The Affects Social Media Has on Teenagers

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Abstract

Many teenagers all around the world use social media apps and websites like Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, ask.fm, Tumblr, and many more for a variety of reasons like sharing and messaging with friends and family, for inspiration in a project they are working on, to share their artistic or musical talents with others, to share a message with others, to stay aware of all the latest trends, to get support from others who are going through similar issues in their lives, or even just to have fun or cure boredom! Through research, I have found that social media is directly linked to an increase in teenage suicides through an increase in teen selfie sharing, an increase in teenagers’ desire for cosmetic surgery, and easy access for bullies to hurt others from the comfort of their home.

*Keywords*: social media, cyberbullying, teenagers, body image, self-esteem, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide, self-harm, mental health, cosmetic surgery, plastic surgery, eating disorders.

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Being a teenager comes with a lot of difficulties. Trying to fit in, finding out who you are and what you want to do with your life, puberty, relationships, school, extracurricular activities, and peer pressure just to name a few. Many teens use social media to get away from this stress for a while or perhaps to get support for what they are going through. On the other hand, it is impossible to use social media without running into harmful consequences from social media use. Social media use is strongly linked to the rising number of teenage suicides today.

Selfies are self-taken photos of one’s face which are often posted on social media. Sharing and viewing selfies has become a common practice for many teenagers today. Qzone is a popular social networking website used by many Chinese teenagers to have online blogs or journals, for photo and video sharing and viewing, and listening to music. Zheng et al found that 12-18 year old teenagers in China who posted selfies more frequently on Qzone experienced more self-objectification. In his study, Zheng et al made 963 female teenagers experience different levels of the presence of an audience (which was an imaginary audience). While posting their selfies, the teens who experienced less of a feeling of an audience had weaker feelings of self-objectification while the teenagers who experienced a greater feeling of the presence of an audience when posting their selfies had stronger self-objectification as a result (Mclean, Jarman, Rodgers, 2019, p.518).

In addition to Zheng et al’s studies, Sherman at el was also interested in finding out if and how the selfie aspect of social media affects teenagers today. Sherman at el, therefore, decided to perform neuroimaging studies on adolescents to help him get these answers. Adolescents in the study were shown their selfies that had been altered to appear with a high number of likes on them. When they saw their selfies with the manipulated amount of likes on them, “greater neural activity was recorded in areas of the brain implicated in social cognition, reward learning, and motivation relative to viewing selfies with a low number of likes” (Mclean, Jarman, Rodgers, 2019, p.518). When shown their selfies with a high amount of likes in comparison to when shown their selfies with a low number of likes, the adolescents had better functioning in the brain that is focused on processing, storing, and then later applying the information that they learned in social encounters. The adolescents did not have as many feelings of confidence and reassurance in their brain when shown their selfies with the low number of likes.

Receiving more positive attention (like likes) on a selfie an adolescent posted on Social Media sends a reward of comfort, reassurance, and confidence to adolescents’ brains. This can potentially become very dangerous as the individual may become addicted to social media posting and receiving attention online. Being at such a young age, the individual is very vulnerable and impressionable. They may become reliant on likes to feel comfortable in their own skin.

On the flip side, receiving less positive attention (such as likes) on a selfie an adolescent posted on Social Media sends the opposite feelings to the brain of the adolescent. Feelings of discomfort, dissatisfaction, shame, disappointment, and insecurity are sent to the adolescents’ brains. As a result, individual may grow to have poor self-esteem and become insecure, depressed, or even suicidal.

Furthermore, authors Dian A. de Vries, Jochen Peter, Peter Nikken, and Hanneke de Graaf were interested in discovering the ways in which social media may or may not be related to the increasing amount of teenagers who would like to have plastic surgery. Each of these authors have a wide-spread set of experiences working professionally as professors, psychologists, researchers, and doctors focusing on the advantages and disadvantages that the media has on adolescent social and phycological development in addition to the sexual development of adolescents. De Vries, Peter, Nikken, and de Graaf decided to complete a study and analysis of a survey that was conducted in two waves by the Netherlands Youth Institute and Dutch Expert Centre on Sexuality in 2008 and 2009.

The Netherlands Youth Institute and Dutch Centre of Sexuality’s study consisted of a questionnaire for individuals aged 11-18 who live across the Netherlands. The survey consisted of questions about sexual behaviors, media use, and social media use, and “the results of this longitudinal survey study show that more frequent social network site use predicts increases in appearance investment among adolescents, which, in turn, is related to an augmented desire to undergo cosmetic surgery” (de Vries, Peter, Nikken, de Graaf, 2014, p. 291).

After looking over countless studies on plastic surgery, American researchers found that overall 50 percent of patients wanting plastic surgery are depressed and almost 30 percent have tried to commit suicide (Cherry Norton Social Affairs Correspondent, 1999). These findings are extremely alarming as teenagers continue to use social media more and more and, in return, yearn for plastic surgery more and more also. Individuals who yearn for plastic surgery are more at risk of committing suicide. As we have seen, teenagers today are increasingly wanting plastic surgery which puts them in greater risk of attempting suicide.

Equally important, social media simultaneously opens the door to a new playground for bullies where these bullies can now conveniently bully others behind the comfort of a screen. Cyberbullying is the word used to describe one of the many types of bullying. This type of bullying occurs when an individual (the bully) harasses, intimidates, hates on, threatens, emotionally or verbally abuses, mentally harms, torments, oppresses, and/or coerces another individual (the victim) on the internet. Social media apps and websites commonly used by teenagers such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Tumblr, ask.fm, and many others are usually where bullies bully their vulnerable targets. Unfortunately, “between 10% and 40% of adolescents experience cyberbullying” and “bullying through the internet increases the risk of suicidal ideation by a factor of 3.12 versus a factor of 2.16 when bullied in person” (Memon, Sharma, Mohite, and Jain, 2018, p. 385).

In addition, a study done in Ottawa, Canada on 753 7th to 12th grade students (which are typically individuals who are 12 to 18 years of age) determined that more than two hours spent on social media a day causes suicidal ideation, psychological stress, and declines in mental health (Memon, Sharma, Mohite, and Jaine, 2018, p.387). All these findings are alarming, dangerous, and devastating to say the least.

Similarly, a recent large-scale study done in 2018 by researchers Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, and Martin resulted in the findings that “adolescents who spent 5 or more hours per day on their devices were 66% more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor present than those who spent only 1 hr” (Granello and Zyromski, 2018, p. 1). In this study, a large group of American adolescents aged 13-18 was used as an accurate representative sample of teenagers in the United States of America. Because of the findings in this study, we can conclude that social media negatively affects the mental health of teenagers. We also can conclude that the more time a teenager spends on social media, the more likely they are to have one or more suicide risk factors which results in an increase in the following: depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and/or death by suicide.

In conclusion, social media has a strong link to a rising number of suicidal teenagers today. Social media opens up the door to a dangerous world where appearances become everything. This world of selfies, plastic surgery, and bullying is what today’s teenagers are facing in addition to the other already overwhelming hurdles one faces as a teenager.

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