took a toll on them mentally by just stopping their lives and activities. It was such a shock to the system to have to sit at home in your room doing school for the whole day, and then just repeating that for more than a year. Nearchou et al’s study (2020) showed that 22.6 % to 43.7 % of youth reported depression symptoms during the pandemic, 18.9% to 37.4 % had anxiety symptoms, and over half (62.2%) expressed concern about infection and the health of family and friends” (Zhang,Liu, Li, Chung).

As seen through this paper, social media can negatively affect the mental or social development of children and adolescents. Robin Dunbar, the psychologist who believed that a human could only have five “real” friends as opposed to all the friends one might have online, is

concerned with how social media will affect a child's development into adulthood. Social interaction and empathy are all crucial for the development of the child. If they miss out on developing these skills they could be in trouble later in life. "If we deprive children of interaction and touch early on because they mostly interact via screens, those brain areas may not fully develop" (Kardaras). This idea has been heightened these past two years, especially by the pandemic, because teenagers rely on social media to be connected to each other since human interaction is not always safe. The discussion of the negative effects of social media on a teenager's mental health and human development can also lead us to question whether there are any positive aspects to come from these platforms for teenagers? Can they gain or learn anything from it?

Positive aspects of social media

Although social media can cause stress, mental health disorders, and make teenagers feel less of themselves, or not good enough, there can be some positive aspects of social media as it can connect people from far away or be educational. Yet, when you think of teenagers and social media applications, it is the negative aspects that are mostly talked about, but there are positive aspects as well. Education can have a positive effect on social media for teenagers. If a student misses school and an assignment, they can see what they missed posted online. "Social media gives a way to the students to effectively reach each other in regards to class ventures, bunch assignments or for help on homework assignments" (Siddiqui, Singh). It can also prepare them to become successful marketers in their future careers because our society focuses on social media and many businesses are operated using applications. You could be connected to anyone at any time, regardless of location.

One of the best parts of social media is that you can impact a community or group of people by just posting an event that is happening on your account. An individual can make a huge impact on a community or a person by just posting about an event happening for a good cause on social media. By the use of a simple click a community can be helped more than they would have if social media didn't exist in our society. Despite the positive aspects of social media, there needs to be steps taken to address the problems and fix them so that social media does not affect teenager's lives in negative ways, and have applications be a positive place where they can support one another, lift each other up, and not tear down people's confidence. In the rest of the paper, I will talk about these hypothetical solutions and what can be done to stop teenagers from feeling the negative effects.

Steps to be taken for the problems to stop

There needs to be more done to protect teenagers on social media and make them feel good about themselves and safe. The steps needed to be taken start with parents and caregivers, then includes physicians, and finally a government plan put into action to stop this problem from spreading into the next generation of children and teenagers. Parents and caregivers should set reasonable limits for their teenagers. This could include setting certain times when their child could use their electronic devices and even taking those devices away from them at night, so social media won't distract them from getting the sleep they need to function. They could also look at and monitor their teenager's account and make sure what they are posting and liking is appropriate.

Talking to teens is a good start. A conversation they could have is telling them that what they see on social media does not always represent real life and the bodies they can see are not always realistic. Another step parents can take is to discourage their children to not post mean-

spirited comments about others or gossip about others online, and also encourage their children to meet with friends in person and have face-to face encounters rather than just texting and calling each other online (Mayo Clinic Staff).

Parents must also practice what they preach. “A randomized study showed that heavy parental smartphone use was associated with poorer quality of interactions with their children” (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello). This shows the influence that parents can have on their children. The less parents use their phones and social media, the less their children will feel they have to. Another study showed that a group of adolescent girls who were supported by the positive influence of parents and their school environment had high levels of confidence and body image issues (Jaoude, Trurnicht. Pignatiello).

Physicians should talk with parents about the risks and harms of social media. “A recent large systematic review found that communication with adolescents is most effective in the context of a therapeutic alliance that is open and non judgemental, elicits trust and emotional safety, and offers a sense of inclusion and autonomy” (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello Canadian Medical Association Journal). This makes the solution a collaborative effort, taking some pressure off the parents. However, the parent’s responsibility should be to model good use of social media behavior. The American Academy of Pediatrics provides health and safety tips supporting the youth and their use of social media. The AAP also partnered with the organization Common Sense Media to produce a family toolkit for parents to use.

A useful approach to get teenagers to stop the addictiveness of their online behavior is motivational interviewing. This approach is used by adolescents who suffer from substance abuse. “This approach should involve open, non-judgmental exploration of all aspects of a

youth's digital life, including positive and negative" (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello). The youth can track their "non screen time" and see if it makes a difference in their life.

Public awareness campaigns can provide education and promote healthier habits with regards to social media. Some platforms have placed bans on content that promote self-harm. A study of sixty-six adolescents showed that even though they like the freedom of posting what they want, they recognized a need for protection and they liked the idea of automatic monitoring in situations they didn't have control of. "There should be public discussion about the extent to which social media companies can use features that are deliberately designed to promote behavioral reinforcement and addiction, particularly on platforms used primarily by youth" (Jaoude, Treurnicht, Pignatiello). Most of the solutions to stop this problem from happening are still in process and most aren't even figured out yet. The types of solutions and programs explored in this paper show promise but should be expanded and have the results closely studied.

In February of this year, federal legislators introduced a bipartisan bill protecting the youth from social media harm. The bill is sponsored by Senator Marsha Blackburn, a Republican from Tennessee, and Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat from Connecticut. The goal of the bill is for the parents to take back control. The bill is called the Kids Online Safety Act of 2022. In the bill social media companies are required to provide privacy options, give parents tools to track the time their children are on an app, limit their addictiveness, require companies to prevent harm from minors including self-harm, suicide, and eating disorders. Companies are also required to use a third party platform to see if those companies are actually preventing harm to teenagers. Lastly, the companies are required to give kids data to academic researchers so that more research could be done to see what is hurting them and further figure out ways to help them

(Guevara). This bill should be passed because it would be a step in the right direction in order for these problems to stop negatively affecting the youth and teenagers.

In conclusion, social media can negatively affect a teenager's mental health which can affect their overall mental wellbeing and development into adulthood. Actions need to be taken now in order to prevent the harm being inflicted on children, teenagers and young adults, who find themselves lured into the "unrealistic" world of social media. If parents, caregivers, physicians, and federal programs offer the proper support, we can use social media as a positive influence, and stop the negative influence it has on our youth. Technology should be used to unify the world, not to harm it. Positive mental health and wellbeing are an important part of growth and development and must be prioritized today, especially in the wake of the problems we currently face in our society. How much are people willing to sacrifice when it comes to social media to ensure that the youth of today become well minded, healthy adults, who can think on their own and not fall to the pressures of unrealistic aspirations?

It's a tall order but one that needs to be taken seriously before it's too late.

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