



New Trends
in Psychology

The Influence of Social Media on Young People's Self-Esteem

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, our world has experienced a strong acceleration of digitisation. Worldwide, 25% of people use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, etc. Social media is revolutionising the way we interact and connect. Research has shown that both the behavioural and neurological responses to social media abuse are similar to those caused by drug, alcohol or gambling addiction. Among the negative effects of excessive use of social networks are aggression, social isolation, loneliness, obesity, sleep disorders and deterioration of relationships with others. Among other things, dopamine is responsible for the sensation experienced when we perform a desirable action, such as eating sweets. Considering the above, it is necessary to take measures to mitigate the negative effects of screen abuse, especially in children and adolescents, to restore psychological normality and create a solid foundation for their harmonious development. So, it is important to emphasise that social networks are not per se harmful, but it all depends on how and to what extent we use them.

Keywords: teenagers; social media; mental health; depression; anxiety

1. What is Social Media?

Social media includes a variety of digital platforms, such as blogs, forums, social media apps (such as Facebook and Instagram), video sites (YouTube, Shutterstock), messaging apps (WhatsApp, Skype) and many others. With the accelerated

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digitisation of the world in recent years, a large part of the global population uses at least one social network. In 2018, about half of the world's population was active on at least one social network, and the users' number is on the rise. Against this backdrop, we have become increasingly connected but also more prone to anxiety and fatigue, often without identifying the exact causes.

In particular, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram have profoundly changed the way we interact and relate to others. While they bring many benefits in terms of expressing creativity and innovation, they raise an important question: how does social media affect young people's mental health?

Studies have shown that excessive use of social media can lead to addiction, similar to substance or gambling addiction. Young people, who want to stay connected, face the risk of negative effects on their mental well-being due to this addiction.

In the United Kingdom, a fairly large survey was carried out on a group of high school and university students or recent university graduates, in which they were asked about the influence of social media platforms on their lives. The study found that over 90% of them use the Internet mainly to socialise online. It was estimated that almost 100,000 children and young people have severe depressive spectrum disorders. What's more, despite reports of cyberbullying, regulators have failed to take action.¹

2. Why Do Social Networks Make Young People Vulnerable?

Heavy use of social media can cause undesirable effects such as aggression, isolation, sleep disturbances and relationship difficulties. Studies show that approximately 19.8% of adolescents become addicted to these platforms (Ko et al., 2018).

Why are adolescents so vulnerable at this time of life?

As we form our identity, especially in adolescence, our self-esteem is very fragile. We seek validation and appreciation from others, especially from those close in age (see Nesi et al., 2015). Social networks facilitate this by allowing us to quickly receive feedback and validation through praise and comments. Increasing the speed

¹ <https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/instagram-ranked-worst-for-young-people-s-mental-health.html>.

of receiving this feedback translates into a much greater amount of information per unit of time that their brain has to process.

In addition to this, the incomplete and asynchronous development of certain brain regions contributes to adolescents' vulnerability. At this stage, the nucleus accumbens, which is responsible for rewards and impulsive behaviours, is mature, while the prefrontal cortex, or "voice of reason", is still developing (Casey et al., 2008). This makes young people more sensitive to immediate rewards and less able to assess the risks they might be exposed to because they lack the support of the "guardian of emotions" (the neocortex), especially concerning sharing personal information with strangers with whom they come into contact.

3. Social Media Addiction in Modern Society

To understand the mechanisms behind social media addiction, we need to understand the role of dopamine, the neurotransmitter of pleasure. When we receive likes on a post, dopamine induces a state of satisfaction, which motivates us to repeat the behaviour. After a while, our brain anticipatorily associates pleasure with the simple act of checking the phone, generating a need to repeat the behaviour to get the same dose of satisfaction. This can create a vicious cycle in which the need for dopamine becomes increasingly intense, and access to social networks becomes compulsive.

According to statistics, teenagers and young people who spend more than two hours a day on social networks are more prone to anxiety and depression. Viewing posts reflecting the seemingly perfect lives of others can make young people feel that they are not living their lives as they "should". In reality, they only see carefully edited and cherry-picked versions of reality that the authors carefully present to give an unrealistic picture of themselves.

The lack of a stable anchor into reality can become a challenge in a society where everyone wants to stand out, promote themselves, and become influential.

Due to the above-mentioned tendencies caused by unrealistic images and scenarios, young people tend to set their expectations too high, which in turn leads to a loss of self-confidence (as those expectations may never be fulfilled). Further, the "chase for perfection" leads to personality disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Studies have been carried out to be able to detect depressives who are present on social networks by analysing their posts. The results have been beyond expectations,

as the software in question identifies depressives with high accuracy by analysing their posts.

There is a very visible discrepancy between female teenagers who are present on social networks for a longer time and those who do not use these networks at all in that they are more self-oriented. By focusing on these aspects, they tend to become more anxious and dissatisfied with themselves, feeling useless and unable to adapt. Unfortunately, due to the dissonance between what they see and what they think they should be (and are not), they end up with extreme feelings of non-acceptance and live at the expense of other people's happiness.

Having said that, we can say that spending a long time on social media opens wide the floodgates of control over emotional regulation, which is affected by following "influencers" who are packaging dreams. The consequence is that we lose sight of the essential aspects of our lives and forget to focus on our growth as fulfilled people but also on achieving the goals we set for ourselves. Today's society cannot disconnect from social media, this is a near-impossibility, but we need to realize that life takes place in a material reality and not a virtual one.

4. Psychological Consequences of Intensive Use of Social Networks

Heavy social media use is associated with depressive symptoms and low self-esteem, caused by our tendency to constantly compare ourselves with others (Vidal et al., 2020). Young people who are connected to social media by the hour expose themselves to a "highlight reel" of other people's lives - only the positive, happy moments - which can contribute to the feeling that their lives don't measure up.

Using devices before sleep is also linked to poor-quality sleep. Blue light emitted from screens interferes with the secretion of the sleep hormone melatonin, delaying falling asleep and reducing sleep quality (Harvard Health). Disconnecting from social media becomes difficult for teenagers due to the fear of missing something important), leading to anxiety and sleep disturbances.

Another attitude identified among teenagers is aggression (Ko et al., 2009). These aggressive displays are increasingly common among boys, both online (when they get into fights as a result of "flaming") and when they see each other face to face. One possible explanation could be that under anonymity, they lose their individuality. The fact that their neocortex does not have sufficient control over their feelings of shame and guilt (which are otherwise inhibited) leads to antisocial

behaviour. As they are almost permanently connected to the network, the hostility and aggression they show online become manifest in real life.

5. Ways to Reduce Negative Impact

To combat the negative effects of social networking, we can take some useful steps:

a) Limit time spent online: Setting a maximum time of use (e.g. one hour per day) can reduce the risk of depression associated with social media.

b) Choosing positive content: Steer towards accounts that inspire positivity and avoid toxic ones.

c) Regular digital detox: Regular breaks from social media help maintain mental equilibrium (for example, we can spend a weekend or a week in the mountains without Internet access).

d) Real-life activities: Replace online time with hobbies or time spent with family.

e) Avoiding comparisons: Awareness that what we see on social media is an idealized image and that it is healthier to focus on our own achievements.

6. Conclusion

While the benefits of social networks cannot be denied, they are an integral part of our lives and their excessive use will, as we have seen in our analysis, have devastating effects on mental health. It is up to us to determine the extent and limits of their use to minimize their harmful influences on us. Education on responsible use of social media is essential to prevent depression, sleep disorders and other related problems.

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