

The Dark Mental Realities of Social Media

Michelle Muthiaru

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

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In an era where relentless scrolling trains our thumbs, creating a disconnection between teenagers' brains and digits, mental health begins to plummet quickly. It starts as little as the comparison of a model that pops up on a screen, to looking in the mirror pointing out every single insecurity, social media can create an unhealthy narrative on what someone is supposed to look like, act like, and talk like that can become addicting. In the article, "How Social Media Affects Your Teen's Mental Health: A Parent's Guide." from *Yale Medicine*, Kathy Katella (2024) highlights social media's ability to addict teens along with the risks of cyberbullying, depression, anxiety, loss of sleep, and body dysmorphia. She highlights that there's evidence linking social media use to the decline in well-being among teens, suggesting a negative impact on them. Although she notes the negative impact social media can have on teens, she also states that in making healthy content, social media can be somewhat beneficial to some people. I agree with Katella that social media is connected to the plummet of teens' mental health and how it can push negative ideologies on teens at such an early age. Teens are at a time in their lives where they're still discovering themselves and their place in the world. When they see others on social media seeming to have it all, it intensifies their insecurities as they compare themselves. Social media can create this distorted view of reality where everyone else seems to have it all together, which can make teens feel even more insecure about themselves. It's like a constant highlight reel of other people's lives, and when teens fall short of those seemingly perfect standards, it can take a toll on their self-image and sense of belonging. It's time to take a stand and make a long-lasting effort to eliminate the addiction and mental health issues put upon teens and instill positive and empowering content. Initiating comprehensive measures, including age-appropriate

regulations, mental health education, and fostering a culture of responsible online behavior, can contribute to shrinking the effect of social media on teens.

Katella (2024) emphasizes that **teens'** mental health is increasingly linked to social media use, with risks including loss of sleep and emotional well-being. I strongly agree with this as it goes with emerging concerns about how much social media affects teens without them even knowing it. Katella (2024) starts by asserting her opinion on how the impact of social media on teens' mental health is substantial. She uses a quote from a recent study by Vivek Murthy stating, "There is a growing body of evidence indicating the harmful effects of excessive social media use on young people's mental health." Teens often use social media as a break from the world whether it **is** to express themselves by posting content, endlessly scrolling through meaningless posts, or connecting with friends, there's no doubt that excessive social media use is not healthy for the brain. **In my experience, scrolling endlessly through social media has often caused me to throw away my responsibilities and lose time, whether it be putting aside my homework or studying. In turn, this has made it so much harder to learn certain material and retain information because I'm not dedicating enough time to my studies.** Katella (2024) expands on this by stating, "Frequent social media use may be associated with distinct changes in the developing brain, potentially affecting such functions as emotional learning behavior, impulse control, and emotional regulation." In this day and age of almost everything being digital, it's apparent that people will be exposed to social media regardless of **whether** they actively seek it or not, it all depends on how they deal with the exposure to it.

Trevor Haynes, a writer for *Science in The News* (2018) states that social media usage is linked to the biology of the brain. Haynes (2018) pulls in a study introduced by **psychologist** B.F. Skinner in the 1930's. In this study, Skinner shows the relation between rats and the dopamine

that is produced in their brains increases when they are rewarded with something at unpredictable times. Haynes (2018) relates social media usage and this study by stating that humans do exactly this by making it a habit to check delivered notifications purely out of habit because they are done at random. In turn, this creates a reward stimulus in the brain making people addicted to checking their phones making it more likely to go on them. Haynes (2018) also explains, “Instagram’s notification algorithms will sometimes withhold “likes” on your photos to deliver them in larger bursts. So, when you make your post, you may be disappointed to find fewer responses than expected, only to receive them later. Your dopamine centers have been primed by those initial negative outcomes to respond robustly to the sudden influx of social appraisal. This use of a variable reward schedule takes advantage of our dopamine-driven desire for social validation, and it optimizes the balance of negative and positive feedback signals until we’ve become habitual users.” Growing up in the social media era, I’ve noticed its increasing presence in my life, making me somewhat attached to my device. In the age of COVID-19, while I was bunkered away in my house, I often found myself on my phone scrolling through social media because I didn’t have any interaction with the outside world. This caused me to use my phone as my main source of communication. The obsession with my phone due to the dopamine response I got from using social media, eventually led to me becoming socially awkward when talking to someone in person. My phone addiction also extended to pushing back schoolwork and spending time with family and friends. This routine not only affected my physical and mental health, but it also created a false reality in my head that caused me to believe everything I saw on the internet. Even now, although I can live without my phone, I still find myself scrolling through social media for an extended amount of time.

Even though social media is posed mostly as a bad thing, at times, it has also helped me a great deal. Madeline Holcombe, a writer for CNN health states in the article “Teens say their experience on social media is better than you think. Here’s why”, “In total, 80% said social media gives them some level of connection to what is going on in their friends’ lives, 71% said it’s a place where they can show their creativity, 67% said social media reassures them that they have people to support them through tough times, and 58% said it makes them feel more accepted” according to a survey that asked teens ages 13-17 what they really think about social media. While I do believe that social media poses some negative effects on mental health, it can also bring out some good. Examples of positive effects that social media can have would be if I am stuck on a homework problem, I can often look at a video on the popular social media app known as TikTok that would thoroughly explain how to execute that problem in a way that I understand. Even down to the sole purpose of using social media as an outlet to communicate with friends and family, especially during COVID-19, it's a great way to keep in touch. Holcombe (2022) emphasizes the need for social media during the COVID-19 era by saying “Especially during the pandemic, the kids Icard worked with were grateful they could still connect with one another, she said. And if encouraged the right way, Icard has seen social media as a good way to showcase talents and humor.” The idea that the use of social media in times of need can be used for good or bad further perpetuates the idea that it all falls on how it is utilized. Social media platforms also play a significant role in creating and fostering supportive communities. People from around the world facing similar challenges or situations often find peace and understanding in connecting with others who share their experiences. While finding people in the same situation as you is easy, it is also important to balance online interactions with in-person ones to ensure a realistic approach to good mental health and well-being. With this,

Katella (2024) emphasizes the fact that social media [hurts](#) teens, she goes on to say that there's an extent to the negativity that comes with social media. Almost everything that people encounter has a negative consequence as well as a positive [one](#). It comes like drinking water or eating fruits and vegetables, a good balance of it is great for your health, but too much of it has a downside to your health. *Mayas, MD, from Yale Child Study (2024)* explains that as well as watching TV, social media also has pros along with cons when it comes to teens. This highlights the need for a balanced perspective when evaluating the substantial effect social media has on younger people.

Recognizing both the positive and negative aspects is crucial for people on social media to understand. In my life, I try to implement ways in which I can balance my usage of social media with my school, work, mental health, physical health, and family and friend time. As I stated before, the age of [COVID-19](#) condensed me into a time where I didn't have the balance with the connection to my phone and connecting with people in person which created a decline in my mental and physical health. Some of the things I have done to improve this include not using my phone when I am talking to another person, doing homework, eating, or before bed. This routine helps me create a balance in my social media usage in order to maintain good mental health and connection with the people around me. Along with the explanation of how social media can be detrimental to teens' mental health, Katella (2024) gives insight into how social media can not only create unhealthy standards on how someone is supposed to look like, live like, and act like, there is also extremely harmful content that can be exposed to teens at an early age. It is no secret that extensive exposure to unrealistic or unattainable lifestyles and physical ideals on the internet can potentially trigger eating disorders or body dysmorphia. The study conducted by *PLOS Global Public Health (2021)* highlights the concerning link between

online content and negative impacts on mental health, emphasizing the need for awareness and caution in using the internet. Small changes in my routine such as spending more time on my phone caused me to spend more time focusing on my insecurities. The increase in social media usage condemned me to compare myself to others and slowly pick apart things about myself, whether it was my appearance, achievements, or lifestyle choices. This constant comparison eroded my self-esteem and contributed to feelings of anxiety. With the help of slow improvements such as limiting screen time and spending more time with friends and family, I slowly regain my self-confidence and self-worth. Although I took a slow route to self-improvement, I also believe it's important to kill the cycle of continuous screen usage before it starts and starts to take a toll on your mental health and well-being.

Excessive internet use, especially on social media, poses significant risks to the mental health of teenagers. Kattela (2024) exemplifies this fact by stating, “Exposure to social media can overstimulate the brain’s reward center and, when the stimulation becomes excessive, can trigger pathways to comparable addiction.” Starting from around 1995, it’s hard to remember a time when technology hasn’t been a part of people’s lives. Even now, it’s easy to find a time when there has been lost time by brainlessly scrolling through social media which can become addicting. Muacevic and Adler writers for the *National Library of Medicine* (2023) state, “Additionally, excessive screen usage has detrimental effects on social and emotional growth, including a rise in the likelihood of obesity, sleep disorders, and mental health conditions including depression and anxiety. It can obstruct the ability to interpret emotions, fuel aggressive conduct, and harm one's psychological health in general." There is an urgent need to address the relationship between teens' mental health and social media. It’s time to take into consideration the potential benefits and harms to ensure there is a healthy balance of social media for everyone.

In a world powered by digital interactions, understanding how to navigate the impact of social media on teen's mental health is more critical than ever. Whether it is reading a book for 10 minutes, going on a walk, or indulging in family conversations, it's all a great start to eliminating the dangers of excessive social media use and mental health issues and will be essential in promoting an overall well-being. In the realm of social media's impact on teens' mental health, where the endless scroll once seemed like a whirlwind of disconnection and comparison, it has now morphed into a journey of self-exploration, where each swipe unveils new insights and opportunities for growth, leading to an importance to balance between our digital and offline worlds.

Authors note: I feel like the first version of my essay lacks clarity and has too many run on sentences. The edited essay opts for simpler language that is easier for readers to grasp, avoiding the use of complex words that might take away from the understanding of the essay. By breaking down some of the concepts into more straightforward terms, the revised essay ensures that its message is accessible to a wider audience making readers able to follow along better. My main focus when editing was to make everything flow together without leaving the readers confused. Starting with the first paragraph, I noticed that it didn't go into enough depth and detail which I included by expanding more on the point I'm trying to get across. Although I believed that this starting paragraph was pretty good, I still wanted to add more detail to tie it all together while also adding in small details like editing the grammar or formatting of some sentences. With the second paragraph I didn't believe it needed much editing overall, but it lacked personality, so I added a short personal experience to it because before, it mostly just consisted of details. The same idea goes for the third paragraph, I just wanted to add a little personality to the mix. I believe the fourth paragraph was structured well and tied together all that I wanted to say while

including good grammar. The fifth and final paragraph only needed a conclusion to tie the whole essay together and make it more interesting to readers. Throughout the essay, I also added small edits to grammar, punctuation, page numbers, and reference page to make sure my reader also doesn't have a hard time following what I'm trying to say.

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