

The Influence of Social Media on Young Adults

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In eighth grade, I signed up for Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. A couple of years later, I signed up for Twitter. Since then, my presence on social media has fluctuated, but I have been scrolling through these platforms on a daily basis for several years. A few months ago, shortly after my 22nd birthday, I removed those platforms from my phone. Although my accounts remain open, I have effectively removed social media from my life. I do not miss it. Since the invention of smartphones, social media has surged to become a part of everyday life for today's youth and young adults in developed countries throughout the world. Platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok have become an intrinsic part of modern-day communities and society. Has it gone too far? People can share anything and everything in seconds with a few taps of their fingers. Additionally, those who own smartphones have constant access to these social media platforms. The result is a culture that perhaps puts too much emphasis on sharing their accomplishments and adventures, which can often turn into a competition of sorts, where many seek the approval of their peers every day. Although social media can offer support and suggestions for living a healthy life, the damage these platforms can have on the young adults viewing them, such as impacts to their self-confidence, body image, and mental health, can create a toxic environment that is hard to escape.

Today's young adults are constantly taking and sharing pictures for the world to see. On photo-based social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, a high value is placed on the physical appearance of the user. This is

especially true for young women, who have always dealt with additional scrutiny and judgment when it comes to their looks. A study conducted in 2018 by Dr. Sophia Choukas-Bradley and associates in the fields of neuroscience and psychology explores how photo-based social media can influence the everyday life of undergraduate women. In this study, Choukas-Bradley et al. introduce a construct they termed "appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC)," which they define as, "the tendency for a woman's thoughts and behaviors to reflect an ongoing awareness of whether she might look attractive to an online audience" (473). In 2014, an estimated 1.8 billion photos per day were being shared via social media, a number that continues to rise (Choukas-Bradley et al. 473). The results of this study found that young women are spending time thinking about how they may appear on social media even when they are not actively using their phones. More specifically, young women are distracted by thoughts of how they might appear on social media, often preparing themselves for the possibility of a picture being taken and shared later that day (Choukas-Bradley et al. 479). In conclusion, this study shows that social media introduces a new form of objectification when it comes to young women and their appearance. Social media can influence the thought process of young adults even when they are not actively using the platforms.

In addition to thinking about how they may be perceived on social media, some young adults may take their concerns a step further. Oftentimes, photos are edited by the user before being posted online. A review by Rounsefell et al. in *Nutrition & Dietetics* ex-

plores this approach. This Australian review compiled and analyzed data from 30 different studies conducted worldwide, stating that “on-line appearances were considered important with participants using photo editing filters, and fashion choices and promotion of their physique and fitness achievements to accomplish this” (Rounsefell et al. 36). Additionally, multiple photos are often taken in the search for the perfect post. Whether it be selfies, candid photos (which are often staged), or other images, different angles and filters are often explored during the process of taking and posting an image. More often than not, only the best photo of the bunch makes it online. In addition to filters and angles, there are also applications available for download on smartphones that are designed to alter images of the body. These applications give their users the ability to contour their bodies into their ideal shape. That is, users can make their bodies appear skinnier, curvier, or anything in between. The fact that young adults are altering the shapes of their own bodies before sharing their pictures online is nothing short of disturbing.

Not only can social media influence the perception and display of one’s self-image, it can also impact health-related decisions such as diet and exercise. Furthermore, social networking can spur comparison and even competition amongst its users, who often turn to social media in search of validation. In 2019 author and dietitian Kim Rounsefell, along with several associates, posted a review in *Nutrition & Dietetics* asserting that “exposure to idyllic images was associated with greater negative body talk, drive for thinness, or healthy eating” (Rounsefell et al. 36). Essentially, viewing popular images that embody health and fitness can trigger negative thoughts of self-image. It is a good thing when these images inspire the viewer to make lifestyle changes toward healthier habits. However, when these posts prompt comparison and body dissatisfaction, the result is an unhealthy environment of self-loathing. On

one hand, images of junk foods can trigger hunger and unhealthy cravings. On the other hand, social networks can be a line of support and inspiration for a healthier lifestyle. Social media can be “considered an essential platform for health professionals to reach and engage with young adults to encourage healthy behaviours” (Rounsefell et al. 37). For example, there are many posts about workout routines, diet suggestions, and advice for leading a healthy life. The relationship here is complex, and although health and fitness pages may seem harmless, at the very least they often set lofty standards and label thinness and extreme fitness to be the ideal lifestyle.

Social media can influence young adults’ self-image in various ways, but there are also other consequences to these platforms. Several studies have explored how these networks can impact the mental health of their users. There is a notable relationship between social media use and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Academic psychiatrist and author Nassir Ghaemi made a shocking claim in his 2020 research report, stating that “reducing social media use in a depressed young adult can have a similar benefit as treatment with an antidepressant” (358). This remark, which is backed by evidence from multiple studies, is very concerning. As someone who has dealt with depression, social media can often feel like an outlet or a distraction from depressive symptoms. However, the numbers clearly show that excessive use of social media inhibits the recovery from depression.

One explanation for this association is the fact that social comparison habits can cause psychological problems, as many young adults who suffer from these issues may struggle when viewing their peer’s accomplishments (Tuan et al. 295). For example, as someone who got off to a low start in my college career, I have struggled with seeing posts of my friends celebrating their college graduation. Additionally, excessive social media usage offers a significant risk to the

user's levels of depression and anxiety (Tuan et al. 295). Less time spent on social media will allow more time for constructive and productive activities, rather than sitting around and staring at a screen. For those young adults dealing with depression, limiting or eliminating the use of social media can have healing powers. Of course, this relationship can vary on a case-by-case basis, and there can be positive effects of social media as well, especially when used in moderation.

In the future, understanding the relationship between depression and social media use will hold value for many reasons. For example, a research article from the University of Pittsburgh discusses social media use, noting that "it is important for clinicians interacting with young adults to recognize the important balance to be struck in encouraging potential positive use but redirecting from problematic use" (Lin et al. 328). Additionally, today's young adults should understand their own relationship with social media and recognize when it is triggering negative thoughts. A research report from Parkview Research Center focused on how social media can offer social support to college students. The results were mixed, as the majority of students in this study identified social media as both a form of support as well as a stress inducer (Drouin et al. 499). The findings from this study emphasize just how subjective social media can be, displaying that it is perceived as both useful and harmful. Furthermore, roughly sixty percent of the students agreed that seeking support through social media would be easier and more helpful if they did so anonymously (Drouin et al. 501). An anonymous support system is an interesting concept, and using so-

cial networking to connect users anonymously to various support systems would be beneficial. In conclusion, there are several ways to take advantage of social media, and it can certainly be a valuable resource of support. However, very few solutions are readily available to solve the problems caused by social media, and much of the responsibility to mitigate these issues falls upon the individual using these platforms.

Honestly, I was not aware of the damage social media had on my mental health until I removed the applications from my phone. I have found it a lot easier to focus on myself when I am not constantly viewing posts and updates from my peers. Far too often, I would catch myself getting aggravated by their posts because I found them either pointless or boastful. Yet, at the end of the day, my opinion of their posts does not matter, and I was fostering that negativity every time I signed in to the network. My experience with social media, like everyone else's, is unique to my personal life. Some may find comfort and support in these platforms; others may find useful suggestions and advice. However, regardless of personal experience, we must recognize the challenges and damages that these networks can inflict upon their users. The uprise of social media has been abrupt, and although the connections formed through these networks have value, the damage they cause often goes unnoticed. From depression and anxiety to health and body image, many issues have arisen or been exacerbated by the prevalence of social media. As the world becomes more dependent on digital connections, it is essential to consider and react to the countereffects of these networks.

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