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## Social Media: Its Appeal to Adolescents and Influence on adolescent Mental Health

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### ABSTRACT

*Social media has become an integral part of our lives, allowing us to remain connected with others despite distance or the weather outside. This online world has greatly impacted adolescents as a whole. The study explores the inherent need that teenagers have for social media as well as its influence on their mental health. The attraction towards social media stems from the role that it has in the development of identity for teens, allowing them to form interpersonal connections during an important developmental chapter of their lives. This curated online world mirrors their offline lives, fostering constant connection and potentially mitigating feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, social media can also cultivate the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and expose them to cyberbullying. These experiences can trigger feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. This research underscores the importance of acknowledging the influence of social media on adolescent mental health.*

**Keywords:** - Mental health, social-media, Adolescent, influence, Affects and Appeal

### 1. Introduction and Background

#### 1.1 Mental health as a concept

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that allows for one to cope with the stressors that come with life. Mental health plays an integral part when it comes to the choices that we make and the relationships that we form. [1] The term "Mental health" is considered as a concept that can be used to describe one's current state of mental well-being – meaning that it is in complete continuance– mental health varies from

person to person. Hence, we can determine that if one's mental health (mental well-being) is negatively impacted, then their ability to make ideal decisions, or form/maintain relationships would also be negatively impacted & vice versa. This shows that maintaining and nurturing one's mental health is of utmost importance – as it plays a massive role in building communities and allowing for socioeconomic development as a whole. [1]

#### 1.2 What is social media?

I'm sure that the term "Social media" needs no explanation – as many people have heard of this term over the course of their lives, however, to those who don't know what "Social media" means, it simply is the "media" or "medium" that allows for social interaction to take place. This includes sharing news, content or photos with other people, social media encompasses all the services that facilitate the creation and sharing of content. [2] This "medium" that allows for social interaction is the internet – where platforms and services that are hosted on the internet are used every day for social interaction.

#### 1.3 A developmental chapter; social media

Adolescence marks an important period of human development which is characterized by cognitive, physical and social changes. Adolescence is a time of self-exploration where teens explore and develop their identities and create interpersonal relationships with others. This is characterized by multifaceted changes – where people search for the emergence of self-identity, build upon interpersonal relationships and the expansion of their own emotional horizons. [3] This phase is considered to be a blank canvas where teens paint and define their character through

experimentation, experience and relationships. Social media is a new element that is added to this developmental canvas, acting as an external influence which shapes their perceptions, thoughts & feelings. Those very thoughts, emotions and feelings that determine the interactions and interpersonal relationships which they will develop in the years to come.

### 1.3.1 Adolescents and social media, an in-depth understanding

Over 93% of adolescents aged 13-17 use social media on a daily basis, this stands at around 37 million teenagers using social media within the USA alone. [4] The constant connect between teens and their classmates, friends and others on social media has allowed for them to express themselves freely through short form content, posts, pictures and videos. Social media allows for teens to establish ideas, make friends, build long lasting relationships and more. However, teens also tend to displace their own emotions onto others – which is typically done through a process called “trolling”, which is done for fun. In “trolling”, teens comment on other posts, shaming them for their bodies, accent, language, lifestyle and culture. The constant trolling of others leads to anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness and even suicidal thoughts. [5] It’s not only that though, but teenagers are also now addicted to social media, attention spans are decreasing, teens fear missing out on brand new content that is uploaded to the web – all of this leads to poor performance, physical stress and more. Over 37 million teenagers’ developmental chapter is being affected by the constant use of social media, as they now are internalizing the problems & remarks that others on social media have – allowing for their issues to project into their own lives. ([5],[6])

Through this research paper we will explore the natural appeal of adolescents towards social media, whilst also identifying and developing upon current ideas that are present surrounding social media and its influence on the mental health of teenagers.

## 2. An adolescent’s appeal towards social media

Before we delve into the influence of social media on the mental health of adolescents, it’s important to understand what the attraction towards social media is. It is common knowledge that everything that has entered the market for us to engage with, social media has been crafted around consumer & human psychology. As a species, humans are highly social beings, with social connection being a key part in our survival - during teen years, this social connection becomes vital for our existence as a being that can develop interpersonal relations and more. [7] We can observe, through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), that there is a large difference between one who is sad due to social exclusion, and one who is joyful due to social interaction. [8] This means that as a species, we feel happy as we scroll through SM, as we are experiencing social interaction through services such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp or Snapchat. The feelings of happiness whilst one experiences social interaction triggers this rewards system – and the brain takes note of how this joy is being experienced – leading to addiction and excessive use of social media by adolescents. [9]. Boredom, as humans, boredom is a largely negative feeling, where being bored leads to frustration or annoyance at a time. [10] During

adolescence teens drive to overcome boredom is pertinent – and with social media being present – teens have a plethora of services that they can use to overcome this boredom, putting the brains rewards system into overdrive, adding to the already present appeal towards social media.

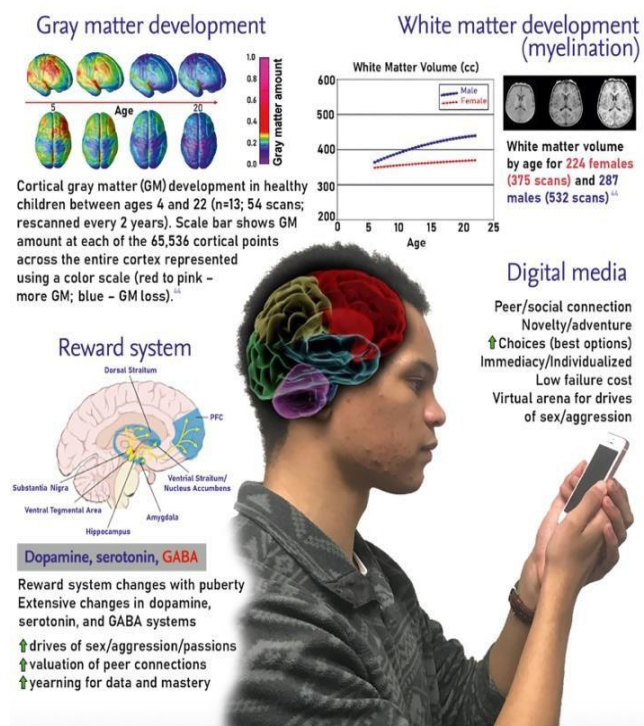


Figure-1: [9] Compiled by MD Jacob B. Giedd

In figure-1, compiled by MD Jacob B. Giedd – we clearly can observe how the rewards system in the brain, and key aspects of human survival contribute to an adolescent ‘appeal towards social media’– however, we can also see how the development of the adolescent brain has led to the increase in use SM amongst adolescents.

### 2.1 The development of the adolescent brain

As mentioned previously, adolescence is often considered as a very developmental chapter of one’s life, and it is during this time that the development of a particular tissue in the brain called white matter is at its peak. [11] White matter (called white matter due to Myelin, that gives it its white look) is largely responsible for helping the body process information, mood and decision making. During this developmental period of one’s life, it makes sense as to why one would associate themselves with social media. The internet is home to so much information that is just a click away, meaning that people don’t have to attend to mundane conversations with their parents, friends and other family members when everything they could possibly need is readily accessible on the web. [9] This developmental phase also means that we are constantly looking for optimization of our decision-making capabilities – The constant search for improvement and enhancement leads to comparison between adolescents and others in order for them to lead better lives. With the plethora of content that is readily available for them on social media, this comparison becomes easy – and they would use social media constantly to try and achieve their

conception of being a “better person” by replicating the personalities of others on social media.

### 3. The influence of social media on adolescent mental health.

Now that we know what the appeal is towards social media for adolescents, we can explore the influence that social media has on the mental health of teenagers around the world.

#### 3.1 The good

Social media has countless benefits in regard to the mental health of adolescents, teens often use social media in order to develop upon their own identities and to build upon interpersonal relationships on the web. Social media is able to provide an online gateway that can allow for teenagers to develop interpersonal relationships, where teens often use social media in because the online environment created through it often reflects their off-line lives. [12] Social media is also able to reinforce the off-line lives of teenagers [13], allowing them to remain connected with others even if they can't meet due to bad weather, or other unforeseen circumstances. This all allows for adolescents to evade feelings of loneliness, whilst also enhancing their feelings of connectedness with their peers. This can be seen through a study conducted by G Borca *et al* which found that adolescents feel that media allows for them to understand their peers more and feel more connected with them. [14] As mentioned above, teenagers are in their developmental phase, where identities are being built. Social media allows for these identities to be built with ease, as teens explore the plethora of content that is available on the web – implementing the practices of those who seem to have a “good personality” or “good identity” into their lives, allowing for adolescents to feel like they are improving their own lives – enhancing confidence, and reducing feelings of inadequacy.

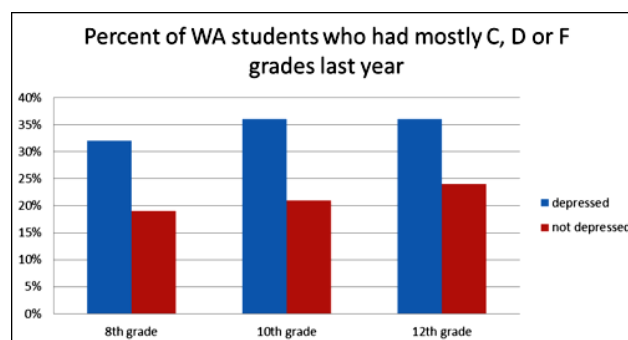
#### 3.2 The bad

There are two sides to a coin, although social media does have its benefits for the mental health of adolescents, sadly there are many aspects of social media that have a negative influence on the mental health of teenagers as a whole.

##### 3.2.1 The Fear of Missing Out

FoMO – (Fear of Missing Out) is a term that arose in early 2004, extensively used in 2010, in order to describe a phenomenon that was observable on social media services. [15] FoMO is characterized by the need to stay connected to what others are doing. FoMO was understood as a negative emotion by Przybylski *et al* [16] who used the SDT, Self Determination-Theory on FoMO. Overall, FoMO is a negative emotion that results from unmet social needs. [16] The Fear of Missing Out can have some tremendous impacts on the mental health of adolescents, as it can leave teens feeling like they are incompetent or unimportant and can even leave them with chronic anxiety, which can be observed in a study conducted by Anna Vannucci *et al* [17] Anna Vannucci *et al* was able to connect social media, the Fear of Missing Out and anxiety. These feelings of unimportance, incompetence and anxiety leave adolescents distraught – where they often struggle to function normally due to the plethora of feelings that comes with FoMO. FoMO has also been linked with Distractibility, and a decrease in

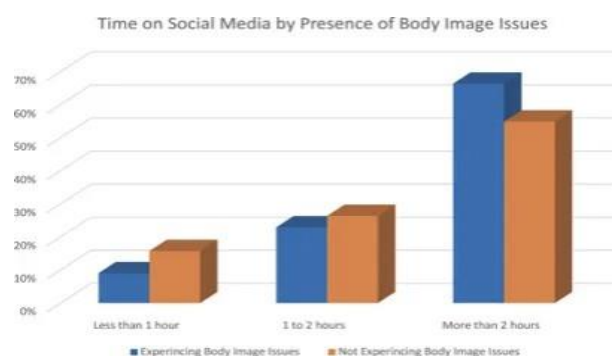
productivity. [18] This decrease in productivity leads to a decrease in academic performance. This decrease in academic performance can enhance the feelings of incompetence and unimportance that teenagers are already facing as a result of FoMO, further impacting their mental health, leaving teens with depression, feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts. This can be observed in **Figure-2** [19].



**Figure-2:** [19] A study conducted in King County, Washington discovered that students (13 – 17) who were performing poorly academically would also suffer from depression.

##### 3.2.2 Body image

Body image can be defined as one’s perception or emotions in regard to their own body. One’s body image reflects social constructs, where the concept of an ideal body enters one’s mind through societal and cultural norms. These perceptions are often communicated through media, between family members and peers. [20] social media in particular, plays one of the biggest roles in contributing to the body image crisis, particularly in adolescents who are incredibly impressionable. [21] Teens spend around 4.8 hours a day on all social media platforms [22], which means that teens have 4.8 hours to get influenced by the plethora of content that is available on the web, that typically features a one’s face, or body. It often does not take long for a teen to find someone who has their perception of a “ideal body type”, thus starting the endless comparison between themselves and others on the internet. Due to the appeal towards social media for teenagers, we can observe that body image issues are rising everyone, especially due to the amount of time that they are spending on social media. A study conducted by Caroline E. Sagera [23] was able to isolate the impact of spending time on social media, and its relation to body image issues.



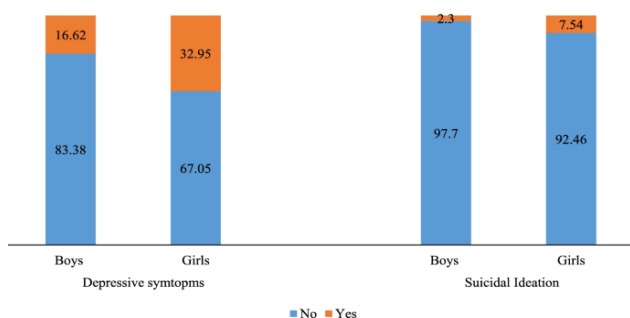
**Figure-3:** [23] Compiled by Caroline E. Sagera

Body image issues often lead to feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, as adolescents often find themselves unable to achieve their perception of the “ideal body type”. In certain

scenarios, in order to try and achieve their perception of an “ideal body type”, teenagers who have body image issues often end up with an E.D – (eating disorder). which are considered as severe mental illnesses that have adverse consequences for the one’s health and quality of life. [24] These eating disorders further amplify the feelings of unworthiness and incompetence – and can potentially lead to life threatening issues due to unhealthy habits.

### 3.2.3 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to “an intentional act of aggression, carried out to harm another individual using electric forms of contacts and devices.” [25] Cyberbullying has spread from emails and simple text messages to a wider array of online communication platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. Cyberbullying can take on many different forms, from “flaming” (heated online arguments, cyberstalking, denigration, harassment, impersonation, trickery and exclusion. [26] There is a lack of prevalence surrounding cyberbullying on the global scale, however, through a small sample – we can see that approximately 3-72% of middle school and high school students have experienced cyber bullying. [27] Cyber bullying can have tremendous impacts on the mental health of adolescents. Teens that are cyberbullied often experience feelings of anxiety, depression and suicidal intent due to them being targeted on the web [28]. A study conducted by Chanda Maurya *et al* [29] discovered that over 16.95% of boys, and 32.95% of girls experience depressive symptoms due to cyberbullying – and approximately 2.3% of boys, and 7.54% of girls experience suicidal ideation due to cyberbullying.



**Figure-4:** [29] Data from a study conducted by Chandra Maurya *et al* surrounding depressive symptoms and suicidal intentions due to cyber bullying amongst adolescents.

According to a study conducted by Pew Research [30] approximately 31% of teens who have been bullied or harassed online think that it’s because of their appearance. This appearance-based bullying may lead to eating disorders amongst adolescents, as they strive to change their appearance in order to prevent being bullied again – these eating disorders further amplify feelings of depression, anxiety, unworthiness and inadequacy – drastically affecting a teenager’s mental health.

### Conclusion

Social media has blessed us with the ability to remain connected with our peers, friends and family members regardless of weather, distance and more. Digital media usage amongst teens does not guarantee that a teen’s mental health would suffer negatively. In fact, teens that use social media

are able to reflect their own off-line lives, allowing for them to develop and enhance interpersonal relationships with others, whilst also exploring identity with the plethora of content available on SM sites promoting mental well-being and diminishing feelings of loneliness. However, there is always a chance, where for many, the usage of social platforms can evoke feelings of unimportance, inadequacy, chronic anxiety, depression and even suicidal thoughts due to FoMO and hostile interactions on digital media. Adolescents should be able to control their usage of social media in order to prevent such emotions and thoughts from entering their own lives. Many are still unaware of the allure of social media towards adolescence and its influence on adolescent mental health. By understanding the allure and its influence – psychiatrists and medical professionals can help provide better treatments for chronic anxiety and depression because they are able to relate to teenagers and the countless factors that may be influencing their mental health.

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