

The impact of social media on adolescent mental health: positive or negative?

Millie O'Dair

Year 4, Medicine, University of Bristol

Email: mo15606@bristol.ac.uk

Background

Today's adolescents, 'Generation Z', have grown up with the internet and social media, with Ofcom figures indicating that 70% of 12–15 year olds have a social media profile.¹ In such an increasingly digitalised world, questions are starting to be asked about how social media affects the health of adolescents. Studies have looked at the dramatic changes social media has brought about in the way people communicate and the its impact on both behaviour and psychological wellbeing.² Data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study indicate that compared with the millennial generation, levels of depression are two-thirds higher and levels of self-harm are one-fifth higher in Generation Z and this is linked, in part, to the associated increase in social media use.¹ This article is a review of the current research findings on the impact of social media on adolescent mental health. The findings to date indicate that more research is needed as no conclusive results about the impact of social media have been reached as yet. However, emerging evidence does suggest that, with closer regulation and education on usage, social media can have a positive impact.

Introduction

Over the last few years, the increased use of social media has sparked controversy in the news. High-profile stories, such as the suicide of Molly Russell in 2017, which has been linked to social media use, led to a Government White Paper on online harms calling for stricter regulations to keep online users safe.³ Actual research in this area seems limited and approaches used in older studies on internet use and its impact on adolescents need to evolve to encompass the wide range of social media in use today.⁴ Comparing mental health in adolescents today with that in previous generations is not straight forward as definitions have changed and recent years have seen increases in people seeking help for mental health problems.⁵ Between 2010 and 2015, there was a 31% increase in teenage suicides, and this occurred in parallel to steep increases in screen time and social media use; Twenge et al felt that this cannot be a coincidence.⁶

Literature search

A literature search was conducted in July 2019 using PubMed and Google Scholar, combining the terms "adolescent"/"teenager", "social media" and "mental health". The search was limited to the past 5 years as this period is the most likely to capture information about social media rather than the internet as a whole. I tried to exclude papers focussing on screen time or general internet use rather than social media itself; however, this proved difficult as there was considerable overlap in many papers. The search found 400 papers, of which 14 were fully reviewed and seen as having the highest relevance for this article.

Summary of findings

Multiple studies identified clear potential for harm resulting from online activity and highlighted associations between social media use and depression.^{1,6,7} They found social media use could contribute

to sleep disturbances, low self-esteem and body image problems, all of which can contribute to mental health problems in their own right.^{1,2,8} There also appears to be a greater detriment to the health of teenagers who are more "emotionally invested" in social media — a group defined as feeling distressed or "disconnected" when unable to access social media. Greater exposure to social media increased the likelihood of an impact on self-esteem, anxiety and depression, and often meant the teenagers would be on screens into the night, resulting in poor sleep quality, in turn, having a negative impact on mood and behaviours.⁹

In contrast, some papers acknowledge potential benefits of social media as a means of reducing social isolation and, for teenagers who find it difficult to express themselves, as a means of communicating distress and reaching out for help.^{2,4,10} People with severe mental health problems may be more likely to share experiences via social media than the general population and a couple of studies have suggested this may contribute to their recovery.^{7,8,11} Although some images found on social media negatively impact individuals who self-harm or have eating disorders, widespread education about safe internet use may allow use of digital media in therapy and recovery.⁴

Statistics show a decline in teenage pregnancy, smoking, alcohol abuse and violence over the past 20 years.⁵ Therefore, it is questioned whether the dawn of the digital age can really be seen as the "downfall of a generation" as suggested by some papers.⁶ A higher online presence may simply reflect current problems rather than directly cause them; this concept makes it difficult to separate online and offline behaviours.⁵

Cyber-bullying is not only identified as having a particularly negative impact on body image and self-esteem¹² but also shows an association with an elevated risk of suicidal thoughts.⁸ A need for "likes" on Facebook or Instagram is causing individuals to change their appearance or behaviour. The constant scrolling through posts and pictures can also lead to teenagers making comparisons in terms of appearance or lifestyle, often contributing to low mood or feelings of failure if they perceive that somehow they do not measure up to their peers.⁸

It is argued that social media increases communication and connectedness;¹⁰ however, it has limitations when compared with the support, empathy and compassion that face-to-face relationships can build. In a paper interviewing teenagers, they acknowledged these negative impacts, speaking of fear of missing out (FOMO), loneliness and anxiety, but also talked of a need to remain connected.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that one paper reported that those with both high social media use and high in-person interactions had fewer depressive symptoms than those using social media with low in-person interactions,⁶ whilst another suggested that those that used social media to connect with friends and family had a decline in depressive symptoms compared with those using it in isolation.² These observations suggest that the problem lies not with social media itself but in the reduction in face-to-face interactions. Several

studies suggest social media has no associated risks if used in moderation. Screen time of 5 hours or more per day has been shown to be detrimental for teenagers, but the same studies showed that shorter periods have a more positive effect on wellbeing than none at all.^{5,6,13} These studies, therefore, suggest that social media should be seen as advantageous in that it allows a “connected world” but guidance should be given on safe usage and screen time.¹⁴ As most of the studies were observational, even those that suggested a negative correlation cannot prove a causal link and are, therefore, unable to provide definite proof. **Figure 1** summarises the main themes mentioned in the studies included in this review, indicating how many reported specific positive or negative effects of social media.

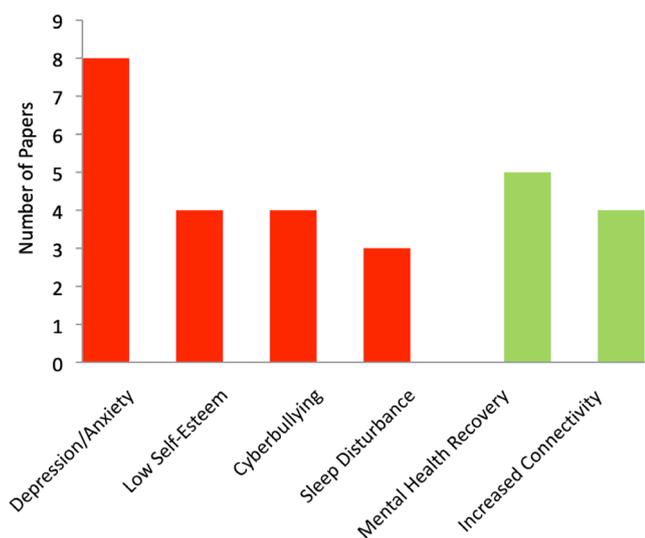


Figure 1: Number of papers included in this review that mention specific positive (green bars) or negative (red bars) effects of social media, by theme.

Discussion

A shift in attitude? Increases in social media use in adolescents today are likely to continue into their adulthood, reflecting the changes in habits and interactions of this generation. This, in turn, calls for adaptations and education on how to manage this.¹² The report leading to the Government White Paper called for a statutory code of practice for social media companies, stressing the importance of protecting children from harm when accessing social media sites but acknowledging the limited data available to assess the magnitude or nature of such harm.¹⁵

It seems that the focus should, therefore, be on adapting to social media use in everyday life by better understanding its risks and pitfalls and focusing on harnessing its positive aspects, namely, reducing social isolation, and incorporation into support and therapy. Encouraging education and reflection on social media use could be the first step in changing behaviours and introducing safer levels of use. Highlighting negative effects, the importance of a better night’s sleep and not having screens in bedrooms could see teenagers start to regulate use.¹

Conclusion Social media is a relatively recent development in the digital world, as is the constant access to it that smart phones allow. There are, therefore, limited empirical data and many papers only present anecdotal evidence in relation to the effects of social media on adolescent mental health. One difficulty in carrying out studies in this field is finding a control group, as it is difficult to identify a group of adolescents who do not use social media as a comparison. There is a clear need for more research in this area to gain a better understanding of the issues, especially as most studies thus far have been observational.

Evidence is emerging that seems to link increasing social media use to a negative impact on mental health, and reports like the UK Millennium Cohort Study are strong indicators that guidelines are needed on the safe use of social media. It is currently difficult to distinguish whether these effects are due to social media itself or the amount of screen time. However, it does highlight the need for social media companies to set out better regulations, not only on safety but also on hours of use.¹

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