

Social Networks and the Mental Health Crisis: What You Need to Know

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Introduction

In recent years, the advent and rise of social networks have dramatically transformed the way people communicate, connect, and interact with each other. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become central to modern life, providing people with the ability to stay in touch with friends and family, access information, and share their personal lives with a global audience. However, while social networks have revolutionized communication and fostered unprecedented levels of connectivity, they have also raised concerns about their impact on mental health. The mental health crisis, particularly among young people, has been exacerbated by the pervasive use of social media, leading to new challenges in terms of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues [1]. The relationship between social networks and mental health is complex and multifaceted. While social media platforms offer a range of benefits, such as fostering a sense of community, providing opportunities for self-expression, and helping people maintain relationships over long distances, they also have significant downsides. These downsides are often magnified by the addictive nature of these platforms and the pressures they place on individuals to present a curated version of their lives, often leading to negative self-perception and unrealistic expectations.

Description

One of the most profound ways in which social networks affect mental health is through the cultivation of unrealistic beauty standards and the constant comparison to others. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, which are heavily focused on visual content, have created an environment where appearance is often prioritized over substance. People, particularly young women, may find themselves spending hours curating the perfect photo, editing their images, and seeking validation through likes and comments. This constant need for approval can lead to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and anxiety, especially when individuals compare their lives to the seemingly perfect lives of others. The images that dominate social media are often carefully selected and edited, presenting an idealized version of reality that can create a warped sense of self-worth [2].

The impact of these beauty standards is not limited to appearance alone. Social networks also amplify the pressure to present a perfect life. Users often post highlights from their lives, showcasing vacations, celebrations, accomplishments, and other moments that reflect the best parts of their existence. This can create a skewed perception of reality, where people feel as though they are falling behind or not living up to the standards set by their peers. The fear of missing out, or FOMO, is a phenomenon closely associated with social media use, where individuals feel anxious or depressed because

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they believe others are having more fulfilling or exciting experiences than they are. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation, even though social media is supposed to connect people.

Another significant concern is the rise in cyber bullying and online harassment, which have become pervasive on social media platforms. The anonymity afforded by the internet allows people to engage in harmful behavior without fear of immediate consequences, leading to an increase in instances of bullying, trolling, and harassment. Victims of online bullying may experience severe emotional distress, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. The long-term effects of cyber bullying can be devastating, as individuals may internalize the negative comments and messages, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth and a heightened sense of vulnerability. The addictive nature of social media also plays a significant role in the mental health crisis. Many social networks are designed to capture and hold users' attention, using algorithms that recommend content based on past behavior and preferences. This can lead to individuals spending excessive amounts of time on social media, often at the expense of face-to-face interactions, physical activity, and other healthy habits [3].

The constant exposure to negative news and distressing content on social media also contributes to the mental health crisis. While social media platforms have the potential to raise awareness about important social issues, they also serve as a constant stream of distressing and sometimes traumatic content. The prevalence of images and videos related to violence, natural disasters, political unrest, and other tragedies can have a cumulative effect on mental health, contributing to feelings of anxiety, fear, and helplessness. This phenomenon often referred to as "news fatigue," can leave individuals feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained. Furthermore, the ease with which misinformation spreads on social media can exacerbate this issue, as individuals may be exposed to false or misleading information that heightens their sense of anxiety or confusion. The constant barrage of notifications, likes, and updates creates a sense of urgency and a desire to stay connected at all times, leading to an unhealthy dependency on these platforms. This addiction can interfere with daily life, sleep patterns, and overall well-being, contributing to feelings of stress and anxiety.

Research has shown that the impact of social networks on mental health is particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults. These age groups are in a critical period of development, and the pressures associated with social media can have lasting effects on their mental health and well-being. Studies have linked heavy social media use to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among teenagers. The desire for social approval and the fear of rejection can be particularly damaging during adolescence, a time when individuals are trying to establish their identity and navigate complex social dynamics. Furthermore, the exposure to idealized versions of others' lives can lead to distorted perceptions of self-worth, as young people may come to believe that their lives are inadequate compared to the curated images they see online [4].

However, social media is not inherently harmful, and its effects on mental health depend largely on how it is used. For some individuals, social media can be a positive force, offering a sense of community and support. Online groups, forums, and resources can provide people with valuable information and a sense of belonging, particularly for those who may feel isolated in their offline lives. Social media can also be a powerful tool for self-expression, allowing individuals to share their stories, raise awareness about important issues, and connect with like-minded people. The key to mitigating the negative impact of social media on mental health lies in promoting mindful and intentional use of

these platforms. This involves setting boundaries around social media use, being conscious of the content consumed, and seeking balance between online and offline interactions.

Encouraging individuals, especially young people, to cultivate a healthy relationship with social media can help reduce feelings of comparison, inadequacy, and anxiety. Digital literacy programs that teach people to critically engage with content and understand the implications of online behavior can also play a crucial role in promoting mental well-being. Furthermore, it is essential for social media companies to take responsibility for the impact their platforms have on users' mental health. There is growing pressure for these companies to implement features that prioritize well-being, such as tools to monitor screen time, promote positive content, and reduce the spread of harmful or misleading information. Social media platforms can also take steps to combat cyber bullying and harassment by implementing stricter policies and offering users greater control over their online experiences [5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, while social networks have revolutionized the way people interact and connect with others, they also pose significant risks to mental health, particularly for young people. The pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, the rise of cyber bullying, the constant exposure to negative news, and the addictive nature of these platforms all contribute to the mental health crisis. However, by fostering responsible and mindful use of social media, promoting digital literacy, and encouraging platforms to prioritize user well-being, it is possible to mitigate these risks and harness the positive potential of social networks. Understanding the complex relationship between social media and mental health is crucial for creating a healthier and more supportive online environment for all users.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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