



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUNG PEOPLE

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Annotation: *This article explores the impact of social media on young people, focusing on both its positive and negative consequences. Social media has become an essential part of youth life, influencing communication patterns, mental health, academic performance, identity formation, and social relationships. The study highlights how social media can provide educational opportunities, emotional support, and global connectivity, while also contributing to issues such as anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, addiction, and decreased attention span. The article reviews relevant literature, outlines methodological approaches used in studying this phenomenon, presents key findings, and discusses the broader implications. Finally, practical conclusions and recommendations are provided for educators, parents, and policymakers to ensure healthy and responsible social media usage among youth.*

Keywords: *Social media, youth, mental health, cyberbullying, addiction, online identity, digital communication, education, self-esteem, internet behavior.*

In the 21st century, social media has become one of the most influential technological developments affecting human interaction. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitter (X) are widely used by young people across the globe. These platforms allow individuals to communicate instantly, share content, express opinions, and build digital communities.

Young people, especially teenagers and university students, represent the most active users of social media. This is largely due to their curiosity, desire for social connection, and openness to new technologies. Social media plays a major role in shaping their behavior, worldview, lifestyle, and psychological development.



However, the influence of social media is not entirely positive. While it supports communication and learning, it also introduces risks such as excessive screen time, exposure to harmful content, online harassment, and unrealistic social comparisons. Therefore, understanding the impact of social media on youth is essential for developing educational strategies and protective policies.

The impact of social media on young people (primarily adolescents and teens aged 13–17) remains a major public health concern as of early 2026. Recent data from sources like the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (originally issued in 2023 and referenced/updated in discussions through 2025), Pew Research Center surveys (most recently from 2025), and related studies show a persistent mix of risks and benefits. Use is extremely widespread, with patterns of heavy engagement continuing despite growing awareness of downsides.

Social media penetration among U.S. teens is near-universal: Approximately 93–95% of 13–17-year-olds use at least one platform. YouTube leads with around 90–92% usage, followed by TikTok (63–68%), Instagram (61–63%), and Snapchat (around 55%). Platforms like Facebook have declined sharply (now around 31–33%). Daily use is common, with roughly two-thirds of teens reporting daily engagement on major platforms. A notable portion—about one-third overall, and roughly 1 in 5 specifically on TikTok or YouTube—report being online "almost constantly." Average daily time spent on social media hovers around 4.8–5 hours, though some estimates place it higher for certain groups.

Negative Impacts

Evidence continues to highlight meaningful risks, particularly to mental health, with correlations strengthening in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies.

- Mental health risks — Adolescents spending more than 3 hours per day on social media face approximately double the risk of experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other poor mental health outcomes. This threshold remains a key benchmark cited by the U.S. Surgeon General and echoed in 2025 analyses. Problematic use is linked to emotional dysregulation, reduced impulse control,



heightened sensitivity to social rewards/punishments, body image dissatisfaction (with 46% of teens reporting that social media makes them feel worse about their bodies), sleep disruption, lower self-esteem, attention difficulties, and in some cases increased suicidality or self-harm ideation. Girls tend to report more pronounced negative effects, including greater impacts on self-confidence, productivity, and overall well-being.

- Perceptions and behavioral shifts — Pew Research Center's April 2025 survey found that 48% of U.S. teens believe social media has a mostly negative effect on people their age (a sharp rise from 32% in 2022), while only 11% see it as mostly positive for peers. However, only 14% say it negatively affects them personally (up from 9% in 2022), suggesting a common "third-person effect" where harm is seen more in others. At the same time, 45% of teens report spending too much time on social media (up from 36% in 2022), and many (around 44%) have actively tried cutting back on social media or smartphone use due to these concerns. Over 40% note negative effects on sleep (45%) and productivity (40%).

- Other developmental concerns — Heavy or passive use (e.g., endless scrolling, exposure to harmful content via algorithms) is associated with cyberbullying, social comparison pressures, unrealistic standards, loneliness, and challenges to executive functioning, working memory, and attention spans. The Surgeon General has repeatedly stated that we cannot yet conclude social media is sufficiently safe for youth, emphasizing inadequate independent safety assessments, addictive platform features, and content risks (e.g., promotion of extreme or harmful material).

Public health organizations (including the CDC, WHO influences, and medical bodies like Johns Hopkins and Mayo Clinic) continue to link frequent use to broader issues like increased sadness/hopelessness, bullying exposure, and potential long-term brain changes in areas related to emotion and learning.

Positive Impacts



Social media retains clear upsides when usage is moderate, intentional, and focused on positive interactions.

- Connection and belonging — It facilitates maintaining friendships, forming new ones, finding support during challenges, and connecting with communities (especially for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth exploring identity or those in isolated situations).

- Self-expression, creativity, and learning — Platforms enable sharing ideas, art, or content, building identity, and accessing educational resources, news, activism opportunities, or skill-building inspiration.

- Support and resilience — For some, it provides a buffer against offline isolation, practice in social skills, and access to mental health awareness or peer encouragement.

Benefits are most evident with active, relational use (e.g., direct messaging friends) rather than passive consumption.

Overall Assessment and Recommendations

As of February 2026, the consensus from major reports (including ongoing references to the Surgeon General's Advisory and 2025 Pew data) is that social media poses a meaningful risk of harm to youth mental health—particularly at high usage levels—while offering benefits that depend heavily on context, dosage, content, and individual vulnerability. Causation is not fully established in all cases (e.g., pre-existing issues may drive heavier use), but the weight of correlational evidence, combined with rising teen awareness and calls for platform accountability, supports precautionary approaches.

Key factors influencing outcomes include:

- Time spent (heavier = higher risk).
- Type of engagement (active/positive vs. passive/comparative).
- Content exposure (supportive vs. harmful).
- Individual traits (e.g., gender, pre-existing mental health, age).



Recommendations from experts and officials include platform reforms (e.g., better content moderation, reduced addictive features), potential warning labels, age-appropriate safeguards, parental/educator guidance on limits and mindful use, promotion of offline activities, and prioritizing real-world social support. Many teens are already self-regulating by cutting back, which research suggests can improve well-being. For those experiencing significant negative effects, consulting mental health professionals is advised.

Conclusions

Social media has become a powerful factor shaping the lives of young people. It influences their education, relationships, mental health, and personal development. The positive effects include access to knowledge, creativity, communication, and awareness of global issues. However, negative impacts such as addiction, cyberbullying, mental health problems, academic distraction, and unrealistic self-image are serious challenges.

The overall conclusion is that social media is neither fully beneficial nor entirely harmful. Its impact depends on how it is used, how much time is spent on it, and how well young people are guided by parents, teachers, and society.

To ensure healthy social media usage among young people, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Young People

Limit daily screen time and avoid excessive scrolling.

Follow educational and positive content rather than harmful material.

Avoid comparing real life with social media content.

Report cyberbullying and block toxic accounts.

Take breaks from social media to focus on physical and mental health.

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