

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON LEARNERS' MENTAL HEALTH

by:

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Social media has become a defining feature of modern learner life. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram shape how students communicate, form relationships, and understand themselves. While these platforms offer opportunities for creativity, connection, and self-expression, growing research suggests they also influence students' mental health in complex ways. Rather than being entirely harmful or beneficial, social media acts as a powerful tool whose impact depends largely on how it is used, how often it is used, and the individual vulnerabilities of each student.

One of the most frequently discussed concerns is the relationship between social media use and symptoms of anxiety and depression. According to a 2019 study published in JAMA Psychiatry, adolescents who spent more than three hours per day on social media were at a significantly higher risk for mental health problems, particularly internalizing issues such as anxiety and depression (Riehm et al., 2019). Similarly, a systematic review in Clinical Psychological Science found consistent associations between heavy social media use and increased depressive symptoms among teenagers (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Although these studies do not prove direct causation, they highlight a meaningful correlation that cannot be ignored, especially as screen time continues to rise globally.

A major factor contributing to this connection is social comparison. Social media platforms often showcase carefully curated highlights of users' lives—filtered photos, achievements, vacations, and social events. For students in adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by identity formation and sensitivity to peer evaluation, constant exposure to these polished images can negatively affect self-esteem. Research published

in Body Image found that image-based platforms are associated with body dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety, particularly among teenage girls (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). When students compare their everyday realities to the seemingly perfect lives presented online, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, or low self-worth.

Cyberbullying is another significant mental health concern linked to social media use. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and reach a wide audience instantly. Harmful comments, rumors, or embarrassing images can be shared and reshared, making the experience difficult to escape. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that students who experience cyberbullying are more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. Because online interactions often lack face-to-face accountability, some individuals may engage in harsher or more aggressive behavior than they would offline, intensifying the psychological impact on victims.

Excessive use of social media can also disrupt sleep patterns, which are closely tied to emotional well-being. Many students use their phones late at night, either scrolling through feeds or responding to messages. The blue light emitted from screens can interfere with melatonin production, making it harder to fall asleep. Inadequate sleep has been strongly linked to mood disturbances, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. A study in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* found that nighttime social media use was associated with poorer sleep quality and higher levels of depressive symptoms among adolescents (Kelly et al., 2018). Over time, this cycle of late-night use and insufficient rest can significantly affect academic performance and overall mental health.

Despite these risks, social media is not solely detrimental. In fact, it can provide meaningful benefits when used mindfully. Many students report that social media helps them stay connected with friends and family, especially during times of physical separation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, digital platforms played a

crucial role in maintaining peer relationships and social support. The American Psychological Association (APA) notes that online communities can foster belonging, particularly for marginalized youth who may struggle to find acceptance in their immediate environment. For LGBTQ+ students or those dealing with chronic illness, online support networks can offer understanding, validation, and access to helpful resources.

Furthermore, social media has increased awareness of mental health issues. Educational posts, advocacy campaigns, and personal stories shared online have helped reduce stigma surrounding anxiety, depression, and therapy. Students may feel more comfortable seeking help after seeing influencers or peers openly discuss their mental health journeys. Some platforms also provide direct links to crisis resources when users search for content related to self-harm or suicide. These efforts demonstrate that social media companies and mental health organizations are recognizing their shared responsibility in protecting young users.

Importantly, recent research suggests that the quality of social media use matters more than the quantity alone. Passive scrolling—simply consuming others’ content without interaction—has been associated with greater feelings of envy and loneliness. In contrast, active engagement, such as messaging friends or sharing meaningful content, may strengthen social bonds and reduce feelings of isolation (Verduyn et al., 2017). This distinction highlights that not all screen time is equal; how students interact online significantly shapes their emotional outcomes.

In conclusion, the impact of social media on students’ mental health is multifaceted. While heavy or unregulated use can contribute to anxiety, depression, poor sleep, and low self-esteem, social media can also provide connection, community, and valuable mental health awareness. The key lies in balanced, intentional use. Students can protect their mental well-being by setting time limits, avoiding harmful comparison, engaging positively with others, and prioritizing offline relationships and sleep. As research

continues to evolve, educators, parents, and students must work together to promote healthy digital habits. Social media is likely to remain a permanent part of student life, but with awareness and responsibility, it can become a tool for empowerment rather than distress.

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