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SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

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1. Introduction

Mental illness affects a large proportion of the American population. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately 1 in 5 Americans aged 18 or older are living with a mental illness while 1 in 5 children have had a debilitating mental illness ("Learn About," 2018). While many factors contribute to the onset of mental disorders, one recent phenomenon gaining more attention is the effect of social media on mental health.

Over the past ten years, the growth in social networking accounts has been rapid, and social media currently has billions of users. As of 2017, approximately 86% of U.S. young adults, aged 18 to 29 years old, used social media, while overall, nearly 7-in-10 Americans actively engage on these social platforms (Smith, 2020). Social media's benefits, such as facilitating connections with family and friends around the globe, raising funds and awareness for charitable causes, and enabling the purchase and sale of products and services, are remarkable. However, these rapidly evolving technologies also have a negative side. Hundreds of millions of Americans risk the negative effects that accompany social media use. For example, the proliferation of multiple social media apps and websites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and now Tiktok, accompanies a rise in mental health issues linked to the use of social outlets. These include but are not limited to depression, anxiety, increased feelings of loneliness, cyberbullying, body dysmorphia, and low self-esteem. Frequent social media use has been associated with greater psychological



distress, with an especially prevalent effect on young girls (Asmelash, 2019). Furthermore, the mental health issues attributable to social media tend to disproportionately affect the youth, who represent the most frequent users of these sites.

2. The Connection Between Social Media and Mental Health

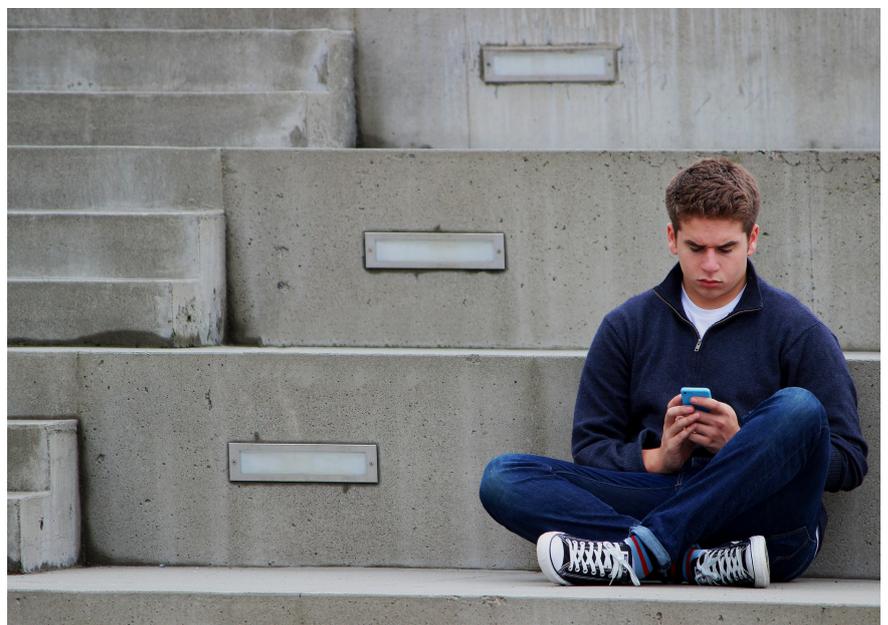
The explanation for the connection between social media and adverse mental health outcomes continues to be studied. One possible explanation is that the rapid expansion of social media networks has increased the time children, adolescents, and even adults spend in front of a screen and correspondingly decreased face-to-face interaction with family and society (Pantic, 2014). Despite increasing connectivity to a large group of people, these interactions tend to be “shallow and cannot adequately replace everyday face-to-face communication” (ibid). In one recent study, 143 undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania were randomly assigned to either use their social media as usual or to limit their Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat time to ten minutes per day per platform. After one month, the study revealed that the group limiting its social media use showed significant reductions in loneliness and depression. Researchers concluded that “limiting social media use to approximately 30 minutes per day may lead to significant improvement in well-being” (Hunt,, 2018).

Another possible explanation for this connection is that frequent use of social media can disrupt activities that positively affect mental health, such as sleep quality and quantity and physical exercise. Both sleep and physical activity are extremely important for maintaining a healthy mind and body. Social media increases exposure to many different harmful factors at the same time it decreases these other positive activities. Cyberbullying is one of these factors. A recent Pew Research Center study found that the

majority of teenagers in the United States have experienced some form of cyberbullying (Anderson, 2020, an experience that has been linked to increased likelihood of depression and, in extreme cases, can lead to self-harm and suicide (Pappas, 2015).

Spending time on different social media platforms can also lead to altered, and often incorrect, impressions of the physical and personality traits of other users. Users post content that maximizes their physical appearance and reflects the lifestyle they want their friends and followers to see, often showing travel, celebrations, and other exciting moments. In a recent study involving 425 undergraduate students, researchers found that “Facebook use is linked to participants' impression that other users are happier, as well as the feeling that the ‘life is not fair’” (Chou and Edge, 2012). These students perceived those around them as leading happier, better, and more successful lives, a view that ultimately is likely to negatively impact one’s mental health by making one feel deficient, discouraged, and depressed. The constant deluge of photos and videos depicting “perfect people” leading “perfect lives” is not only misleading, but is also harmful to the psyche of the users seeing these posts, mainly the youth, as many begin to feel self-conscious and unsatisfied with their own bodies and lives.

Applications like Tiktok and Instagram, in which many people share posts showing off their physique, have “made constant the ability to critique and analyze bodies in such a way that promotes body dissatisfaction, constant



body surveillance, and disorder thoughts – all of these factors that can potential lead to very serious eating disorders” (Klein, 2013).

A recent phenomenon gaining more attention has been labeled “Snapchat dysmorphia” – when people experience a disconnect between what they actually look like and the filtered images they share on social media. Apps, such as Snapchat and Instagram, allow users to put filters on their photos and videos that can smooth out wrinkles, plump lips, make eyes bigger, define cheekbones, and otherwise enhance a person’s appearance. Renee Engeln, a Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, described the effect of these social media apps and filters by pointing out that “the common man is losing perspective on what he/she actually looks like” (Ramphul, Kamleshun, and Stephanie G Mejas, 2015). Many plastic surgeons have even reported numerous patients asking for surgeries that correspond to what these filters show (ibid).

3. Conclusion

Because social media is such a new phenomenon, its long-term effects have yet to be fully evaluated. However, even in its current, relatively short lifespan, social media has affected nearly every aspect of society, completely changing the way people interact with one another and how the entire world functions. Mental health has not escaped the ramifications of mass social media use, and today’s youth will need to work out how to healthily navigate this landscape for the rest of their lives. Fortunately, an expanding body of research is focusing on social media’s effects on people’s mental health, and many platforms have begun enacting changes aimed at addressing these concerns. Instagram, for example, is testing removing “likes” from its platform in an effort to reduce anxiety and social comparison. At a Wired25 conference in 2019, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri revealed,

“[Instagram] will make decisions that hurt the business if they help people’s well-being and health.” While the youth of today will undoubtedly continue to face issues generated by these social platforms, implementing positive policies that prioritize mental health and raising awareness of the potential dangers of social media use are all important steps in the right direction (Constine, 2019).

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