

A Review of Social Media's Impact on the Mental Health of Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a dominant aspect of many adolescents' lives, with 95% of teens ages 13-17 using social platforms, and over one-third reporting near-constant usage. While social media can promote social connectivity and have other apparent benefits, its overuse, especially by adolescents, has been linked to significant mental health side effects, including addiction, anxiety, depression, and body image distress. This paper explores the overall causes and consequences of the overuse of social media by gathering data from recent studies. The findings reveal that social media addiction additionally stems from the perceived obligation to maintain social connections as well as feelings of loneliness. Adolescents are extremely vulnerable to the detrimental effects of compulsively using social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat. Because of their developing hormones and dopamine, which can make them more vulnerable to wanting social validation, adolescents are more susceptible to social media addiction. Some of these side effects can include anxiety and cyberbullying. By addressing these concerns, society can better safeguard the mental well-being of adolescents in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately, 95% of teens ages 13-17 use social media, with over one out of three reporting that they use it almost constantly (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d). This widespread usage has made social media a dominant aspect of many adolescents' daily lives, with over 5.3 billion active users worldwide by early 2024 (Datareportal, 2024). Studies have shown that the "typical" social media user spends an average of 2 hours and 30 minutes online per day (Datareportal, 2024). Adolescents who use social media for over three hours per day experience double the risk of detrimental mental health outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d).

In addition to these concerns, social media use among adolescents is associated with a wide range of risk factors, as outlined by Saygin et al. (2022). Some of the associated risk factors include issues with sleep, anxiety, sex related issues, behavioral problems, body image, physical activity, online grooming, and headaches, among others. Adolescents' heightened susceptibility to these various risks is compounded by their ongoing psychological and emotional development, which makes them more vulnerable and likely to be affected by pressures and expectations set by social media platforms.

Furthermore, the responsibility for social media addiction does not rest solely on the user. Social media platforms are intentionally designed to maximize the user's engagement through features such as unlimited scrolling, personalized content, and almost constant notifications. These factors trigger the brain's reward system which can lead to excessive use of social media and addiction (Turel et al., 2018).

This paper aims to examine the causes, consequences, and mechanisms which underlie social media addiction among adolescents, particularly focusing on mental health. By analyzing recent studies and data, this paper explores how social media platforms induce addictive behaviors among adolescents, resulting in effects on well-being, anxiety, depression, body image issues, and exposure to cyberbullying. The objective is to provide an overarching understanding of the risks associated with extensive social media use by adolescents, while offering potential solutions to mitigating negative consequences.

METHODS

To explore the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health, a literature search was conducted using two prominent databases: ScienceDirect and PubMed. Because of the broad topic, this is a preliminary review collecting some of the papers that the search databases showed as relevant throughout the last 20 years. The search process utilized a combination of key terms "*social media*," "*addiction*," "*mental health*," and "*adolescents*" together. Additional search terms were later added on, such as "*causes*," "*consequences*," "*cyberbullying*," and "*body image*," were also incorporated to ensure a comprehensive analysis of relevant literature. When searching these terms together, there are thousands of results, but only 17 papers were selected from these results, as they were considered more relevant to the objectives of this review. The specific papers chosen have been selected because they are peer-reviewed and are up to date, remaining within the years 2008 to 2025.

CAUSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Social media addiction is initially triggered by a response to loneliness and lack of social interaction (Aksoy, 2018). Over time, it becomes a means for the adolescent to feel obliged to maintain social connections, which creates addiction. This feeds a continuous and never-ending cycle of using social media (Aksoy, 2018).

Similarly, according to Kuss and Griffiths (2017), the perceived necessity of being online can eventually lead to compulsive use of social media.

Levine and Schanzenbach (2019) conducted a study with 25 university-level students. The objective of this study was to determine the causes of social media addiction of individuals who consider themselves as social media addicts. Those students thought of themselves as social media addicts and were selected to participate in this survey. Their main reasons for social media use included lack of friends, fear of missing out, and the feeling of fulfillment (Levine & Schanzenbach, (2019).

According to Bhargava and Velasquez (2021), the overall design of social media platforms is problematic, as the platform designers intend to create addictive content that unjustifiably harms users, causing significant detrimental effects on their well-being. Many social media platforms utilize the users' data as well to try and fuel further addiction.

Social media platforms are made to trigger the brain's reward center, releasing dopamine, a neurotransmitter and hormone that can make the brain feel good. (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Adolescents who are already in a state of emotional distress and exposed to hormonal development, are particularly sensitive to these

dopamine cues, which makes them develop compulsive social media use.

It has also been reported that when participants of a review viewed posts with few or no likes, their brain's reward-circuit activity decreased and their self-reported mood was lower, suggesting that missing expected social rewards can diminish adolescents' sense of self-worth (Dores, et al., 2025). This constant cycle of reward-seeking behavior can eventually result in a deeper addiction to the social media platform (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Importantly, dopamine's role in social media addiction is especially pronounced during adolescence due to ongoing hormonal changes that affect brain development and emotional regulation. These neurodevelopmental shifts make adolescents more sensitive to rewarding stimuli, such as social media feedback, and contribute to their heightened vulnerability to addictive behaviors (Flannery et al., 2025).

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Risk factors associated with social media addiction include female gender, impulsivity, low self-esteem, anxiety, social anxiety, and negative attentional bias. These vulnerabilities make individuals more prone to social media addiction, as they often yearn for social attention and feel more confident interacting behind a screen (Zhao et al., 2022). This reliance on online interactions can create a cycle of compulsive usage, further fueling an adolescent's addiction.

Furthermore, social media use has been strongly linked to various mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents. According to Keles et al. (2020), the influence of social media can be categorized into four domains:

time spent, activity, investment, and addiction. Social media platforms are deliberately designed to encourage engagement across these domains, making users more susceptible to addiction. Each of these domains has been shown to correlate with negative mental health outcomes, highlighting the significant impact of social media on adolescent well-being.

BODY IMAGE

One major area where social media influences adolescents is body image, shaping how teens view themselves and their self-worth. In adolescence, most teens become aware of their image, which means they have stronger opinions and values about how they want to be seen in the world (Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d.). Adolescents often seek to create a pleasing social image and look up to popular social media influencers who are perceived to have the “perfect bodies and looks”. This constant comparison can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and anxiety, which can negatively impact their mental health and well-being.

Social media influencers hold significant power over adolescents, shaping their perceptions of themselves. This influence often leads to body dissatisfaction, which can result in mental health problems, eating disorders, suicidal feelings, and more (Bornioli et al., 2019; Jacobi & Fittig, 2010). Additionally, the pervasive body standards and expectations presented online further pressure adolescents to adopt unhealthy eating habits in pursuit of being “pretty and skinny” (Yale Medicine, 2024).

While much of the literature, such as Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022), focuses on the negative effects of social media on women’s body image, there is a noticeable gap in research addressing how social media influences the male body image. This disparity underscores the need

for more inclusive studies exploring how social media usage affects all adolescents.

CYBERBULLYING

In addition to shaping body image, social media can also expose adolescents to harmful behaviors such as cyberbullying, a form of online harassment, which poses serious risks to their mental health. Cyberbullying can be induced by peer pressure, adolescents being bullied themselves, or even the fact that most people don’t realize they are cyberbullying. The anonymity of the internet can make cyberbullies more confident in hurting their victim, as they won’t be able to identify who is cyberbullying them. It happens on private online spaces, making it harder for adults or friends to intervene in the situation (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Building on earlier findings, more recent research highlights the psychological toll of cyberbullying, revealing a strong association with PTSD symptoms among adolescents. In a US adolescent emergency-department sample, 46.7% out of 353 adolescents reported experiencing cyberbullying, and it was significantly correlated with various PTSD symptoms. (Ranney, M et al., 2016)

In relation to mental health, cyberbullying can lead adolescents to develop feelings of shame, isolation, or anxiety. Victims of cyberbullying are vulnerable to experiencing negative effects on their self-esteem and body image, which can later on increase the risk of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and in extreme cases suicidal thoughts (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). The idea of cyberbullying ties in with social media addiction because adolescents may be trapped in a cycle of addiction and exposure to cyberbullying, which worsens mental health challenges. Furthermore, constant exposure to harmful messages can make adolescents feel trapped, as their addiction to social media keeps them addicted to the very

platforms that they are being bullied on (Kowalski et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

Social media has become a pervasive of many adolescents' lives, yet brings harmful risks to their well-being. This paper highlights how social media addiction which is driven by platforms' addictive designs and the users' need for validation can lead to various consequences such as eating disorders, cyberbullying, and additional mental health problems. Adolescents who are more susceptible to dopamine-triggering activities are more vulnerable to these negative effects. By increasing social awareness about the harmful effects of social media on adolescents, we can advocate for healthier online habits. Future efforts should focus on creating more behavioral platform designs, and encouraging adolescents to take responsibility when using social media. Possible social media platform restrictions could include features for permanently limiting screen time, making the platform more educational, and reducing harmful comments and messages. By fostering awareness to how social media detrimentally impacts adolescents, society can take critical steps towards safeguarding the mental well-being of future generations in a rapidly evolving digital world.

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