childrenatRisk

The Impact of Social Media on Children

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Social media platforms have become central to our everyday lives. 72% of US adults under 30 say they use social media sites, and a majority of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram users say they visiting these platforms daily (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). It is nearly impossible for children and young adults to imagine a world without Facebook, Instagram, and their many contemporaries. As our children grow up in a society where social media is hard to escape, parents, educators, mental health professionals, and researchers are anxious to understand how these platforms affect their development and overall well-being. This paper will summarize some of the most recent research on how social media influences children's lives so that parents and educators can make informed decisions on how to approach and regulate its use.

BACKGROUND

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) prevents social media companies from collecting, maintaining, or disclosing and personal information from children under the age of 13 without parental consent. This applies both to any online platform or website intended for children or to any online operator that, "has actual knowledge that it is collecting or maintaining personal information from a child." COPPA also restricts social media platforms from, "enabling a child to make personal information publicly available in identifiable form," or having a public social media profile to put it simply. To stay in compliance with COPPA, online entities are required to establish and maintain procedures that protect the personal

information of children. While COPPA has been amended to adapt to the rapid growth of social media as recently as 2013, it is not without loopholes and limits to how it applies to child use of social media (COPPA, 2013 312.3-8). It is ultimately up to parents as to how early and to what extent they allow their children to engage with social media platforms.

Most social media sites have and age requirement for their users, most set at the age of 13 to limit risk of COPPA compliance. The majority of parents agree that children under the age of 12 should not be using social media, 78% according to a July 2020 Pew Research survey (Auxier et al., 2020). Despite age restriction and public opinion, some children under the age of 12 are using social media. Over the few parents who allow their children to use social media at early age, Youtube, TikTok, and Snapchat are the most used platforms. The same Pew Research study found 53% of all parents surveyed with children under the age of 11 said their child watches videos on YouTube daily (Auxier et al., 2020). While these survey results may indicate parents set YouTube apart from other social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, YouTube relies on user-generated content and personalized algorithms just like any other social media website.

Parental opinions on the minimum age children should reach before using social media ranges between 11 and 15 years of age. 15 was the most popular starting age with 44% of parents surveyed, followed by 12 and 14 (Auxier et al., 2020). As many as 89% of 15 to17-year-olds report using social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook and 70% of 13 to 14-year-olds (Rideout & Robb, 2018). As far as frequency of use, 73% of teens report they check social media daily. Posting original content is less common daily but 39% of teens report doing so creating a large body of youth generated content on social platforms (Rideout & Robb, 2018). A 2021 survey published by Statista showed that TikTok has rapidly become the most used social media app by teens, coming in first in their survey results, followed by Instagram and Snapchat (Statista, 2021). Youth

social media use is only expected to grow as our society moves more and more online and as new platforms emerge.

These platforms can be helpful for children to keep up with friendships and acquaintances, learn about current events, and form close connections with issues they may not otherwise have. These traits are all healthy with moderate use and can even benefit a child's communication skills and social connections (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

But social media platforms are designed for more than just checking in on what our friends are up to. Rather, they're carefully designed to keep users engaging in their content. Regardless of safety or accuracy, the algorithms present content that a particular user has a high likelihood of viewing. Most social media companies make money by monetizing user content. That is, the users themselves provide all the content for free and the company makes money from branded advertisements or branded posts that appear on their feed. The longer, more engaged users are the more money social media companies make.

In an interview with "Wired Magazine", former head scientist at Facebook Data Team, Dr. David Stillwell, discusses how algorithms present content based on what individual users are likely to engage with. "On Facebook, for example, we show people posts based on how likely they are to comment on them. If you comment on a lot of posts, we want to show you the ones that people like you also like" (Wired, 2018). Some critics of the current algorithm argue a feed that prioritized posts in chronological order from newest to oldest would be better for society (Will Oremus, C. A., 2021). In theory, this would reduce the power and spread of divisive content and give greater space to updates from family and friends.

Social media is intentionally built to connect users with content that matches their interests, reflects their pre-formed opinions, and amplifies emotion. For young, impressionable users who are still developing their self-identify and critical thinking skills this can be especially affecting. With fewer mental guardrails earned through education and in-person experiences, many may struggle to distinguish fact from fiction. Algorithms may also cause youth and young adults to become more isolated as they are more likely to keep users in familiar content circles versus expose them to new or differing perspectives. When new types of content are introduced, it is not safe or healthy for youth. Social media companies are financially incentivized to push inflammatory content that draws a strong emotional response. Constant exposure to this content can be mind-altering for adults, let alone youth whose brains are still developing.

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH

While social media is still a fairly new technology, a growing body of research raises concerns around youth social media use on their health and overall well-being.

Low Self-Esteem

A study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal found that "students who spent more time on the social media platform Facebook were more likely to endorse feeling envy or sensing that others in their social network were better off than they were" (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020, pp. E136-E137). Imposter syndrome is another common result of spending a large amount of time online. Especially among teenage girls, the constant comparison to others can lower confidence and self-esteem. When it comes to relationships, the hyper-awareness of being ignored or the pressure to constantly interact with friends and partners through social media can negatively affect the quality and intimacy of friendships and romantic relationships (Ehmke, 2021).

Filters and digitally altered images abound on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest. Some studies show that even viewing a single digitally altered image, regardless of whether the photo discloses that or not, can spark negative mental thoughts or a desire to alter one's appearance (McCallum & Widdows, 2016/2018). An internal Facebook study reported, "32% of teen girls said that when they feel bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse" (Wells et al., 2021). For adolescents whose bodies are still growing and changing, the constant comparison to unrealistic standards can be especially negative for self-love and esteem.

Anxiety & Depression

Excessive use of social media led to increased depressive symptoms. One study found that the more time young adults spent on Facebook, the more likely they reported feeling lonely and dissatisfied with their lives (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). As a result of increased social isolation and excessive use, any positive benefits from social media can start to take a backseat to anxiety and depression. Even when social media makes users feel bad, it can be difficult to log off these platforms, as children and teenagers are new to self-regulation and impulse control (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Cyberbullying

Social media sites may make it easer for bullies to find new targets and reach their victims. The United States government has an entire website dedicated to the issue of cyberbullying, stopbullying.gov, and defines the practice of bullying that "takes over devices like phones, tablets, and computers." Cyberbullying may include repeatedly sending, posting, or sharing harmful material with the victim or sharing private, personal, or false information with others in order to embarrass or humiliate their victim (stopbullying.gov). In a 2018 survey, 13% of teens reported experiencing cyberbullying at some point in the past two years. Of those teens, 7% said

they were cyberbullied "a few times, 4% said "one or two" times, and just 2% reported "many times." 7 percent say "a few times," When asked about the seriousness of the cyberbullying, 2% said it was "very serious," 9% said "somewhat serious," 4% said "not too serious," (Rideout & Robb, 2018). When the same teens were asked about how often they encountered "hate speech" including racist, sexist, homophobic or other discriminatory content, two-thirds (64%) reported encountering such content "sometimes," and 21% of those said they encountered it "often," (Rideout & Robb, 2018).

Suicide and Self-Harm

Early and high levels of social media use that increased over time is associated with higher levels of suicide risk in emerging adulthood (Coyne et al., 2021). Social media can also make it convenient for children and adolescents to access information on suicide and self-harm easily. A study on the public health risks of social media and suicide indicated that cyberbullying victims were almost twice as likely to attempt suicide than those not (Luxton et al., 2012). Cyberbullying offenders were also 1.5 times as likely to report having attempted suicide than children who were not offenders or victims of cyberbullying.

Physical Health

Social media has also been linked to several physical health problems. In one study, researchers found that adolescents who spent more than two hours a day on electronic devices were more likely to have obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure (Wang et al., 2013). Another study showed that teens who used computers and video games for three or more hours per day were more likely to report problems with their vision (Ham et al., 2009). Social media can also make it difficult for children to get enough sleep. The average teen spends over nine hours a week browsing their favorite sites (Gentile & Walsh, 2009).

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROOMING, RADICALIZATION, AND EXTREMISM

Grooming

Child grooming and sexual abuse is another major risk-factor for children online. Grooming includes meeting a child with the intent to sexually abuse them, encouraging a child to take part in sexual activity, or sending indecent images. Instagram and Facebook are a few of the most popular sites for child grooming. A recent UK study found Facebook-owned apps - including Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp - accounted for 51% of online child grooming behaviors (NSPCC 2019). A 2020 survey of more than 1,000 9 to 17-year-olds had some alarming findings regarding youth perceptions and practices of sending and receiving sexually explicit material. 28% of all minors surveyed agreed it was "normal for people my age to share nudes with each other." It is not just older teens who feel that way, of those aged 9 to twelve years-old, 21% agreed it was normal (Thorn & Benenson Strategy Group, 2021). When asked if they had ever sent or received explicit material, 17% of all minors surveyed said they had shared a nude photo or video directly or with their social media followers. 25% of all minors surveyed reported having been shown or sent a nude photo or video of someone at their school or their age in the community with out that person's knowledge. Among those that said they have shared a nude photo or video, 50% reported they had shared them with someone they had not yet met in real life. 41% of that same group reported they had shared a nude photo or video with someone over the age of 18 ((Thorn & Benenson Strategy Group, 2021).

Radicalization & Violent Extremism

The process of adopting an extreme political, social, or religious view is known as radicalization. It can happen online or offline, but the internet has become a major tool for spreading extremist propaganda. Children and

young adults are especially vulnerable to content that aims to convert them to extreme viewpoints and movements.

There is a clear connection between social media and school shootings. Social media provides a platform for shooters to share their intentions and plans with the world, and it also allows them to gain a following and celebrate their crimes. Prior to his arrest for murder at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Nikolas Cruz was known to the FBI for his disturbing social media posts. Cruz posted disturbing content to social media sites such as Instagram and Snapchat (Oppel, et al., 2018).

Social media platforms also provide an easy way for extremist groups to spread their message. Certain extremist movements have been known to target young online users through the creation of an online subculture that appeals to young people and "gamification" of online propaganda (Schlegl, 2018). These strategies encourage young people to continue to interact with propaganda through virtual rewards and social status. Social networks can be used to disseminate terrorist propaganda and plan attacks. The Islamic State has been known to recruit via social media (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2015), and a George Washington University study of 50 terrorist plots in the United States found that social media was used in almost every case (Gill et al., 2017).

The internet is a great tool that can help children learn; however, it also comes with risks. It is important for parents to be aware of these risks and talk to their children about how to stay safe online. It is also important for children to be taught how to use the internet responsibly and be aware of the dangers that can come with using social media.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

It's not all bad news. There are also ways that social media can be helpful for children's development. For example, social media can help young people learn to communicate and collaborate effectively with others. It can also help them develop a sense of identity and community. However, it is important to be aware of the risks associated with excessive use and parents should take steps to regulate their children's access.

Some things that parents can do include:

- Setting time limits on how much time kids spend on social media each day
- Monitoring their children's online activity
- Talking to their kids about the risks associated with using social media
- Encouraging them to use social media in moderation
- Providing alternatives to social media, such as books, sports, and face-to-face interactions

It is important for parents to be proactive about regulating their children's social media use. By being mindful of the risks and taking steps to mitigate them, parents can help keep their children safe and healthy online. It is also important for educators to be aware of the impact of social media on their students. They can help kids maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing the risks by teaching them how to use it safely and responsibly.

The bottom line is that social media is here to stay, and we need to find ways to make sure it benefits our children's development instead of harming it. With careful regulation and education, we can help ensure that young people use social media in a positive way that enhances their well-being.

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