

The Effects of Social Media on Mental Health Among Adolescents

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Abstract. This study delves into the intricate relationship between social media and adolescents' mental health, a pressing concern in the digital era. The development of social media is a product of the times and a reflection of social progress. For individuals, the impacts are diverse. Social media platforms, while promoting social interaction and a sense of belonging, also harbor dangers like addiction and cyberbullying that can negatively impact self-esteem and mental health. The paper offers a succinct literature review, emphasizing social media's dual impact as a source of support and stress for high school students. It highlights the pivotal role of mental well-being in countering social media's negative influences and advocates for additional research to develop strategies that encourage positive social media engagement. The study concludes with a call for a balanced strategy to maximize social media's benefits for adolescents while protecting them from its potential detriments. This study explores the relationship between social media and the mental health of adolescents, a pressing issue in the digital age. The development of social media is a product of the times and a reflection of social progress. There are both positive and negative consequences for individuals. While social media platforms promote social interaction and a sense of belonging, they also pose dangers such as addiction and cyberbullying, which can harm self-esteem and mental health. The paper provides a concise review of the literature, emphasizing the dual impact of social media as a source of support and stress for students. It highlights the central role of mental well-being in countering the negative influences of social media and advocates for further research to develop strategies to promote positive social media engagement. The study concludes with a call for a balanced strategy to maximize the benefits of social media for young people while protecting them from its potential harm.

Keywords: social media; adolescent; mental health.

1. Introduction

In an age where digital footprints are as common as heartbeats, how using social media impacts adolescents' mental health has become an issue of paramount concern. 97% of adolescents reported being online daily. High school students in particular are navigating a complex landscape where the virtual and the real are intertwined, often blurring the lines between online interactions and personal well-being. Social media has introduced a new form of social interaction, with social media platforms serving as primary channels for communication, self-expression and community building. High school students, a demographic group that is inherently in a developmental stage of identity formation and social bonding, are particularly susceptible to the effects of these platforms. Multiple studies have correlated excessive social media use with mental health problems, including depression [1,2]. However, there are other studies that have explored the positive effects of social media use, particularly in communities, in promoting identity development and belonging [3]. The central research problem addressed in this study is the multifaceted effect of social media on the mental health of adolescents. The ubiquity of social media and its influence on self-esteem, social comparison and isolation presents a complex challenge. The question is how these platforms contribute to comprehending the wider implications of mental health interventions.

2. The Influences of social media

2.1. Positive Influences

As an integral part of modern life, especially for adolescents, social media offer unique approaches for social connectedness and mental health support. According to a study, social media use can nourish a sense of belonging, which is a fundamental aspect of adolescent development [3]. The research highlights that digital platform provide spaces where young people can interact with others who hold values and interests that are similar with them, potentially expanding their friendship groups and fulfilling their need to belong [1].

2.1.1. Strengthen Social Connectedness

Social media increases social connectedness by providing a platform for communication and interaction across geographical boundaries. As noted in the study, social media platforms like Facebook allow young people to create and maintain virtual communities online, which can be particularly beneficial for those who may feel isolated or marginalized in their offline lives. For example, the study by Bonetti (2010) suggests that online communication encourages adolescents who are originally lonely and anxious to interact offline to disclose themselves to their peers, thereby increasing their sense of social connectedness [4].

2.1.2. Increase Social Support

Social media can improve mental health by allowing young people to find communities they like and find comfort in. By offering selectable content that meets individual preferences and needs. The study by Sharabi suggests that the use of social media to communicate with friends can remit intense loneliness, especially for adolescents with learning disabilities [5]. This finding suggests that social media platforms can be seen as an extension of offline relationships, providing a space where young people can seek support and validation from their peers. Furthermore, the ability to customize one's social media feed allows adolescents to curate a positive environment that can help reduce stress and promote well-being [1]. The qualitative study of adolescents during pandemic-related school closures also shows that active engagement with social media, such as messaging and sharing content with friends, was associated with positive affect and feelings of happiness [1]. This finding highlights social media's ability to promote social support and a sense of connectedness, which are crucial for mental health. In addition, passive engagement, such as viewing positive or entertaining content, can serve as a coping mechanism, providing a temporary respite from stressors and contributing to emotional regulation [6]. Social media platforms offer significant potential for enhancing social connectedness and supporting mental health by providing a wide range of selectable content. By facilitating communication, fostering a sense of belonging and allowing personalization of online experiences, social media can play a positive role in the adolescents' daily lives.

2.1.3. Enhancement of Self-Esteem

Social media, particularly Facebook, has emerged as a powerful tool for self-presentation and identity management. Gonzales and Hancock's study uncovers intriguing findings about how Facebook engagement can positively influence users' self-esteem, a finding that challenges the established Objective Self-Awareness (OSA) theory and supports the hyperpersonal model [7]. The OSA theory suggests that self-awareness, often triggered by mirrors or reflective stimuli, leads individuals to measure themselves against societal standards, potentially lowering self-esteem when they perceive a discrepancy [8]. However, Gonzales and Hancock's research suggests that viewing one's Facebook profile, which could be considered a modern form of self-reflection, has the opposite effect - it increases self-esteem. This enhancement is attributed to the platform's unique ability to allow users to selectively present themselves, showcasing the best or most desirable aspects of their lives [7]. The hyperpersonal model posits that the affordances of online communication allow users to craft unique selves, often resulting in a more positive self-image than might be conveyed offline [9]. Gonzales and Hancock's findings support this model, suggesting that the selective self-presentation on Facebook

leads to an 'identity shift', where the curated online persona begins to influence the user's self-concept and consequently their self-esteem. An interesting correlation was observed between the act of updating one's Facebook profile during the experiment and reported self-esteem. Participants who made changes to their profiles, such as updating their status or photos, reported higher self-esteem than those who made no changes. This suggests that actively curating one's online image is not only about presenting oneself to others, but also about affirming and enhancing one's self-worth [7].

2.2. Negative Influences

2.2.1. Addiction

Social media is generally appealing due to its ability to provide instant satisfaction, constant connectivity and a platform for self-expression. However, these features can also make it addictive. Adolescents, with their developing brains and heightened sensitivity to social cues, are particularly vulnerable to this addiction. Dhir et al. (2018) highlighted the compulsive nature of social media use and its potential to lead to psychological distress [10]. Social media addiction can manifest in a number of ways, including excessive time spent on platforms, an inability to cut back despite negative consequences, and reliance on social media for emotional regulation. This compulsive use can lead to the neglect of other important areas of life, such as academics, physical health and face-to-face social interactions [11].

2.2.2. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is another critical issue that has gained prominence with the widespread use of social media. It involves the use of digital communication tools to harm, intimidate or humiliate others. The impact of cyberbullying can be amplified due to the anonymity and the distance on social media platforms, making it a pervasive and damaging form of harassment. Studies have shown that cyberbullying can lead to severe emotional distress, including feelings of isolation, depression and even suicidal thoughts among victims. As discussed by Wright et al. (2018), witnessing cyberbullying can also have a profound impact on the mental health of bystanders, contributing to a culture of fear and distrust [12]. The school closures caused by the pandemic further exacerbated the problem of cyberbullying, as increased screen time provided more opportunities for such behaviors to occur. The lack of face-to-face social interactions also meant that many adolescents turned to social media for social connection, inadvertently exposing themselves to potential cyberbullying.

2.2.3. Negative Social Comparison

Social comparison posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and achievements with those of others [13]. Social media provides a fertile ground for such comparisons, as users are exposed to curated and often idealized representations of other people's lives. This can lead to upward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those who appear superior on various dimensions, such as attractiveness, success or happiness [14]. Upward social comparison, a pervasive phenomenon on social media, involves individuals comparing themselves to others who are perceived as superior or more successful on certain dimensions, such as attractiveness, wealth, or social status. While this process of comparison can be a source of inspiration and motivation, it often has a negative impact on self-esteem, as well as well-being. The appeal of social media platforms such as Facebook lies in their ability to present an idealized version of life, full of success and happiness, which can inadvertently lead users to measure themselves against these often-unrealistic standards.

The negative effects of upward social comparison are manifold. When users are constantly exposed to the curated highlights of others' lives, they may begin to perceive their own lives as inferior, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and inadequacy. This dynamic can trigger a cascade of negative emotions, including envy and self-doubt, which can erode self-esteem over time. As Vogel et al. (2014) note, "upward social comparison can be detrimental to well-being and self-evaluations". The research highlights that frequent Facebook users, who engage in upward social comparison more often, report

lower trait self-esteem, a finding that is mediated by the extent to which they are exposed to upward social comparison on the platform [14]. Moreover, the effects of upward social comparison are not limited to the individual level but also have broader societal implications. It can contribute to a culture of comparison that perpetuates unrealistic expectations and a narrow definition of success, further exacerbating the negative impact on mental health. It is therefore crucial to recognize and address the potential harms of upward social comparison on social media in order to foster a more inclusive and supportive online environment that promotes the self-esteem and well-being of all users.

3. Discussion

In the digital age, social media has become an indispensable part of young people's lives, acting as a double-edged sword with the potential to affect their mental health significantly. On the one hand, social media platforms offer a wealth of benefits such as peer connection, access to communities and unique self-expression. They can foster a sense of belonging, provide support networks and enable self-expression in ways that were previously unimaginable. On the other hand, the ubiquitous nature of social media also poses risks. Given these contrasting impacts, it is vital that we approach social media with a strategy that maximizes its positive effects while mitigating the negative ones. By taking a proactive stance, we can empower young people to navigate the digital world with resilience and awareness, ensuring that social media is a platform for growth and connection rather than a source of harm. The aim is to cultivate a balanced and informed relationship with technology, where the benefits of social media can be fully realized without compromising the mental well-being of the younger generation.

Balance between active and passive engagement: Striking a balance is key. Active engagement, such as creating and sharing meaningful content and interacting in online communities, can encourage a sense of belonging and promote self-expression. Passive engagement, such as browsing and consuming content, can provide entertainment and relaxation. However, it's important to be aware of the time spent passively scrolling, which can sometimes lead to negative emotions or feelings of inadequacy.

Learn more perspectives: Improving literacy and exposure to diverse viewpoints can change the way individuals interact with social media [15]. By seeking out different perspectives, users can develop a nuanced understanding of complex issues, reducing the impact of echo chambers and promoting a healthier information environment.

Find help: Social media platforms can be valuable resources for finding help and support. Many mental health organizations and communities offer support groups, professional advice, and coping strategies that can be accessed online. Connecting with these resources can provide comfort and guidance during difficult times [16].

Improve critical thinking: Developing critical thinking skills is essential for navigating social media. Users should question the credibility of sources and the intentions behind certain messages. This skepticism can protect against the spread of misinformation and help users make informed decisions about the content they consume and share.

The relationship between social media and adolescent mental health is an issue that requires nuanced understanding and proactive action. This article has explored the dichotomy of social media's impact, highlighting its potential to both enhance and undermine the mental well-being of adolescents. On the one hand, social media platforms serve as a conduit for social connectedness, support, and self-esteem enhancement, which are critical for healthy adolescent development. On the other hand, the addictive nature of these platforms, the prevalence of cyberbullying, and the culture of social comparison they foster pose significant risks to mental health.

A multifaceted approach is needed to maximize the positive effects while mitigating the negative effects of social media. It is essential to educate young people about the negative impacts of social media overuse and to provide them with the tools to utilize the digital tool responsibly. Parents,

educators, and policymakers must work together to nurture an environment that promotes mental health care and provides accessible resources for support.

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