

Christian Felipe

Prof. Jareb & Bowman

HN-300-C

12 April 2022

Social Media & its Effects on Mental Health

The world today as we all know is digital, and revolves around easy and instantaneous sharing of information and data. The influence social media has in today's society truly is immeasurable, as it is utilized by billions daily, regardless of their age, gender, race, or economic status. However, regardless of the endless "good," social media has supplied humanity, looking at it critically, there is great danger that comes with the way social media is being used, and the alarming rate it is used at. The first piece of evidence to support this claim comes from social media use during the COVID-19 Pandemic. During this time, usage increased tremendously, causing very significant changes to individuals' daily living, while furthering and increasing psychopathology within them as well. Additionally, research shows a subgroup of people using social media, specifically adolescents, have displayed numerous detrimental effects to their mental health due to over exposure to social media. These effects include decreased social skills, worsened quality of sleep, lowered cognitive abilities, and poorer performance in school. This is alarming because studies show that 84% of teenagers use social media daily, and its accessibility is quite literally at their fingertips. According to a study done by Watson, the median age of first social media use is 14 years old, and 63% of respondents between 13 and 18 years of age use social media every day (Watson, 2022). Additionally, Brown claims that in today's age, the smartphone has essentially become an extension of man itself. Overall, the negative effects of social media on an individual's mental health goes relatively unspoken about. For something so

prevalent in society today, and something so revered, the grip it holds over people's lives is dreadful considering the toll it takes on our long term mental health.

Social Media & the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic and its subsequent quarantines had devastating effects on the mental health of individuals worldwide. Unlike previous pandemics however, the COVID-19 Pandemic worked in tandem with social media to suppress mental health. Furthermore, many demographics suffered from mental health issues such anxiety and depression due to the limitations of the pandemic, as well as over exposure to social media. One key factor that explains this occurrence is a phenomenon known as “doom-scrolling.” The term doom scrolling was coined during the pandemic, and is described as “the surge in negative affect associated with repeated exposure to pandemic-related stories.” Additionally, the nature of the pandemic required for multiple quarantines, forcing individuals to obtain information via the internet and social media (Price, 2022). One population affected by doom scrolling are young adults, and Price states that this specific demographic saw a large increase in the severity and frequency of psychopathology. Additionally, this age group is far more likely to use social media in a problematic manner compared to other demographics (Price, 2022). For many people, the over utilization of certain pleasures is done as a coping mechanism. Price suggests that because of the new found stressor in the pandemic, individuals turned to social media as their coping mechanism. His study showed a very high correlation between media exposure, specifically negative pandemic related material, and an increase in psychopathology. “The results of the present study show an association between daily exposure to pandemic-related social media and elevated depression and PTSD symptoms in young adults during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States” (Price, 2022).

In contrast, Yang's studies takes a look at the other demographics that suffered from over exposure to social media, but does not restrict his findings by age. According to Yang, every demographic suffered in some way psychologically during the pandemic, and the extended uses of social media taxed them heavily. As previously stated, young adults were at greater risk mentally compared to elders, however, a new finding by Yang shows that level of education and occupation also plays a large role in the risks of suffering from ailments such as anxiety and depression. For example, health care workers are not only at greater risk for these ailments, but are also more likely to have compromised levels of quality sleep. "Higher levels of social media exposure were positively associated with the likelihood of anxiety and depression. Remarkably, before the COVID-19 pandemic, studies showed mixed results on the relationship between social media use and mental health" (Yang, 2020). The results of Yang's studies showed the type of information individuals participated in had effects on their long term wellbeing. Those who were exposed to negative information about the COVID-19 pandemic showed a lower quality of life, and increased levels of anxiety compared to those who refrained from viewing COVID-19 related media. People who were inclined to be involved in discussions about the COVID-19 on social media tended to have higher anxiety and lower life satisfaction levels (Yang, 2020). Yang suggests here that information should be discerned between reliable sources, and rumors. He states that it is invaluable to have social media literacy to make these distinctions, however people of lower levels of education may find it more difficult to do so. This disparity in education provides a reasonable explanation as to why this demographic has an increased likelihood of developing mental health issues compared to those of higher education. Young adults are also susceptible to decreased social media literacy. "Participants had noticed that the pupils used social media as a source of information. They worried that adolescents are too

uncritical of information from the internet and social media, and argued that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to fake news and social media ‘echo chambers’ (Saha, 2022). This quote by Saha demonstrates the dangers the media presents to those "who are unable to think critically, and to be able to discern the differences from reliable and unreliable sources. As mentioned previously, adolescents are susceptible to this as their social media use is increased, and they may lack the awareness to make correct judgment.

“But for those low in anxiety, being bombarded with messages regarding COVID-19 through social media, many of them false or misleading may lead to an increase in concern about themselves and their futures. This finding speaks to the pervasive effects of the pandemic, highlighting how even those who are not prone to extreme worry became concerned for their personal futures when they spent more time on social media” (Fraser, 2021).

This quote by Fraser perfectly encapsulates the effects doom-scrolling had on the population, as the constant harassment of pandemic related material has worn away at society. In addition to decreased social media literacy, these two factors played a large part in decreasing mental well being worldwide. Even the most formidable individuals have expressed doubts or concerns about the future due to excessive consumption of pandemic related material. Fraser also notes that the pandemic and social media had long lasting effects on college students as well, mostly due to the fact that it disrupted their schedules and left them with uncertainty for an extended period of time.

“The disruptions, ambiguity, and uncertainty undoubtedly have taken a toll on undergraduate students’ concerns for their personal futures and society in general, as well

as their behaviors and mental health. Research suggests that university students displayed increased anxiety after COVID-19.”

This increased anxiety comes from the formation of unhealthy coping mechanisms and habits according to Fraser. Such habits include extended usage and unhealthy digestion of social media. For example, he states that video games are typically a way this demographic unwinds and relieves stress, however its massive and excessive consumption during the pandemic leads him to define it as a coping mechanism as well. This is because it exacerbates the feelings of anxiety and depression within these individuals.

“Mental health on college campuses is a matter of growing concern as an increasing number of college students show rising levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. According to the 2019 National College Health Assessment¹ 16.7% students felt too depressed to function in the last 2 weeks from when the survey was conducted while 8.6% seriously considered suicide or tried to harm themselves in the past 12 months.”

She also notes that this period between 18-25 is an important developmental period, and because of the pandemic, college students worldwide were unable to experience this period. “For many this is where autonomy is learned, education is increased, and feelings of instability and being in between are enhanced” (Fraser 2021).

Overall, the combination of the pandemic, excessive consumption of pandemic related material, and poor social media literacy had devastating effects on the mental health of individuals throughout the world. As evidenced by these studies, regardless of age, race, or education, everyone felt the effects of their well being becoming diminished during this time. This was due to the phenomenon birthed during the pandemic we now know as doom-scrolling,

which essentially created a veil between rumor and reality by preying on those less social media literate. Additionally, social media became a coping mechanism for many demographics throughout the pandemic, which unfortunately lowered their quality of life by increasing their chances of developing psychopathic disorders such as anxiety and depression. Knowing this now, it is important to monitor social media use and be aware of the fallacies being posted on social media. Without the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, it can be overwhelming to be active on social media, especially considering the excess amount of information readily available at one's fingertips.

Social Media and its Effects on Adolescents

The preconceived notion that social media is beneficial because of its ease of connection between peers has been proved to be false by researchers. In fact, the rise of social media is responsible for numerous mental health issues in adolescents as well as their general well-being. Additionally, social media has lasting effects on their ability to learn, socialize, and perform academically. According to Yang, having such an easy connection to others is not always beneficial. “The findings of this study revealed that engaging in social media communication was not necessarily associated with better mental health status for the general population” (Yang, 2020). Hjetland affirms this: “Weinstein showed that communication through social media could lead both to a feeling of closeness and to a feeling of isolation, and that other people’s posts (photos, videos, etc.) were entertaining and led to admiration, but also to envy and self-awareness about their own appearance” (Hjetland, 2021). Both these researchers make this claim, and Hjetland’s reasoning is sound.

Comparison is a very dangerous thing adolescents must overcome while they are still developing as it puts unnecessary pressure on them to match up to their peers. Moreover, social

media gives them poor role models to look up to, and gives unrealistic expectations of what they should have accomplished compared to others. Typically, their social media use goes unmonitored as well, which may lead to toxic interactions that parents will never know about. “Because they don’t have a clue themselves. Nor have they taken the time to get acquainted with it [social media]. And then they are not able to assess the dangers and . . . whether it is actually good for the child or not” (Medrut, 2021). The ability to open up any social media platform and view what appears to be someone else’s “perfect” life, can damage the respect one has for themselves. Medrut explains this as an “idealized virtual identity.” Essentially, this theory states that an individual’s identity may be blurred as they commit to a facade on social media that is inconsistent with reality. This unauthentic version of others causes people to lose touch with themselves by getting caught up in the image they are portraying for others. In contrast, the people viewing this artificial “perfect” version of others as previously mentioned may cause feelings of self-doubt and lowered self esteem (Medrut, 2021). Adolescents are also susceptible to the fear of missing out due to the ability to keep track with everyone else’s lives and time. Brown defines the fear of missing out as the desire to be constantly connected with what other people are doing, and that this desire works in tandem in increasing social media usage. This once again may cause individuals to lose appreciation for their own respective lives when constantly compared to those of their peers, along with anxiety as they are separated from their peers. In addition, with everyone else’s lives documented on social media, one may feel absent or deprived of certain experiences, as well as a longing to be connected with everyone else. “A significant decrease in fear of missing out and a significant increase in mental wellbeing were revealed after social media abstinence” (Brown, Lorna & Kuss, 2020). The results of Brown’s studies show that fear of missing out and social media use are correlated, and that extended

breaks from social media can help alleviate this fear, as well as increase mental well being in general. Their research also shows that following social media abstinence, the average screen time per day decreased per individual. This goes to show that all it takes is an initial first step for some when it comes to refraining from excess social media use. They mention that social media “cleanses,” are also becoming more popular. “Further, the ‘digital cleanse’ is becoming a more popular phenomenon particularly amongst celebrities taking abstinence breaks from technology and self-optimisation theories that participants may have felt morally better in successfully abstaining. Nonetheless, thematic analysis revealed that the voluntary sample still found abstaining challenging” (Brown et al., 2020).

Excessive social media use also limits creativity, compromises one’s ability to concentrate, and inhibits social skills. These are all functions required to have a healthy and successful relationship with academics and school.

The participants also felt that the introduction of smartphones and social media has led to poorer concentration among pupils. This view is shared by teachers in other countries, where a study from England found that 87 % of teachers agreed with the statement that digital technologies have created an “easily distracted generation with short attention spans”. In support of this view, experimental studies have shown that people learn less if they have access to their phone during a lecture (Saha, 2022).

Saha’s research shows that technology in the classroom is viewed as a huge distraction by teachers, and that typically less learning is done when it is allowed due to a lack of concentration. Hjetland refers to this inability to concentrate as a lack of cognitive stamina within the individual. “Those who manage to put away their phones get to train their “cognitive stamina” a greater extent than those who do not.” Furthermore, some of the participants

expressed concerns that extensive use of social media could lead to poorer oral language skills and poorer social skills due to less frequent face-to-face interaction (Hjetland, 2021). The lack of natural socialization due to primarily online interactions is a key contributor in the lack of social skills in most young people today according to Hjetland. Rea agrees with this statement as they state that time spent online displaces time spent with face to face interactions, which inhibits social skills. In addition, studies have shown that increased social media usage has effects on the quality and amount of sleep teenagers are getting, and the results are generally unfavorable. In the article written by Rea, they mention how plentiful sleep is essential for optimal physical and mental health and growth, while also mentioning how in today's rapidly moving society, people are neglecting this by not getting enough sleep. They attribute immoderate social media use for this sleep disturbance, which they define as a lack of sleep that hinders daily functioning. Symptoms of poor sleep include daytime sleepiness, depression, and an inability to concentrate (Rea, 2021). "Moreover, it has been suggested that social media use closer to bedtime is associated with increased cognitive arousal, leading to delayed sleep latency and difficulties maintaining sleep" (Rea, 2021).

"In the 42 included studies, excessive internet use and mobile phone use were the most commonly examined forms of social media, with depression and anxiety being the most commonly assessed mental health outcomes. The findings of this review suggest an association between excessive social media use and poor mental health – specifically anxiety, depression, and psychological distress – among youth."

Along with troubled sleeping habits and declining quality of sleep, Rea's findings are consistent with those previously discussed. Rea further goes on to state that with the rise in social media

uses, along with increasing mental health disorders throughout the world, social media should be used more wisely due to the effects and influence it has on public health and society as a whole.

Although the current age is one filled with technology, information, and ease of communication, the studies have shown that an excess of these has detrimental and long lasting effects on our mental health and overall well being. Not only has the pandemic damaged the collective mental health of society, the great increase in social media usage during this time also had devastating effects. However, from this it is important to take away the value in being able to discern fact from fiction. The pandemic was a time where individuals were flooded with information, sometimes even ideas that contrasted with one another. This is enough to get anybody overwhelmed, and unfortunately, not everyone was able to deal with this bombardment of negative news. As a result, their mental health suffered and declined. As we move forward as a society it is important to recognize all the information we consume, and have enough social media literacy to determine for ourselves what is real and what is not.

In addition to doom-scrolling and the pandemic, social media has long lasting effects on adolescents, their development, and their well being as well. As mentioned prior, comparison is something all young adults face when utilizing social media. Medrut's idea of the "idealized virtual identity," also plays a part in having strong social media literacy. Adolescents must remain confident in themselves and recognize that what they view on social media is not an accurate representation of reality. Those who are unable to do so are doomed to suffer from low self esteem and anxiety when comparing themselves to their peers. Moreover, the fear of missing out is an issue that occurs when social media is used excessively. This is evident through the study done by Brown, where fear of missing out decreased after abstinence from social media platforms. Once again, anxiety is a major issue that comes with fear of missing out, and it can be

avoided entirely with moderate usage of social media. Finally, social media inhibits creativity, social skills and other cognitive functions throughout important developmental stages in adolescents. With much interaction occurring online, and excess social media use inhibiting quality sleep, students are performing worse in school, and lack social skills necessary for a healthy relationship with learning and school.

Like anything, social media can be good in moderation. Like mentioned, it can be a great way to connect with others and spend time occasionally. However, today it is not used in moderation and that is where the problem lies. Going forward it is important to realize this and to make sure to take care of not only take care of one's physical health, but mental health as well. The first step in doing so is to spend as much time living in reality as opposed to illusions.

Works Cited

- Abi-Jaoude, Elia, et al. "Smartphones, Social Media Use and Youth Mental Health." *CMAJ* : Canadian Medical Association Journal = Journal de l'Association Medicale Canadienne, vol. 192, no. 6, Feb. 2020, Web.
- Brown, Lorna, and Daria J. Kuss. "Fear of Missing Out, Mental Wellbeing, and Social Connectedness: A Seven-Day Social Media Abstinence Trial." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 17, no. 12, June 2020. EBSCOhost, Web.
- Fraser, Ashley M., et al. "College Students' Media Habits, Concern for Themselves and Others, and Mental Health in the Era of COVID-19." *Psychology of Popular Media*, June 2021. Web.
- Hjetland, Gunnhild Johnsen, et al. "Pupils' Use of Social Media and Its Relation to Mental Health from a School Personnel Perspective: A Preliminary Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 17, Aug. 2021. Web.
- Medruț, Flavia-Petronela. "The Impact of Social Media Use on Adolescent Mental Health – Depression and Anxiety: A Review." *Social Work Review / Revista de Asistentă Socială*, no. 2, Apr. 2021, Web.
- Price, Matthew, et al. "Doomscrolling during COVID-19: The Negative Association between Daily Social and Traditional Media Consumption and Mental Health Symptoms during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, Feb. 2022. Web.
- Rea Alonzo, Junayd Hussain, Saverio Stranges, Kelly K. Anderson, Interplay between social

media use, sleep quality, and mental health in youth: A systematic review, *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, Volume 56, 2021, Web.

Saha, Koustuv, et al. "Social Media Discussions Predict Mental Health Consultations on College Campuses." *Scientific Reports*, vol. 12, no. 1, Jan. 2022, Web.

Watson, Joshua C., et al. "Distress among Adolescents: An Exploration of Mattering, Social Media Addiction, and School Connectedness." *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, vol. 40, no. 1, Feb. 2022, Web.

Yang, Yang, et al. "Social Media Activities, Emotion Regulation Strategies, and Their Interactions on People's Mental Health in COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 17, no. 23, Dec. 2020. Web.