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How Does the Addiction of Social Media Affect Adolescents?

Social media is defined as, “websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or cell phone” (Cambridge). There are many types of social media applications in this modern day and age: Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube. Social media addiction will also be talked about because it occurs when a person uses social media to the point where it causes negative problems in our lives. Social media addiction is also linked to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. You may ask, “What is addictive about social media?” There are many addictive factors, such as a user looking for information on said app, sharing or posting ourselves with other users, and entertainment purposes with viewing posts/videos via Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. There are three main types of people affected by social media. These age ranges are adolescents (aged 10-18), young adults (aged 19-21), and adults (aged 21 to 50). With social media evolving, adolescents will have more negative side effects, such as: self-image comparisons, cyberbullying, or sleeping problems.

The history of social media started back on May 24 of 1844, where “electronic dots/dashes were tapped out by hand via a telegraph machine” (Maryville). In 2006, Jack Dorsey “coded a site for Internet users to post 140-characters messages, calling the site twttr” (Rosenwald, pp. 1). There is a timeline for when some of the current types of media and social media applications. Blogs were introduced in 1999, while LinkedIn was the first social platform founded in 2002. In 2003, Myspace was launched followed by Reddit two years later, in 2005. 2012 was the launch of Google Plus by Alphabet, Google’s parent company. Unfortunately, Google Plus was stopped in 2018 due to a security breach. After 2012, four years later, in 2016, Chinese company Byte Dance launched TikTok, Vine’s successor to the world. A year later, in 2019, the Pew Research Center reported that “72% of American adults used some form of social media” (Maryville). With this, Jack Dorsey did not truly invent social media. Rather, on May 24 of 1844, an inventor named Samuel F.B. Morse sent a message via the telegraph machine from Washington to Baltimore. Over the years, the telegraph machines evolved to the social media apps we know and use daily.

Social media has its positive factors for adolescents. One aspect is the teens voicing their own opinions on their respective platforms. With voicing own opinions, users build confidence and spread positive, uplifting, and important messages. Another aspect is self-validation or positive feedback. Positive feedback gives teens the feeling of happiness with likes and comments on their own posts. A third aspect would be that social media reduces loneliness for teens. With the pandemic back in 2020, many teenagers were struggling with isolation/loneliness, and because of this, they turned to social media, which helped them tremendously. Building relationships and staying connected as well as offering support are two other positive factors. With this, users can communicate and share content with the world with applications such as Instagram or Snapchat. Education is another positive factor of social media. Users can watch videos or tutorials as well as learn to do new things to adapt skills, which leads to future successful career goals. Teens can also search up solutions to problems with which they are struggling. Information pages as well as counselling guides have been set up online for teens to learn from and try to apply to themselves. Adolescents find social media helpful in boosting their creativity skills. Income also plays a role as a positive factor. With a source of income, teenagers can create fun and engaging apps/games, sell online products, and make informative pages. Additionally, social media boosts confidence for teens. Chat rooms (direct messaging) let users share about their own thoughts and opinions, thus having higher confidence levels. There are two sides to everything, with positives discussed, now comes the negative aspects.

There are downsides and negative factors to social media. One aspect is self-image comparisons to online influencers leading to adolescents having low self-esteem. Another major aspect is online harassment or cyberbullying. With this, social media is making bullying a lot easier by enabling bad people to terrorize other teens on other platforms. An example of this might be creating a fake online profile then posting embarrassing pictures of the victim, leading to teens harming themselves or worse, taking their own lives. Anxiety/depression and isolation would also be added negative factors of social media. More time spent on social media leads to depression. The fear of missing out, known also as “FOMO,” has contributed to being one of the downsides of social media. It is a form of anxiety when a person gets scared of missing a positive experience that their friends are having. Sleeping problems can occur with more media consumption. With viewing and scrolling thorough posts on media apps, less physical activities are being done. Grades can also be lowered in school or university as well as work performance can be affected because of media usage. Real life relationships with family, friends, peers, or coworkers can be ignored or even lost due to more usage. Some feeds of users are filled with negativity as well as conflict, which is another downside of social media. Additionally, a daily stream or feed of non-realistic images or lives make people feel as if they are not successful as the influencers online. Teens can also overshare personal information as well as being hacked online, then having their identities put at risk.

Several factors lead to social media addiction and one of these factors is scrolling through posts or video after another. The design of the social media apps as well as its logo or app colors are dopamine signals that lead to app addiction. As a result of these dopamine signals and addiction factors, social media plays a vital role for adolescents. Another factor leading to media addiction would be spending endless hours scrolling and scrolling through TikTok, for example. Gratification is another factor that leads to social media addiction with receiving likes and comments. With most media platforms being on different platforms (iOS, Android, Windows, macOS, even web browsers), teens can log onto any device and continue scrolling their other posts. Additionally, our brains are wired to getting added info, so incoming and new pieces of information can be stimulating for teen users.

With regards to scrolling through posts online, blue light also has a part in the addiction space. Blue light is one of the several colors in the visible light spectrum, with a shorter wavelengths and higher energy than other colors. Blue light, unfortunately, surrounds us daily. However, we are exposed to more blue light because of LED (light-emitting diode) technology. Structures in our eyes that protects them from some kinds of lights, do not keep blue light out. Eye health experts and optometrists expressed concern about blue light as lots of users spend much time viewing content on media platforms at a close range. Fifty-nine percent of users have symptoms of digital eye strain, according to the University of California, Davis. Additionally, sixty-seven percent of users us two devices or more to view social media content.

As mentioned previously, our eyes are not highly effective with blocking blue light, with most visible blue light passing through the cornea and lens into the retina, converting the light into images for the brain to process. Constantly being exposed to this blue light can damage cells in the retina leading to vision problems including age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, or glaucoma. A vision study done by the National Eye Institute found that children are more likely to absorb more blue light from electronic devices than adults. While using devices and being active on social media, users blink less resulting in dry eye or eye strain. Signs of eye strain is headaches, neck/shoulder hack as well as blurred vision. A study done by Vision Council, twenty-seven to thirty-five percent of Americans experienced either headaches, blurred vision, or neck/back pain after using a device. Blue light affects the circadian rhythms of adolescents as it suppresses the release of melatonin, in turn making it more difficult to fall asleep. Without those signals from our brains, we cannot fall asleep properly. The blue light prevents REM sleep as well. Without this REM sleep, our emotions and memories are not well processed, and as a result, not feeling well and not doing well in school or at work. A point to make is that the melatonin levels rise in during the evening hours as our bodies know it is time to go to sleep, while in the morning hours, the melatonin levels decrease as our bodies recognizes that it is time to b e awake and be productive.

This year alone (2022), around 333 million people are addicted to or suffer from social media addiction. On average, people spend at least two hours and thirty minutes each day on social media. Additionally, there are currently around 4.6 billion social media users around the world. By generation (age ranges) of social media users, eighty-four percent are aged eighteen to twenty-nine, eighty-one percent are aged thirty to forty-nine, seventy-three percent are aged fifty to sixty-four, and lastly, forty-five percent are aged sixty-five or above. The most widely used social media sites, according to the Pew Research Center in 2021, YouTube was number one with eighty-one percent of users, Facebook at number two with sixty-nine percent of users, and in third place, is Instagram with forty percent of users. Additionally, this year alone, seventy-five percent of users use media platforms to research brands and, back in 2018, forty-nine percent of regular consumers depend on recommendations from influencers. Also in 2018, ninety-one percent of all users accessed social channels via their mobile devices (phones and tablets) and eighty percent of their total time spent on these media platforms occurred via mobile applications.

Between ten and forty percent of people reported being cyberbullied. Cyberbullying can occur via social media platforms, text messaging services, online forums, email, or gaming chatrooms. In terms of physical effects, skipping meals or avoiding school can result from being cyberbullied. Last year, in 2021, victims aged thirteen to fourteen rose from around 25.1 percent to 27.2 percent. Victims aged fifteen to seventeen declined from 27.7 percent to 16.2 percent. In terms of gender, in 2021, 23.7 percent of females were cyberbullied, 21.9 percent of males were cyberbullied, while 35.4 percent of transgender teens were cyberbullied (sample of 2,546 U.S. thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds).

There are many effects of social media addiction with some of these effects being: eating disorders, depression or anxiety, isolation or loneliness, or broken relationships with friends and family. Social media addiction can cause a person to develop mental health issues. Additionally, users lose their ability to focus on important tasks at hand, such as schoolwork or chores. Users feel an urge to constantly check their feeds for new updates or posts/stories. A physical effect of social media addiction is that users can gain weight from sitting on their couch or bed at home and not being active every couple of minutes. Forming relationships with people you do not know as well as missed opportunities for jobs, for example, are two other effects of media addiction.

Users have many ways to combat social media addiction. Going out with friends and actively contributing to their conversations can be a way to combat social media addiction. Another is to use the screen time feature on your device(s). Sports and exercise can get a person off social media for long periods of time. If you find yourself going on your phone, for example, while you are working, leave said phone in another room or give it to a family member, friend, or coworker, to ensure no distractions occur. Deleting the social media applications completely from your phone and turning off your phone during work hours can also be more ways to reduce social media consumption/usage. Daily application time limits are useful for making sure your phone or device is monitored and controlled. A tested method for reducing media usage is to turn your phone or computer’s display to grayscale or black and white, completely removing any colors on the screens.

Different types of media applications exist today, with more apps being made daily. With adolescents getting access and being exposed to these media platforms, there is the addiction factor. Multiple addictive factors exist, including the app design and its accompanying logo, instant gratification with likes and comments, or meeting new people and making connections. Some positives of social media are users saying their take on certain topics, watching video tutorials, and making an income, while with the negatives, lowered grades, lack of sleep, and low self-esteem. Cyberbullying was an important issue to be discussed as it is still happening worldwide, with some teens harming themselves. More negative stuff comes out regarding social media, and with that, adolescents can have problems with sleep, being bullied online, and body comparisons.

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