

The Negative Impact of Social Media on High School Students during COVID-19

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Abstract: Social media is an irrefutable part of students' lives in this day and age. Although it can be used as a tool to connect and spread information; most social media platforms center around superficial posts and content that often have a detrimental effect on high schoolers focus and self-esteem. There have been many surveys that show the use of social media amongst young adolescents is widespread and the number continues to increase with every passing year. Therefore it is crucial to be able to observe the effect that prolonged social media use is having on students and how to alleviate any negative outcomes. Social media has made such a big impact in students' lives because they start to feel affected by what they see and surround themselves with. Students experience negative mental health outcomes because of what they are seeing on social media by comparing themselves to strangers, friends, and influencers which leads to problems with body image and body dysmorphia. Research also showed that students were struggling more because they were new to the idea of having to talk to people in person. Being isolated from people caused them to lack the ability to interact with others. Being on social media for countless hours, affected their academics and the way they learn. Finally, social media has affected students through their mental health. They experience lack of sleep, lack of energy, and start to see behavioral changes to themselves. Overall, students' daily lives have been changed through social media because of the way it changes the way they act, feel, and communicate with others.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image, High School Students, Academic Outcomes, Mental Health, COVID-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

The internet is often heralded as the most significant technological development in the last century. There is no denying its impact on generations of children, especially in the modern age. Most children are comfortable with navigating the internet and electronic devices even before they can read and social media is something they have never lived without. There are a plethora of social media platforms that are accessible to almost everyone with internet connection- although these sites were created with the intention of connecting the world and allowing people to share about their lives; over the years social media has gained notoriety as an unsafe environment especially for students. However, with the COVID-19 outbreak in recent years for a while social media was the only way to remotely connect and communicate with people. This necessity facilitated the further growth of a lot of these platforms; and to many high school students apps like instagram, twitter, and facebook are a non-negotiable part of their everyday lives. As social media continues to permeate almost every aspect of our lives there has been extensive study done on its impact not just culturally but also towards the individual. Especially within the last few years social media platforms have garnered a reputation for aggression under anonymity. In many schools social media is now an integral part of how the curriculum is distributed to the students. With that in consideration almost all students in America have at least some type of access to social media. This paper will explore the negative impact that social media has had on especially young adults pre and post COVID-19. In particular how social media has impacted multiple aspects of students' lives: the academic, social, and mental. Although it is clear that social media is now an irrevocable part of our lives it is important to be aware of the impact it has on students especially if it is detrimental.

II. INCREASE IN SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Even with no data it is evident that social media has taken over the lives of adolescents and young adults. Social media especially within the last decade has completely changed the social, academic, mental landscape for students across this generation. Surveys have shown that As of September 2009, 93% of American teens between the ages of 12 and 17 had online access and 72% of 16-29 year olds were using social networking websites, which is significantly higher than the 39% of internet users ages 30 and up who use these sites⁵. It is safe to assume that these numbers are much higher now, and that almost all school age individuals within the US have some sort of exposure to social media. Since these networking sites are a newer form of media it is hard to predict the long term consequences of constant exposure to this type of content. As more and more people join and post on sites like instagram, facebook, and twitter the type and amount of posts and pictures that young adults are harder to filter or censor.

Most people use social media for entertainment and social interaction; especially in the age of COVID-19 it became even more necessary to interact remotely. As a result of the pandemic social media became an even stronger presence in our lives, and for a prolonged period of time many students were learning and interacting with each other completely online, many schools even adopted their own forms of social networking sites in order to keep students connected. Due to this temporary complete shutdown of public social services there have been some arguments that social media should be developed and used even further for students especially in the learning-teaching process by taking student habits and penchants for social media into consideration and using it to create effective strategies for teaching⁹. Regardless of its potential for use in education; social media usage is exponentially growing therefore it is relevant to know the effects that it could potentially have on especially the students who are spending a prolonged period of time on these sites.

III. SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Social media has completely changed how we put out and consume information. Although social media was a large part of students' social lives even before the pandemic; the subsequent quarantining caused these platforms to experience a new wave of attention and importance. Especially in our modern age, "During recent infectious disease outbreaks, social media networking sites have functioned as firsthand information channels from which the public can obtain disease-related information and exchange it with their family, friends, and neighbors in real time" (Jang, 2019). Due to the necessity of social media as a means of information even more people flocked to sites like twitter and facebook in order to not just keep up with loved ones but also the world at large. It is clear that social media has had an impact not just on how individuals communicate, but how governments and media outlets inform the public about pertinent news.

As students continue to only communicate through remote means for a prolonged period of time there are questions as to whether this will have a lasting effect on their social lives. Communication in person and online vary wildly and there is the possibility that increased reliance on social media to connect could lead to more serious long term issues. In a study by Oh and colleagues they found that, after testing multiple experiments they saw fear as a big component of judgment which led to people feeling more scared, angry, and anxious around others. One of the main sources of this anxiety was the stress of having to transition from communicating remotely through social media to communicating in person. Many people reported feeling more self conscious and more fearful of judgment, and many participants felt that people were different online versus in person⁸. After COVID-19, schools were shut down leading students to do school online. Students were not able to interact with other students, teachers, or friends for over a year. Since then, schools started opening back up, but left students with anxiety when it came to social interactions. As students have had to self isolate they have increasingly started to rely on social media as the only way to keep in contact with their peers and the world at large. Since so much social interaction has been happening on social media, many students are more uncomfortable with the idea that everything needs to happen in real time with no room for avoidance. Although in normal circumstances many students would have no choice but to interact with one another in person at least in a school setting; with online schooling becoming more of a viable option during and after the pandemic it seems as if some students will see the consequences of drastically decreasing real in person interaction with their peers.

IV. MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Social media and the rise of social media stardom has had an irrefutably negative impact on the mental health of our society as a whole, but has been particularly harmful for this generation of young adults whose world view has been completely warped by what celebrities and "influencers" are doing and wearing on their posts. "Exposure to magazines and television may lead to body image dissatisfaction and eating disordered symptomatology among girls and women"¹⁰. So we can see even before the rise of social media how body image as presented by the media could lead to negative mental outcomes.

However, with platforms getting ever more accessible it is plausible for girls as young as thirteen to see posts and post themselves. While before it could be argued that thoughts of body dysmorphia are usually self induced; through platforms like instagram and twitter it is now possible to get instant reactions and scrutiny about your appearance and actions.

Body image has become one of the main issues especially for high school students. Students are able to see other people and their lives on social media. They compare their lives and themselves to people that they might see as “better.” By comparing themselves to others, they are constantly putting themselves down in a way where they feel that they are not good enough. One main problem was body images and body dysmorphia that were caused by comparing other peoples’ pictures to themselves. “Dissatisfaction with body shape as well as valuing a slim body, and abnormal eating attitudes and behaviors can put adolescents at risk for eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa...”⁴. Although most people are aware of the fact that the things that they see on social media are usually airbrushed and editorialized there is still increasing evidence that social media plays a powerful role in the formation of eating and body image disturbances such as body dysmorphia, anorexia, bulimia, and many others. The scope and reach of some social networking sites are vast and are able to reach a large audience of people even though the posts that usually garner the most attention are of a select few. As described by Thompson, “the internalization of societal ideals regarding attractiveness is a potent...modify their behaviors in a dysfunctional way to model media-promoted images”¹⁰. Therefore even though there is a practical understanding that social media is airbrushed, there is no escaping the way these images affect body image and self-confidence. For example, in a randomized study, female participants reported a more negative mood after just 10 minutes of browsing their Facebook account compared with those who browsed an appearance-neutral control website¹. Many students start to compare how they look to conventional beauty standards set by the celebrities that are trending, and now with the growth of social media they can also compare with each other the number of followers, likes, or shares they have in relation with their peers.

V. ACADEMIC OUTCOMES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Education is constantly evolving, and throughout history there have been many updates to how schools choose to operate. The development of the internet has had arguably the largest effect on how students learn within the last decade. With this innovation many of the educational tools that we used in the past like dictionaries and encyclopedias have become moot; but along with holding enormous amounts of easily accessible information the internet also became this generation's greatest distraction. For instance a study showed that, “While students mostly use social media for educational purposes, YouTube was observed to have the highest mean...Study results indicate that high school students use social media frequently for educational and entertainment purposes and use it less frequently for the purpose of social interaction”².

Although there are arguments that social media can actually enrich the materials students cover through broadening communication and collaborative learning, social media as a whole has been detrimental to student achievement. The use of social media and its purposes has differed over the years. A study showed that instead of studying students were spending more time on social media or playing online games. Moreover, since they are spending so much time on games and social media, many of the test scores were lower than before. Along with lower test scores they were also getting lower scores on their individual homework, and it also discussed how the students struggle in different ways because of the way they are learning or what they are doing online that affects their work. The article specifically brings up how students rely on social media which lacks actual support for the students, “Many students rely on the accessibility of information on social media and the web to provide answers...Our ability to retain information has decreased, and the willingness to spend more time researching and looking up good information has reduced, due the fact that we got used to the ease of accessibility to information on social media”⁷. With the dense amount of information available on those platforms it is often difficult to decipher which sources are credible, and as students become more dependant and trusting towards social media they become more resistant towards putting in work to find factual information.

Another outcome that is consistently associated with social media in students is lack of sleep and or a disturbed sleeping schedule. The amount of time students can now spend interacting with others goes beyond normal working hours. Social media has been suggested to be just as if not more addictive than cigarettes or alcohol. The consequences of this addiction is constant fatigue due to lack of sleep. Sleep deprivation could also be a sign of other mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. There is more than enough research that shows sleeping for fewer hours than the recommended duration on a regular basis is associated with attention, behavior, and learning problems. Without getting enough sleep, students are more likely to get frustrated and irritated. In addition, “Past studies have found that sleep disturbances caused by excessive social media use at night adversely affect daytime learning on campus and lead to poor con-centration during lecture”³. Since

students aren't paying attention because they lack energy to do their work or participate, their scores are evident to what they are doing. Without having enough energy and getting frustrated to do their work, they are not only causing problems with their academics, but also their mental health. The use of social media affects students' and their sleep, but it also leads to other mental health problems such as depression. For instance, Levenson reported that 30% of respondents used social media in the 30 min preceding their bed time and subsequently experienced disturbed sleep. Five minutes turn into 30 minutes, and 30 minutes turns into hours before many people are able to go to sleep. Most students spend their last waking moments on social media looking at and commenting on posts, only to go back on social media in order to coordinate or do their school work. In this way the effects of social media on student performance is two-fold- the ease of information makes it easy for students to become lazy or get exposed to false information and also the amount of time spent on social media takes time away from more important tasks like studying or sleeping.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper examines the negative effects of social media on high school students' individual achievements along three factors: the social, mental, and academic. Knowing that this age group is particularly vulnerable to the influence of social media; it is important to have a grasp on the effects of these sites on students especially after the pandemic as more and more people choose to continue their schooling online. Although it is common knowledge that students are spending extended amounts of time on their phone, more research could be done to see the direct effects that social media sites have on student achievement. In addition, the amount of data on the effects of social media on students who were going to school online during the pandemic could be more extensive. Social media used as a tool could be a tremendous resource for both students and educators but there has to be a clear understanding of its effect on people's psyche in order to design a method that is beneficial over the long term. In addition to the academic consequences of uncontrolled posting there is enough evidence to conclude that the unrealistic beauty standards that many students face have to do with what they see everyday in the media. As access to the web and social media networks continue to get more advanced and widespread it is difficult to see media reverting back to what it was before. With that being said, more research needs to be put in in order to make sure that this tool for communication and connection be used to the benefit of society with long-term benefits.

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