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Social Media and Wellbeing: Cause for Concern

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About the Author



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Social media has completely changed the world within a timespan of twenty-five years as the first channel of social media was launched in 1997 (*A brief history of Social Media*, 2021). Whether people started utilizing social media platforms as early as MySpace or more recently when downloading TikTok during the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 4.48 billion people are using some form of social media worldwide as of 2022 (Dean, 2022). That is double the number of users since 2.05 billion people were accounted for in 2015, showing that social media is still growing at a monumental speed (Dean, 2022). Social media has many positives that pull people into using different platforms, whether for connecting, learning or even just pleasure. Although, this utilization has also proven problematic.

In October 2021, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook product manager, alleged in testimony to a Senate Commerce Committee that Facebook had been completely aware social media was negatively impacting people's mental health, and that the spread of false information was affecting society as a whole (Bartz, 2022). This is not the first time that a whistleblower like Haugen stepped forward to talk about how social media companies are aware of their wrongdoing. In the spring of 2022, Democratic

Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Republican Senator Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming introduced the Social Media NUDGE Act (Bartz, 2022). This proposed legislation is designed to force social media platforms to develop new features that address concerns ranging from social media addiction to lessening adverse content (Bartz, 2022).

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has been asked to work along with the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to conduct research and determine steps to take to reduce addiction to social media and lessen the spread of harmful content (Bartz, 2022). As of today (May 2022), Congress and the Federal Trade Commission are waiting to learn more from the findings of NSF and NASEM so they can arrange for a set of standards that social media platforms will be expected to follow. Platforms that would violate these changes would be held under the scrutiny of the Federal Trade Commission (Bartz, 2022). Since this has happened, Facebook, now Meta, has announced that they plan to implement new tools for their platform, Instagram, that are aimed to help both the issues of social media addiction and the spread of harmful content (Admin, 2022). Both legislators and social media platforms are aware of the harmful effects from the use of social media and, in particular, how today's youth are impacted, but who is ultimately to blame?

Young Girls: Be Careful

Studies have shown that teens spend up to nine hours a day on their phones using some kind of social media or messaging platform (Lucas, 2022). Research has also shown that young girls, ages 16 and younger, who have grown up with social media have increased levels of anxiety, depression, and a lesser view of their own body image compared to young girls who grew up without social media (Lucas, 2022).

Virginia Tech Professor Dr. Jimmy Ivory explains that the correlation between the negative effects of social media and the behavioral science shown by young girls today is an increasingly concerning worry for young girls specifically. Dr. Ivory goes on to explain that body image dissatisfaction has increased among young women who view social media posts of other women and compare themselves to these unrealistic images (Lucas, 2022). The rising use of social media has also increased the rise in "face tuning" and editing applications. Users are able to upload photos to these apps and completely change the way their faces and bodies look, creating unrealistic versions of themselves that are then shared to the digital world.

When Haugen leaked the information about Facebook, she admitted that the company was very aware of the toxic risks and how platforms like Instagram negatively affected

teenage girls' mental health (Bartz, 2022). Haugen provided research that Facebook kept internal, indicating that 13.5% of teenage girls said that Instagram worsens suicidal thoughts and 17% of teenage girls said that Instagram contributed to their eating disorders (Bartz, 2022). This information shows that platforms such as Facebook have been aware of the correlations between negative mental health and the use of their applications. However, nothing had been done to fix or even address these issues until this information was leaked to the public.

Young Men: What About You?

Media coverage seems to overlook young men in comparison to young women within the same age group. Unfortunately, research shows that young boys, specifically those sixteen years old and younger, are also greatly influenced by what they see on social media (*The impact of social media on boys*, 2021). Research conducted by Netsanity shows that boys as young as six years old are already developing body image issues from the content they are seeing through social media (*The impact of social media on boys*, 2021). Although there is little research available, (particularly in comparison to research on girls) studies have shown that boys too are experiencing the same effects as young girls in relation to social media and depression, anxiety, and decreased body image. There is a disproportionate amount of research and attention paid to boys and young men as compared to girls and young women. If young boys are enduring the same negative effects of social media as young girls, why is it that the media seems to not pay as much attention? Is it because there is less evidence? Could it be because “toxic masculinity”—the set of attitudes or expectations of behavior stereotypically associated with men – is installed in these boys at such a young age that they are not reporting the issues they may be going through? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer.

Who Is Accountable - The Social Platform or the User?

Research proves that there is a problem between social media and the effects it has on our youth. Who is responsible for allowing the negative effects social media has on the youth to have gotten this bad? There are many components to consider in this equation. Should the blame fall entirely on social media platforms? Dr. Ivory states that he believes that big technology and these social media platforms have been completely complicit, and something like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) may be helpful in fixing some of these major concerns relating to child safety (Lucas, 2022). The KSOA is designed to help parents take control of their children's online experiences to improve well-being and safety (*Blackburn & Blumenthal*, 2022). Now, this brings parents into the

equation. Could they be to blame? Although the KSOA has multiple features which protect, such as parent control options, and creates accountability for social media's harm to kids, it puts the responsibility on the parents for their children's experiences online. So, are parents to blame for allowing social media to get this far in affecting their children's wellbeing?

What complicates this sense of accountability is that many participate in this experience of social media. Social platforms, editing applications, parents, legislation, and so many more have all played their part in allowing this issue to get this far. Jack Johnson, a famous singer, said it perfectly in his one song "Cookie Jar," written about how no one will take the blame in our world and how online media contributes to this:

"It was you, it was me, it was every man,

We've all got the blood on our hands

We only receive what we demand,

If we want hell, then hell's what we'll have"

The hard truth is that a little bit of everyone and everything is to blame.

What's Next? Where Do We Go From Here?

Social media companies have been put under the spotlight as research shows that people are beginning to link their negative mental and physical health to various platforms. The question arises, where do we go from here now that know this information? There are a few action steps to move forward, and in some cases, have already begun:

1. Introducing New Laws

The Nudge Act that was referenced earlier is just one legislative move out of many happening all over the world. New York, for example, just introduced a new bill in December 2021 that aims to hold social media companies accountable for promoting misinformation, contributing to eating disorders or any other unlawful content that may be harmful to viewers (Hogan & Wayt, 2021). Lawmakers are becoming more strict, and for accountability purposes, this will force social media to address the concerns relating to wellbeing and the youth.

2. Limiting Screen Time

As stated above, teens are scrolling up to nine hours a day on social media websites, indicating that addiction to these sites is a very real issue (Lucas, 2022). Cutting back on social media has proven to have various benefits from getting a better night's rest to reducing anxiety and depression (Washburn, 2022). Smartphones have tracking capabilities where everything from our screen time to seeing which apps we use the most can be seen through our settings. There are also apps that can be downloaded, like Offscreen, which helps track phone usage and even sends reminders to live in the moment instead.

3. Reaching Out

Dealing with the negative effects of social media can make us feel very alone, however, there are many others that are dealing with the same struggles. There are support groups that specialize in everything from dealing with social media addiction to anxiety stemming from social comparisons. Talking about our mental health is important, especially for our youth. If there are no changes, the challenge of mental health issues stemming from social media will only escalate.

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