

The Impact of Social Media Use on Adolescent Mental Health and Suicide Rates

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive integration of social media into daily life has significantly influenced adolescent development, offering both opportunities for connection and presenting new challenges to mental health. This paper explores the dual-edged nature of social media's impact on adolescents, examining its role in shaping mental health outcomes and its association with suicide rates. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, the paper identifies key areas where social media affects adolescent well-being, including cyberbullying, body image concerns, and the dissemination of mental health misinformation. Additionally, it discusses the implications of these factors on suicide rates among young individuals, emphasizing the need for balanced approaches to social media use and mental health support.

Keywords: Adolescent Mental Health, Social Media Use, Suicide Rates, Depression In Adolescents, Anxiety And Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, social media has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary adolescence. With the proliferation of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter (now X), young people are now more connected than ever before. These platforms provide opportunities for creative expression, peer interaction, identity formation, and information sharing. However, they also introduce novel challenges that previous generations did not face—namely, the psychological and emotional toll of navigating life in a perpetually connected, digital world. As adolescents spend increasing amounts of time online, scholars, parents, educators, and mental health professionals have raised pressing questions about how this digital immersion impacts adolescent mental health and, more disturbingly, whether it contributes to the rising rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide among this vulnerable population.

The adolescent years are a period of profound transformation. Psychologically, adolescence is marked by increasing self-awareness, emotional volatility, sensitivity to peer feedback, and a search for identity and belonging. Physiologically, the brain undergoes significant restructuring, particularly in areas responsible for decision-making, emotional regulation, and impulse control. Socially, adolescents begin to detach from family dependence and seek autonomy through peer relationships. In this already complex developmental stage, the ubiquitous nature of social media introduces an environment in which every action, thought, or image can be shared, scrutinized, and evaluated in real time. The immediate feedback loop of likes, shares, and comments can become a powerful source of validation—or a breeding ground for insecurity, exclusion, and emotional distress.

This shift has not gone unnoticed by researchers and mental health advocates. Several epidemiological studies in recent years have documented alarming increases in mental health disorders among adolescents. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of high school students in the United States who reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness rose from 26% to 37%. Suicide rates among adolescents have also climbed significantly, now ranking as the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 24 in many countries. While causality is difficult to prove in such complex phenomena, a growing body of research suggests a correlation between high levels of social media use and poor mental health outcomes in adolescents.

The mechanisms through which social media influences adolescent mental health are multifaceted and often interrelated. For one, cyberbullying—defined as the use of electronic communication to bully or harass someone—has become a major concern. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can follow a child home, invade their private space, and operate around the clock, leaving victims feeling trapped and helpless. Furthermore, platforms like Instagram and TikTok often promote curated, idealized portrayals of life, which can lead adolescents to engage in harmful social comparisons. Seeing peers who appear more attractive, more popular, or more successful can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Another troubling phenomenon is the normalization and glamorization of mental health issues online. Certain social media trends, hashtags, and communities have been found to romanticize depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, sometimes inadvertently encouraging harmful behaviors. While some online spaces can offer support and foster open discussions around mental health, others propagate misinformation or even actively discourage professional treatment. This creates a confusing digital landscape where adolescents may struggle to differentiate between helpful guidance and harmful content.

Moreover, excessive screen time has been linked to disrupted sleep patterns, physical inactivity, and impaired academic performance—factors that indirectly contribute to mental health decline. Late-night scrolling, exposure to distressing content, and the addictive design of many platforms can lead to sleep deprivation, which is closely associated with depression and anxiety. The constant availability of social interaction can also lead to a state of hypervigilance, where adolescents feel compelled to remain engaged with their online personas at the expense of real-world interactions and responsibilities.

Despite these concerns, it is essential to recognize that social media is not inherently detrimental. Many adolescents use these platforms to build positive relationships, find communities where they feel accepted, and access educational or mental health resources. Social media can amplify marginalized voices, foster activism, and provide critical support networks for youth who might otherwise feel isolated. For example, LGBTQ+ adolescents have reported finding affirming communities online that they may lack in their immediate environments. Similarly, mental health awareness campaigns on social media can help reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior. Thus, the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health is not one-dimensional but rather depends on the nature, context, and intensity of usage.

The goal of this research paper is to explore the nuanced relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health, with particular attention to suicide rates. It aims to synthesize findings from contemporary research, evaluate the psychological and behavioral mechanisms at play, and assess both the risks and potential benefits of social media in the context of adolescent development. The paper will examine critical factors such as cyberbullying, body image concerns, social comparison, mental health misinformation, and screen time. It will also explore demographic variables, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and existing mental health conditions, to better understand which groups are most at risk.

Furthermore, the paper will investigate how interventions—both at the individual and systemic levels—can mitigate the adverse effects of social media while promoting its positive uses. This includes the role of parents, educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and the technology industry in fostering a healthier digital environment for adolescents. Strategies such as digital literacy education, ethical platform design, algorithm transparency, and clinical screening for social media-related stressors will be discussed.

Ultimately, understanding the impact of social media on adolescent mental health and suicide rates is not only a matter of academic interest but a public health imperative. As the first generation to grow up entirely within the digital age comes of age, society must grapple with the consequences of this unprecedented cultural shift. While the internet and social media offer tremendous opportunities for learning, growth, and connection, they also pose unique challenges that must be addressed thoughtfully and proactively.

By bridging the gap between research, clinical practice, and public policy, we can work toward solutions that support adolescents in leading balanced, resilient, and mentally healthy lives in an increasingly connected world.

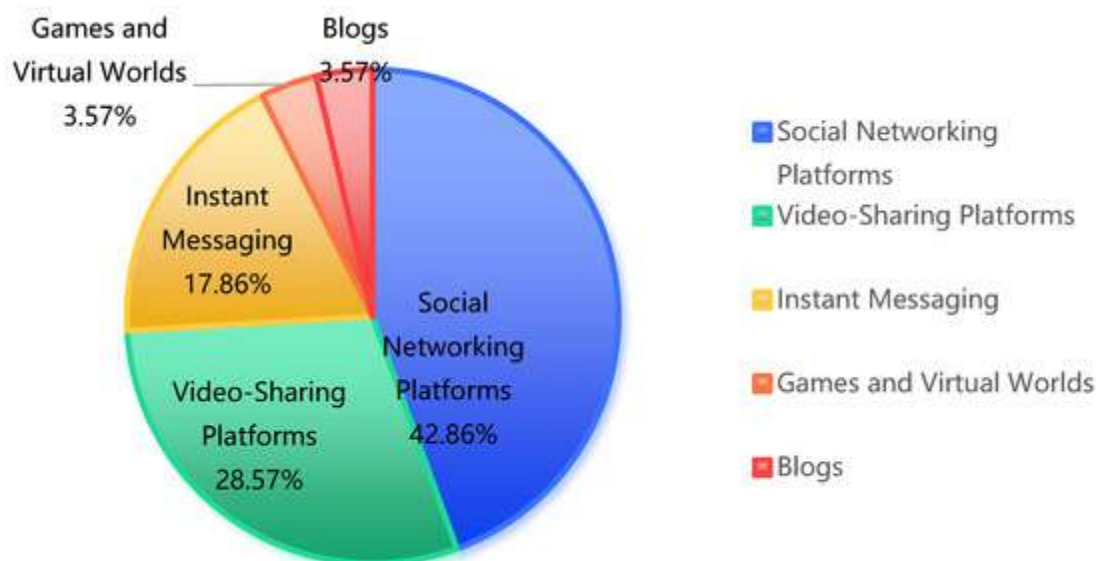


Figure 1.0: Impact of Social media on Mental Health

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant concern in the digital age, with adolescents being frequent targets. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur 24/7, making it more pervasive and challenging to escape. Victims of cyberbullying often experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Studies have shown that adolescents who are cyberbullied are at a higher risk of engaging in self-harm and contemplating suicide. The anonymity provided by social media platforms can embolden perpetrators and complicate the identification and support for victims.

Body Image and Self-Esteem

Social media platforms often promote unrealistic beauty standards, leading adolescents to engage in social comparisons that can negatively affect body image and self-esteem. The use of filters and photo-editing tools exacerbates this issue by presenting idealized versions of reality. Research indicates that exposure to such content can lead to body dissatisfaction, which is a known risk factor for depression, eating disorders, and suicidal behavior. Adolescent girls, in particular, are more susceptible to these influences, although boys are increasingly affected as well.

Mental Health Misinformation

The proliferation of mental health content on social media has led to the spread of misinformation. Many posts offer oversimplified solutions to complex mental health issues, potentially leading adolescents to misunderstand or mismanage their conditions. For instance, a study found that over half of the top 100 mental health-related videos on TikTok contained misleading information, including unproven treatments and misused therapeutic language. Such misinformation can delay proper diagnosis and treatment, exacerbating mental health problems among vulnerable youth.

Suicide and Self-Harm

The relationship between social media use and suicide rates among adolescents is complex and multifaceted. While social media can provide support and a sense of community, excessive use, particularly when associated with negative experiences like cyberbullying or exposure to harmful content, can increase the risk of suicidal ideation and behavior. Studies have found that adolescents who spend more than two hours per day on social media are at a higher risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts and attempts. The constant exposure to distressing content and the pressure to conform to online personas can contribute to hopelessness and despair.

The Role & Rise of Social Media in Adolescent Engagement

Over the past two decades, social media has evolved from a niche form of online communication into a global phenomenon that is deeply embedded in everyday life—especially for adolescents. This demographic has emerged as one of the most active and engaged user groups on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube. With smartphones now

widely accessible and internet connectivity becoming more affordable and reliable, adolescents are increasingly living parallel lives online, where much of their social development, entertainment, and information-gathering takes place.

The timeline of social media's rise aligns closely with the development of mobile technology. While early platforms like MySpace and Facebook were originally accessed through desktop computers, the widespread adoption of smartphones in the late 2000s and early 2010s dramatically increased the accessibility of social media. Today, nearly all adolescents in developed countries own or have access to a smartphone. According to the Pew Research Center (2022), 95% of teens in the United States report owning a smartphone, and 90% use social media daily. Many check their accounts multiple times per day, with some engaging almost constantly throughout their waking hours.

What distinguishes adolescent engagement with social media is not merely frequency, but intensity. Social media platforms are carefully designed to maximize user interaction through features like notifications, likes, comment threads, algorithmically personalized feeds, and content loops. These mechanisms create a feedback-driven environment that strongly appeals to the adolescent brain, which is particularly sensitive to social rewards and peer validation. During adolescence, the brain's reward centers are highly active, while regions involved in impulse control and long-term decision-making are still maturing. This neurological profile makes teens more susceptible to the "dopamine hits" associated with social media interactions.

The reasons adolescents engage with social media are multifaceted. For many, these platforms serve as essential tools for social inclusion, communication, and community-building. Teens use them to chat with friends, share updates, follow trends, and express themselves creatively. Video-based platforms like TikTok have become particularly popular for their entertainment value and the opportunity they provide for viral visibility. In many cases, adolescents report feeling pressure to stay active online to maintain social standing or avoid missing out on important peer interactions—a phenomenon often described as "FOMO" (fear of missing out).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated adolescents' reliance on social media. With schools closed and in-person interactions restricted, teens turned to digital platforms to maintain friendships, access educational content, and cope with feelings of isolation. This period highlighted both the resilience and the risks of adolescent social media use. While many benefited from digital connectivity, others experienced heightened anxiety, loneliness, and exposure to harmful content.

In conclusion, the rise of social media and the high levels of adolescent engagement are not coincidental—they are the result of technological innovation intersecting with the developmental needs and vulnerabilities of youth. While these platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for connection and creativity, they also demand scrutiny and guidance to ensure that adolescent engagement remains healthy and supportive of overall well-being.

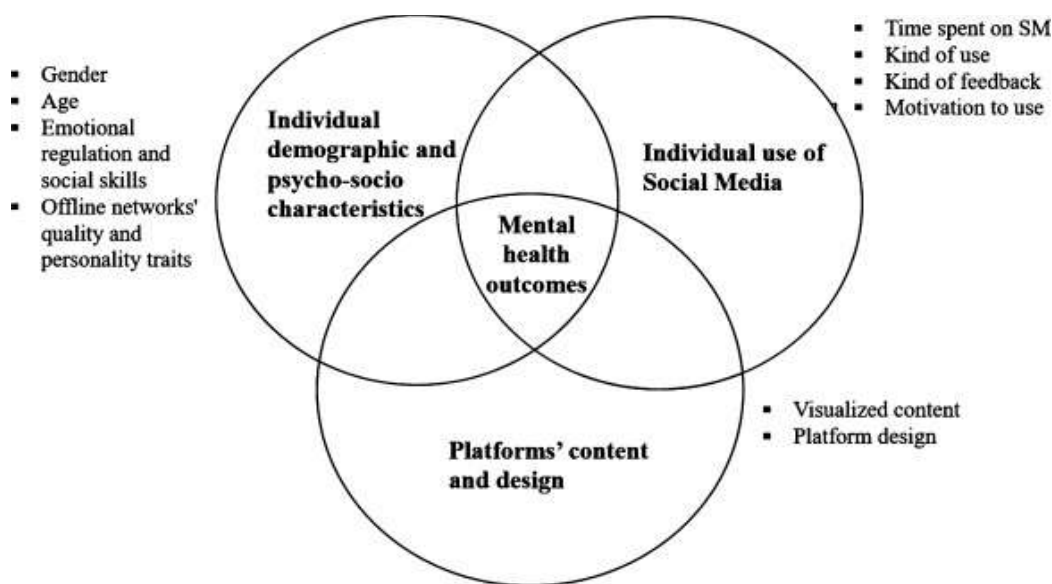


Figure 2.0: Social Media Use & Adolescent Engagement on Mental Health

Mental Health Implications of Social Media Use

The relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health is complex, multifaceted, and increasingly scrutinized by researchers, educators, and healthcare professionals. While social media can offer meaningful social connections and access to supportive communities, a growing body of evidence suggests that excessive or negative use of these platforms is associated with a range of adverse mental health outcomes in adolescents, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation.

One of the most widely reported psychological consequences of social media use is increased anxiety and depression. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to these issues because they are in a developmental stage marked by emotional sensitivity, identity formation, and a heightened need for peer approval. Studies have found a correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and symptoms of anxiety and depression, particularly when usage exceeds two or more hours per day. The constant stream of curated, idealized content can trigger negative social comparisons, causing adolescents to feel inadequate or left out.

Another significant concern is sleeping disruption caused by late-night social media use. Adolescents who engage with screens before bed often experience reduced sleep duration and poorer sleep quality. Sleep deprivation, in turn, has a well-documented link to mood disorders, impulsivity, and cognitive impairments. Notifications and the urge to check updates can interrupt rest and lead to what experts refer to as "social jet lag"—a misalignment between biological rhythms and digital habits that can impact emotional well-being.

Self-esteem and body image issues also figure prominently in the mental health implications of social media. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok emphasize visual content, where idealized and often digitally altered images dominate. Adolescents frequently compare themselves to these unrealistic standards, which can lead to dissatisfaction with their own appearance. Girls, in particular, have been shown to be more likely to experience body image concerns linked to social media, though boys are not immune. This can contribute to the development of eating disorders, social anxiety, and feelings of unworthiness.

In more severe cases, social media use has been linked to suicidal ideation and self-harm. Exposure to harmful content, including pro-suicide or self-injury forums and hashtags, can normalize or even glorify these behaviors. Some adolescents report feeling overwhelmed by online bullying, peer rejection, or social isolation exacerbated by their experiences on social media. While causation is difficult to establish definitively, correlations between heavy social media use and elevated suicide risk are increasingly supported by longitudinal studies and public health data.

Despite these risks, it is important to note that not all social media use is harmful. When used mindfully and in moderation, social media can promote mental health by providing a sense of belonging, access to resources, and platforms for creative expression and advocacy. Ultimately, understanding the mental health implications of social media use requires a nuanced approach—one that recognizes both its risks and its potential benefits. Support from parents, educators, and mental health professionals can help adolescents develop healthier relationships with technology, fostering resilience and well-being in an increasingly digital world.

Depression and Anxiety

Numerous studies have explored the link between social media use and mental health issues among adolescents. A scoping review of 43 studies found a consistent association between increased social media use and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Particularly, adolescents who spent more than two hours per day on social media platforms reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, with females being more affected than males.

Body Image Concerns and Self-Esteem

Social media platforms often promote idealized images and lifestyles, leading to unrealistic comparisons. This phenomenon can contribute to body dissatisfaction, especially among adolescent girls. Research indicates that exposure to curated content on social media can negatively impact self-esteem and body image, potentially leading to mental health issues such as eating disorders and depression.

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

The anonymity provided by social media can facilitate cyberbullying, which has been linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among adolescents. Victims of cyberbullying often experience profound emotional distress, and in extreme cases, these experiences have led to suicide.



Figure 3.0: Implication of Social Media Use

Social Media Use And Suicide Risk

The rising prevalence of suicide among adolescents is a growing public health concern, and social media use has increasingly been scrutinized as a potential contributing factor. While suicide is a complex and multifactorial issue—shaped by biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors—emerging research suggests that excessive or negative social media engagement may heighten suicide risk in vulnerable adolescents. The constant connectivity, exposure to harmful content, and pressure to maintain a particular online persona can all contribute to mental distress that, in some cases, leads to suicidal ideation or behavior.

One of the most concerning aspects of social media is its potential to amplify feelings of isolation, rejection, or hopelessness, all of which are known risk factors for suicide. Adolescents who experience cyberbullying, online harassment, or social exclusion on digital platforms often report higher levels of emotional pain and lower perceived social support. Unlike traditional bullying, which may be confined to school or other physical spaces, cyberbullying follows adolescents into their homes through their smartphones, creating an inescapable cycle of humiliation or torment. Victims of cyberbullying are significantly more likely to engage in self-harming behaviors and report suicidal thoughts than their non-bullied peers.

Another contributor is exposure to suicide-related content. On platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, and Instagram, there are communities and content streams that discuss, depict, or even glamorize self-harm and suicide. Although some of these spaces claim to offer support, they can inadvertently normalize or romanticize suicidal behavior.

Vulnerable adolescents may be influenced by the "contagion effect," wherein exposure to suicide-related content increases the likelihood of imitative behavior, particularly if the content is emotionally resonant or presented without appropriate warnings or context. In some tragic cases, suicide challenges or trends have gone viral, further endangering at-risk youth.

The emotional toll of constant comparison and performance on social media also plays a role in adolescent suicidality. Many platforms reward visibility, popularity, and aesthetic perfection, pressuring users to craft idealized versions of themselves. For adolescents who struggle with self-worth, this environment can be deeply alienating. Continuous exposure to peers who appear happier, more attractive, or more successful can reinforce feelings of inadequacy or despair. These distorted comparisons may push some adolescents to view their own lives as unworthy or irreparably flawed.

Despite these risks, it is important to note that social media is not inherently dangerous and can also serve as a lifeline for some adolescents. Online communities can offer support, connection, and resources, particularly for those who feel marginalized or isolated in their offline lives. Crisis helplines, mental health education, and peer support groups are increasingly present on social platforms, offering guidance and reducing stigma around mental illness and suicide.

Ultimately, the link between social media and suicide risk demands careful attention, ongoing research, and proactive interventions. Encouraging healthy online habits, monitoring harmful content, and promoting open conversations about mental health can help reduce suicide risk among adolescents and support their well-being in a digital age.

MECHANISMS LINKING SOCIAL MEDIA USE TO MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Social Comparison and Validation

Social media platforms often encourage users to compare themselves to others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth. The pursuit of validation through likes and comments can create a cycle of dependence on external approval, which may contribute to mental health challenges.

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

The constant stream of updates and shared experiences on social media can induce FOMO, leading adolescents to feel excluded or less satisfied with their own lives. This sense of missing out can contribute to feelings of loneliness and depression.

Sleep Disruption

Excessive use of social media, especially before bedtime, can disrupt sleep patterns. Poor sleep quality has been associated with various mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, among adolescents.

Cultural And Demographic Considerations

Understanding the impact of social media on adolescent mental health and suicide rates requires a nuanced examination of cultural and demographic variables. These factors significantly influence how adolescents perceive, engage with, and are affected by social media.

Cultural Norms and Stigma Around Mental Health

Cultural beliefs play a critical role in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward mental health. In many cultures, especially in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, mental illness is stigmatized, often perceived as a sign of weakness or a family disgrace. This stigma can prevent adolescents from seeking help when experiencing distress linked to online experiences. For example, in countries like India, even though suicide among students is rising, discussions around mental health remain limited. This cultural silence may exacerbate the psychological toll of negative social media interactions, as adolescents lack open channels for emotional support.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Access to technology, internet connectivity, and education varies widely across demographics. In low-income families or rural areas, adolescents may have limited digital literacy, making them more vulnerable to cyberbullying or misinformation. Conversely, in wealthier urban settings, adolescents may experience different stressors such as social comparison, academic competition, and performance pressure amplified by social media portrayals of success. Socioeconomic status also determines access to mental health services, with underserved communities often facing significant barriers to care.

Gender Differences

Research shows that adolescent girls tend to be more affected by social media than boys, particularly concerning body image and emotional well-being. Girls are more likely to engage in appearance-focused activities on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, making them susceptible to anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Boys, on the other hand, may be more exposed to aggressive content or gaming communities, which pose different types of psychological risks.

Ethnic and Racial Identity

Minority adolescents often face unique challenges online, including racial discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusionary behaviour. Experiences of racism or xenophobia on social media can lead to heightened stress and trauma. At the same time, these platforms may also serve as vital spaces for cultural expression and community-building, illustrating the dual-edged nature of digital engagement.

Globalization and Western Influence

Social media platforms predominantly reflect Western cultural ideals, which may conflict with local values and traditions in non-Western countries. This cultural dissonance can lead to identity confusion, internal conflict, or pressure to conform to foreign norms, adding to the emotional strain of adolescence.

Government & Social Interventions And Recommendations

Given the increasing evidence linking excessive or harmful social media use to mental health issues and suicide risks among adolescents, coordinated interventions from governments, social institutions, and community stakeholders are crucial. The following subsections outline actionable strategies and policy recommendations to mitigate these risks.

Policy Development and Regulation of Social Media Platforms

Governments must play an active role in regulating social media to protect young users. Key initiatives include:

Mandatory Age Verification: Enforcing strict age verification protocols to prevent underage users from accessing platforms unsupervised.

Content Moderation Policies: Collaborating with platforms to remove harmful content, such as cyberbullying, self-harm encouragement, and suicide ideation.

Time Usage Controls: Mandating tools that allow users, especially minors, to monitor and limit their screen time.

Transparency in Algorithms: Requiring platforms to disclose how their algorithms influence content visibility and user engagement, particularly around sensitive content.

These measures should be backed by legislation and compliance enforcement to ensure platforms are held accountable for the psychological safety of their users.

Digital Literacy and Safe Internet Education

Introducing structured digital literacy programs in schools is a critical step. These should focus on:

Understanding online risks (cyberbullying, misinformation, FOMO, etc.)

Developing healthy screen-time habits

Teaching media literacy to help students recognize unrealistic portrayals and reduce harmful social comparison

Encouraging respectful online communication

Curricula should be tailored by age group and cultural context and integrated into existing health or civics education courses.

Strengthening School and Community Mental Health Services

Schools and local governments must bolster mental health infrastructure to provide early intervention. Recommended actions include:

Hiring more school counselors and psychologists trained in adolescent mental health

Setting up peer-support networks or student-led mental health clubs

Creating anonymous helplines and chat services for students in distress

Conducting regular mental wellness check-ins and awareness workshops

Public Awareness Campaigns

Governments and NGOs should launch national and regional campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues and promote safe social media habits. These campaigns can utilize:

Influencer partnerships to promote mental health narratives online

Posters, videos, and interactive content in schools and public spaces

Radio and television spots targeting both youth and parents

These efforts help normalize seeking help and equip families with knowledge to support adolescents.

Parental Engagement and Family-Based Interventions

Parents and guardians play a critical role in mediating social media use. Governments and community organizations can provide:

Parental training sessions on digital behavior, mental health red flags, and communication strategies

Toolkits for monitoring screen time and platform usage

Forums or workshops to build supportive parenting networks

Empowered parents are more likely to notice early signs of distress and intervene effectively.

Data Collection and Research Funding

Ongoing research is necessary to understand emerging patterns of social media use and mental health. Governments should fund:

Longitudinal studies tracking youth well-being in digital environments

Culturally specific studies in underrepresented populations

Publicly accessible mental health data dashboards for schools and policymakers

Data-driven policy ensures responsiveness to real-world trends and needs.

CONCLUSION

The pervasive integration of social media into adolescent life has brought both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges. While these platforms offer avenues for self-expression, social connection, and access to information, they also introduce significant risks to adolescent mental health, including increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. The evidence explored throughout this research demonstrates that excessive or maladaptive social media use—particularly when combined with factors such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and disrupted sleep—can significantly exacerbate psychological distress in adolescents.

Importantly, the impact of social media is not uniform; it is mediated by cultural, socioeconomic, gender, and demographic variables. Adolescents from marginalized communities may face unique challenges online, including racial discrimination and social exclusion, while cultural stigmas around mental health can inhibit timely intervention in some regions. These disparities highlight the need for culturally sensitive, equity-focused approaches when developing policies and interventions.

Preventing the negative consequences of social media on adolescent mental health requires a coordinated response across multiple sectors. Governments must enforce stronger regulations on social media platforms to ensure user safety and algorithmic transparency. Schools should integrate digital literacy and emotional resilience training into their curricula, while mental health services must be made more accessible and responsive to the needs of young people. Families, too, must be equipped with the tools and knowledge to guide adolescents in developing healthy digital habits.

Moreover, ongoing research is essential to deepen our understanding of the evolving digital landscape and its psychological implications. Longitudinal and culturally contextual studies will be critical in shaping effective, evidence-based interventions.

Ultimately, the goal is not to demonize social media, but to foster an environment where adolescents can benefit from digital technologies without compromising their mental health. By promoting mindful usage, emotional awareness, and supportive online communities, we can work toward a safer, more empowering digital experience for future generations.

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