

The Price of the Influencer Lifestyle: Social Media Messages' Effects on Mental Health

Ryan Thatcher

Department of Communication, Old Dominion University

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Dr. Gary Beck

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It is often said that comparison is the thief of joy. With the rise of social media in recent years, many users find themselves in constant pursuit of validation, acceptance, and status amongst their peers. Crafting a desirable online identity has become a focal point for many people's lives, whether it be for social or professional reasons. However, one must consider the factors that influence what is deemed 'desirable' and how the pressures of social media messages can take a toll on users' mental health. As evidence suggests, social media messages have an inherently negative impact on the mental health of users; constant comparison of self-identity to trending individuals and the messages they spread often leads to the development of various social and behavioral disorders. In a world that is growing ever more connected by social media and technology as a whole, it is important to diagnose the mental health issues posed by social media and its messages as early as possible, so that ample progress can be made to reduce the effects in the future. While there is a plethora of questions that still remain unanswered about the adverse effects of social media, the primary purpose of this review is to identify the documented effects of social media on mental health and examine how various kinds of messages can influence the development of these effects.

Before discussing the negative impacts of social media and its messages, it is important to emphasize that "...the quality rather than the quantity of social media use can determine whether the experience will enhance or deteriorate the user's mental health" (Zsira et al., 2023, para. 2). With this in mind, one must note that social media's emergence as a fundamental influence in everyday life comes not without its benefits. In a not-too-distant past, social media was the most common medium of communication in the world amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided "mutual friendships, rewarding social interactions, and humor [that] also reduced

stress...” (Zsila et al., 2023, para. 3). The sense of community that social media can provide users does serve its purpose of fostering human connection despite time and distance barriers, which allows anyone to find likeminded people or new communities of interest to be a part of. The scale of interconnectedness that social media provides can, in fact, “decrease the sense of stigmatization and increase belongingness and perceived emotional support” (Zsila et al., 2023, para. 3). Additionally, social media can be a platform for inspiring positive change by spreading information regarding social causes and philanthropic movements, many of which pertain to the research and treatment of mental health disorders. The community and platform for positive social and health messages and movements that social media provides users reinforces Zsila et al.’s statement about quality of social media usage being more influential than quantity. While unhealthy amounts of social media usage can have negative effects on the user’s mental health, recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have shown that social media messages can be a positive force during times of crisis.

Despite its fundamental benefits and increased importance during global hardship, social media still poses a myriad of issues regarding the impact it can have on the mental health of its users. Because social media’s constant evolution comes with new issues and increasing complications, “addressing the complex relationship between social media and mental health requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the actions of social media companies” (Minimitani, 2024, para. 6). However, proper examination of how users’ mental health is affected by social media requires examining the source: how social media companies influence the mental health of their users. One must consider that “69% of U.S. adults are social media users” and that “social media is especially popular among younger adults, as 86% of 18- to 29-year-olds are social media users” (Smith, 2017, para. 7). Taking the mass popularity of social media into

consideration, it must be noted that social media companies have a wide spectrum of influence on society as a whole. However, social media companies often use algorithms and engagement to tailor each user's experience to their unique interests. Social media platforms spread various content and messages based on what they think each user wants to see, as "humans are natural social learners. We are constantly scanning the environment to figure out what other people are doing and what we can learn from that" (Brady et al., 2023, para. 2). However, this can have a negative impact on the mental health of various users, depending on a variety of factors. Within these algorithms are various content pools linked by connector phrases, such as buzzwords or hashtags. Some of these content pools include content relating to depression, anxiety, trauma, and the like. Because users search for and interact with content they relate to, these algorithms created by social media companies to boost user engagement may push depressive or toxic content onto the feeds of users already struggling with mental health complications. This recurring presence of negative content, especially in bulk amounts per day, may be "associated with a higher risk of depression and anxiety" (Beyari, 2023, para. 3). However, a multifaceted approach to this issue requires recognizing that social media companies are not completely responsible for the actions of their users.

A natural aspect of human nature is to compare oneself to others. This comparison, in moderation, is necessary for setting standards for identity and success that people can use to gauge their progress and social status. With the rise of social media, "pressure to create the stereotype others want to see and also being as popular as others" (Karim et al., 2020, para. 4) has become a determinant factor in the behaviors of many individuals. With an inherent desire to be liked, people use social media "searching for validation on the internet that serves as a replacement for meaningful connection they might otherwise make in real life" (McLean

Hospital, 2024, para. 10). Various terms relating to widespread anxieties, such as ‘FOMO’ (or fear of missing out), have become increasingly popular in recent years, as “if everyone else is using social media sites, and if someone doesn’t join in, there’s concern that they’ll miss jokes, connections, or invitations. Missing experiences can create anxiety and depression” (McLean Hospital, 2024, para. 11). The rise in prominence of these kinds of terms and messages shows that there are aspects of human nature that social media companies can’t control. However, this does not invalidate the fact that social media has an increasingly significant impact on its users’ mental health. Viewing the evolution of social media from a medical standpoint, “the U.S. has seen an increase in mental disorders overall, and among adolescents in particular” (Galea et al., 2024, para. 2). Considering that the evidence shows 86% of 18 to 29 year olds are social media users and that mental health disorders are becoming more prominent in adolescents, concern must be raised about the future of social media and the impact it can have on early development.

Because social media today plays a frontal role in the life of adolescents, teens, and young adults, one must examine the cognitive effects that social media can have on a developing brain. When social interaction and interpersonal relationships play such a crucial role in the development of a child’s identity as they grow, negative aspects of social media that even adults struggle with can make an overwhelming difference. Relating to the fear of missing out, “when people look online and see they’re excluded from an activity, it can affect thoughts and feelings, and can affect them physically” (McLean Hospital, 2024, para. 12). Considering that many children, teens, and even young adults haven’t fully developed their social skills and moral compass, social exclusion and online harassment have more of an impact on their mental health and may normalize poor social behaviors. Additionally, access to any kind of content may be harmful for the developing mind, as influencers and messages that promote unhealthy lifestyles

may act as poor role models to children and teens that may find their page. This side of social media, when paired with a developing mind, may “increase risk of addiction and cyberbullying involvement” (Zsila et al., 2023, para. 4). With platforms evolving exponentially every year, many call for more stringent terms of service and parental controls that would set stricter regulations for ‘toxic’ influencers and monitor the child’s activity on the platform. This is mainly because “some behaviors—even if rare—are explicitly harmful and emerge from social media exposure by adolescents. These behaviors, including cyber-stalking and harassment, are well documented and most troubling because of the difficulty that social media has in policing these behaviors—or even in providing opportunities for adolescents who experience them to report these behaviors or shield themselves from them” (Galea et al., 2024, para. 8). When an adolescent spends most of their time learning from those around them, those with status on social media become figures in the adolescent’s life and impact their identity thus forth. With the current structure of social media today, “technologies aiding young people in comparing social statuses present a risk to their mental wellbeing. Some turn to social media to increase followers and gain a sense of gratification to compensate for their emotional and psychological challenges. This leads them further down the path of a graver depression” (Beyari, 2023, para. 8).

This evidence raises further questions about what can be done to combat negative mental health derived from social media usage. Some suggest that “policymakers could consider implementing stricter rules and guidelines for social media companies to follow, such as requiring them to prioritize user well-being and mental health over engagement and profits” (Minamitani, 2024, para. 6). Such guidelines would include “mandating regular mental health impact assessments, providing resources for mental health support, and implementing stricter content moderation policies to reduce the spread of harmful and toxic content” (Minamitani,

2024, para. 6). However, there are some issues with taking legal action, mainly stemming from existing legislation. According to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which “provides immunity to online platforms from civil liability based on third-party content and for the removal of content in certain circumstances” (DOJ, para. 2), social media companies are not directly responsible for the content users post, as well as how users interact with said content. This creates a difficult polarization in perspective on the topic, as “strong opposition is expected from users and companies on human rights grounds, including violations of freedom of expression” (Minamitani, 2024, para. 6). On one side, social media can be detrimental for mental health and something must be done about it. On the other side, the prominence of social media and legal obstacles make it difficult for significant change to be made.

According to Karim et al., the problems posed by social media may also have some relation to the Displaced Behavior Theory, which states “people who spend more time in sedentary behaviors such as social media use have less time for face-to-face social interaction, both of which have been proven to be protective against mental disorders” (Karim et al., 2020, para. 4). This evidence essentially states that social media use is a sedentary – or inactive -- behavior, “which, if in excess, raises the risk of health problems” (Karim et al., 2020, para. 4). Sedentary behaviors, which involve any seated or resting activity, have numerous effects on humans if done too frequently. However, one effect to underline is that sedentary behaviors “were positively correlated with depression risks” (Park et al., 2020, para. 24). When combining the effects of a sedentary lifestyle with the social anxieties and addictive nature of social media, one can experience a significant toll on their mental health. With social media addiction becoming a frequent topic of discussion in the health industry, one must consider the added downsides that come with the sedentary nature of social media usage and how it may only

further fuel addiction and depressive symptoms. Similar to the *ouroboros*, a sedentary lifestyle can quickly evolve into a social media addiction, whereas a social media addiction can also lead to a sedentary lifestyle. The recurring issue is that “sedentary behaviors may increase the risk for depression by blocking direct communication and lowering social interactions, or by reducing the available time to engage in physical activities that help to prevent and treat depression” (Park et al., 2020, para. 24). When addiction to social media becomes more severe, it requires an individual to spend more time on the platform, leading to more sedentary behaviors. Often times, as mental health declines, people tend to look to social media more frequently as an escape or for validation, which tends to cause a reliance on social media for self-esteem, rather than finding it through offline accomplishment. This can become a very dangerous downward spiral if not managed properly, which remains an issue for many.

With social media playing such a pivotal role in daily interactions and behaviors, identifying and diagnosing both the positive and negative effects it can have on mental health is incredibly important for making a step in the right direction. Reducing the mental health risks of social media while capitalizing on its benefits requires a more structured, long-term plan if success is to be achieved. However, as stated earlier, there are a variety of roadblocks that currently prevent effective changes from being made, whether it be socially, legally, or morally. This leads to the proposed research question: what can be done to reduce the negative effects of social media and its messages? Considering the current circumstances, “it is crucial to organize the evidence to date and explain convincingly that the restriction is urgently needed for public health reasons and that there are no other measures that could be taken” (Minamitani, 2024, para. 6). Identifying methods and future plans that may aid in reducing the negative impacts of social

media is the main focus of the upcoming proposal, aiming to highlight the best possible courses of action and how they can be carried out.

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