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What Teens Need to Know About Social Media

Technology has advanced so enormously over the last few decades that today's generation of teenagers have a hard time imagining their lives without it. One aspect of this modern technology that teens heavily rely on is social media. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat not only allow teens to communicate with, connect with, and learn more about their friends, family, acquaintances, and favorite celebrities, they also keep teenagers constantly updated on what these people are doing. What many teens and their parents don't realize, however, is that these platforms are doing much more than keeping teens connected and updated. Social media wields a powerful influence on our modern culture, specifically on teens who are often caught up in its swift current. Popular social media platforms hold significant positive possibilities for teens users, but at the same time exert a negative impact on their lives, affecting their physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual health and well-being.

Defining Social Media

Social media, also known as social networking, has evolved over the years as new platforms have been created. These platforms allow users to interact with others online by sharing information and expanding their social circle through a variety of media including photography, videography, and writing. A website called Six Degrees, created in 1997, was the first platform considered by most to be social media (Merrell). MySpace and LinkedIn were two other early platforms that were created after Six Degrees. A few years later, Facebook and

Twitter were consecutively created (Merrell). Today, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter are the most popular platforms among teens. They have evolved over the years and look different than those first forms of social media (“#StatusofMind”). YouTube, which is almost exclusively a video-sharing platform, remains the most popular social media site among teenagers today. Although Facebook ranks as the most popular platform worldwide, garnering over one billion users, a study by Pew Research found that only about half of teenagers currently use it (Anderson and Jiang). While it used to be a common connection place for teens, it has increasingly become more popular among the older generations, and teens now use it less often. The number of teen users on social media platforms is so substantial and so influential that they can command and determine the viability of sites and platforms (Anderson and Jiang). Almost all of the teens surveyed by Pew Research Center in the spring of 2018 either owned or were able to access a smartphone, with only about five percent answering otherwise (Anderson and Jiang). According to the Royal Society for Public Health’s study titled #StatusofMind, “91% of 16-24 year olds use the internet for social media” (#StatusofMind). Additionally, “63 percent of teens’ social media time is spent on smartphones,” according to Common Sense Media’s report “The Common Sense Census: Media Use By Tweens and Teens” (Rideout). These facts illustrate just how many teenagers today are being touched in some way by the reach of technology. The average teenager spends about an hour a day interacting with social media platforms (Rideout). This number fails to account for teenagers identified as more “active” users of social media, who spend about an additional hour on social media on an average day. Teen girls and teen boys are grouped and analyzed separately because they are impacted by social media in different ways (Rideout). Fourteen percent more females than males use social media daily, and almost that same percentage enjoy it more than their male peers (Rideout).

The findings of the Pew study reveal how unaware, or perhaps even confused, most

teens are about the extent to which their lives are being affected by social media. Over forty percent of teenagers admit that they spend too much time on social media, and fifty-seven percent admit they have tried to limit their use in some way (Jiang). Interestingly, half of the teens surveyed described social media as neither positive nor negative, suggesting that they felt they were unaffected by social media (Anderson and Jiang). This finding points out that some teens are unaware that they are being impacted by the time they spend on social media even though they are aware of their exaggerated use of it. About one third of teenagers viewed social media as “mostly positive,” while about one quarter of teens described social media as “mostly negative” (Anderson and Jiang). The Pew study results point to a lack of clear understanding among teens and the need for education and information.

The vast impact of social media on today’s generation of teenagers extends into every area of their lives, interfering with everyday life. Whether they be positive or negative, the various effects are interconnected. Teens need to be aware of the impact and influence social media is exerting on their lives. They also need to learn how to combat its negative effects.

Physical Effects

Teens are affected by social media use in ways that can either provide helpful benefits or harmful consequences to their physical health. Social media may have a positive effect on teenagers if they intentionally use it to improve their physical health. Through mindful social media use, teenagers can be inspired to focus on self-care, be informed about how to do so, and be supported in their endeavors to live healthily. Unfortunately, teenagers’ own poor choices coupled with misinformation and peer pressure, prevalent on social media, can cause teens to suffer harmful and dangerous physical effects. Awareness of these effects is key. Social media provides an outlet for motivational and inspirational posts and stories that can encourage

teenagers to live better or be better versions of themselves. These may either come from individuals with health knowledge or from organizations. Today's teenagers can access a wide variety of health information that was never accessible to previous generations. They may see peers posting about how they are taking care of themselves or follow accounts dedicated to living a healthy lifestyle. A teen may post a picture of herself completing a 5k race on Instagram, and it may inspire her friends to want to get into shape and do the same. Teens may also decide to join groups or communities that encourage and support each other to complete health goals they have such as dieting. There are many ways teens support one another, from finding like-minded people on Instagram to joining a group chat to finding a group on Facebook dedicated to weight loss (“#StatusofMind”).

There are of course downsides to easily accessible health information. There is the possibility that teenagers will access unreliable, unsubstantial, or false information that may negatively affect them, such as an Instagram page that promotes starvation to become thinner. Teenagers may need help identifying social media accounts and groups that promote healthy living. If social media influences a teen to decide to live a lifestyle that is physically unhealthy or even damaging, parents need to intervene (“#StatusofMind”).

Unfortunately, dangerous physical behavior is common among teenagers on social media. Potentially harmful trends and challenges are extremely popular, and many teenagers participate in them. Many “challenge videos” are posted to platforms such as YouTube and Instagram by teenagers who have been persuaded or pressured to take part in whatever the challenge is. Some challenges are fun and harmless, while others can be extremely dangerous. One challenge in particular that caused Poison Control to receive hundreds of calls over a span of several years was the “Cinnamon Challenge.” Teens participating in the challenge tried to swallow a spoonful of cinnamon without water. Many teenagers were hospitalized or suffered

unhealthy consequences after participating in the challenge because of choking or asphyxiation. After trying the challenge and inhaling cinnamon into her lungs, sixteen-year-old Dejah Reed suffered a collapsed lung, and she wasn't the only one ("Cinnamon Challenge"). The challenge was fatal for a four-year-old boy named Matthew who asphyxiated on the cinnamon (Staff). Not only are these challenges harmful in their own right, they also encourage teenagers to "tag" their friends in their videos by mentioning their names and encouraging them to participate too. This results in unhealthy peer pressure. Other dangerous activities, such as snapchatting and texting while driving, can potentially result in injury or death, not only for the teenage driver but also of the victims affected if the teen crashes. The overt risky behavior that so many teens display is common because the prefrontal cortex of their brains is still developing, the part that makes decisions and takes risks. Although that fact should not be an excuse for a teen who wants to participate in a dangerous activity, it does help to explain why some teens choose to take dangerous risks (Sifferlin).

A lack of proper sleep can affect almost every area of a teen's life and prove detrimental to both short-term and long-term functioning. Teens may decide to stay up late on their phones, scrolling Instagram or snap-chatting friends, disregarding or perhaps not even realizing the consequences of staring at a screen all night long. Many natural forces work against teenagers being well rested, or so it seems. Teens naturally have a harder time falling asleep and waking up and require more hours of sleep than adults to function properly (Rumble). School day start times require teens to go to bed early, but melatonin is not released until around 11 pm, which means teens have a harder time falling asleep naturally until then (Rumble). Some schools have tried to help teens by pushing back their start times, but balancing elementary and middle school bus schedules limits how much they can do. Poor sleep has been proven to impact mental health, weight gain, concentration, mood, and more (Pietrangelo). Additionally, teens who consistently

sleep fewer than six to eight hours increase their chances of early death by twelve percent (Pietrangelo). An excellent night's sleep can mean the difference between a day well-lived and a day wasted.

While teens may be unable to change their schools' schedules or to combat the natural forces that seem to be against them, they can control the extent to which the artificial force, technology, impacts their sleep. They need to be informed about what is best for their bodies and do what they can to be as well-rested as possible. Helpful solutions include charging phones in another room besides the bedroom to eliminate the temptation to use them at nighttime and turning off notifications so as to not be disturbed during sleep (Saini). Using devices at night is hazardous to sleep and eyesight largely because of the blue violet light emitted from phones. Blue violet light prevents the sleep hormone called melatonin from being produced, causing teens to have more trouble falling asleep. Not only does blue violet light interfere with quality sleep, it also causes eye strain, which can in turn cause poor eyesight. Poor eyesight can, in some extreme cases, turn into macular degeneration which can cause blindness. Optician Amanda Saint suggests that teens, "Get [their] eyes tested regularly and take regular breaks from [their] computer[s] and hand-held device[s]" ("Smartphone").

Poor posture is another consequence of extended social media use. Teens who crane their necks over their phones or computers suffer from sore necks, back pain, and other spinal complications. Teens can avoid these issues by consciously choosing to use proper posture when deciding to use their phones, computers, or other electronic devices (Saini). To remind themselves, they can even set alarms on their phones to go off during the day to remind themselves to sit properly so that when they are slouched on the couch scrolling social media, they will see the alarm and be reminded to sit up straight.

A more ominous physical concern for teens is the potential danger posed by online

predators that lurk on social media. The CNN special report *#Being13* explains, “According to the FBI, there are more than half a million sexual predators online every single day in America, and they regularly create fake online profiles to groom unsuspecting victims” (“#Being13”). These predators stalk teenagers’ profiles on social media and then pose as a peer with a fake profile. If a teen posts a picture identifying her physical location, anyone accessing her page will know where she is. Stories of targeted and kidnapped teens have become commonplace. A predator decides to establish a connection with a teen in an attempt to meet in real life. Once the teen is lured in, the predator gains control and may physically harm the teen, including rape or even murder.

Teenagers need to remember that predators are actively using social media to seek out victims. Something as simple as not posting their locations on social media could mean the difference between life and death. Because social media sites like Instagram offer the option to submit a post with location tagged or not, by simply turning off location services on their phones, teens can avoid the risk of being tracked. This does, unfortunately, create a dilemma for parents. A phone’s location services feature allows parents to track their teen’s location, which, in the case of an emergency or dangerous situation, could actually save a teen’s life. Teens and parents should decide together how to use the location services feature and consider its potential both to harm and to help.

The most detrimental physical effect social media may have on teens is to convince them to harm themselves or to change an aspect of themselves as a result of what they experience on social media, especially if cyberbullying is involved. Many teenagers experience mental and emotional pain and illness as a result of what they encounter on social media, and many decide to self-harm, even if their intention is not to kill themselves. Girls are more commonly the victims of self-harm than boys. In 2017, about one fourth of teenage girls and one tenth of boys

harm themselves (Kee). Suicide is another grave consequence of social media use, which is affecting teens around the country. Among American youth, suicide is now the second-leading cause of death. According to the Population Reference Bureau, “The suicide rate for teenage boys was three times the rate for teenage girls in 2014. The rise in the overall teenage suicide rate between 1999 and 2014 was driven by the 56 percent increase in the suicide rate among teen girls—from 2.7 deaths per 100,000 to 4.2 deaths per 100,000” (Vanorman). These grave statistics should cause parents, guardians, health professionals, mentors, and other trusted adults to take action. Because self-harm and suicide are most often connected to the emotional impact of social media, this topic will be explored more fully in the next section of this paper.

Emotional Effects

Social media impacts teenagers’ emotional well-being perhaps even more than their physical health. While most studies focus on its negative emotional impact, social media does provide some benefits to teens, such as awareness of and support for those experiencing a number of emotional health issues. Platforms such as YouTube allow users to publish videos which provide support, encouragement, and inspiration for viewers. The Royal Society for Public Health conducted a study titled #StatusofMind which allowed teenagers and young adults to rank popular social media platforms in terms of their emotional impact and to note whether they felt better or worse when using the platform. Out of the five platforms in the study, including YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter, the only platform to rank positive overall was YouTube, which was shown to have improved participants’ anxiety, depression, and loneliness (“#StatusofMind”). Teens may also seek support from friends on social media. According to Pew Research, “Two-thirds [of teenagers] say these platforms make them feel as if they have people who will support them through tough times” (Anderson and Jiang).

Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and addiction are just a few of the adverse mental and emotional effects of social media. Today's generation of teenagers seem to struggle more with the pressures of everyday life than ever before--and these claims seem to be based in reality. The Royal Society's "#StatusofMind" report found that "...rates of anxiety and depression in young people have increased by 70% over the past 25 years" ("#StatusofMind"). This significantly high percentage proves teens are actually struggling. Additionally, an online article published by TIME magazine states that "[a]bout 70% of mental illnesses...appear in the teen years and early adulthood" (Sifferlin). This is largely because teens' brains have not fully developed yet, and they are more susceptible to changes in their brains (Sifferlin).

Social media has proven to be as addictive, if not more so, than other highly addictive substances such as alcohol and cigarettes (Soat). Moreover, this fact is particularly disturbing for teens who are more susceptible to addiction (Sifferlin). Neurology department chair at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, Frances Jensen states, "Addiction is simply a form of learning...[It]is repeated stimulation of the reward circuit in the brain, which is more mature than the frontal lobe at that point. The biology of teens' brains [makes them] more susceptible to the effects of substances and stress" (Sifferlin). About five percent of teenagers are considered to be addicted to social media ("#StatusofMind"). Various studies have shown that social media releases the "reward" chemical dopamine, similar to drugs and exercise (Soat). Clinical psychologist Dr. Marion Underwood believes that teens are addicted to the peer connection and affirmation that they're able to get via social media" ("#Being13").

Cyberbullying is one of the more serious issues teenagers can experience on social media, and, like sleep deprivation, it can adversely affect the way they live their everyday lives. Of the seventy percent of teenagers who have experienced cyberbullying at some point, almost

forty percent claim to experience it *frequently* (“#StatusofMind”). Many organizations have done what they can to prevent cyberbullying by speaking out against it; however, their influence seems not to be as weighty as the pressure of online peers. As long as the Internet exists there will be evil people seeking to harm others. That harm comes in a variety of forms. Studies have shown that teenagers who are cyberbullied “are more likely to experience low academic performance, depression, anxiety, self-harm, feelings of loneliness, and changes in sleeping and eating patterns” (“#StatusofMind”).

Even before the era of the Internet, teenagers struggled with body image issues. Social media has simply exacerbated many teens’ negative feelings toward themselves. Studies reveal that about ninety percent of young females dislike some aspect of their bodies (“#StatusofMind”). The Royal Society for Public Health study also allowed teens to rank the social media platforms in terms of how they made teens feel in relation to their body image. Instagram fared worst (“#StatusofMind”).

Ironically, many teens are emotionally impacted by social media, even when they are doing nothing, or more accurately, *because* they are doing nothing. Thirty-six percent of teens surveyed by the CNN report “#Being13: Inside the Secret World of Teens” said they checked their social media profiles because they wanted to see if their friends were doing things without them (“#Being13”). The problem has become widespread enough to gain the acronym FoMO, or the fear of missing out. FoMo is a form of emotional distress teens experience when viewing activities their peers have posted on social media that they did not participate in. Often, social posts portray the best aspects of people’s lives. Unfortunately, most teens are not able to consider that likelihood and end up feeling “less than” or inadequate (“#StatusofMind”). Like other aspects of social media use, teens seem unaware of the extent to which the posts they view and read are affecting them emotionally.

Mental (Academic) Effects

Common sense would suggest that large amounts of time spent on social media would negatively impact high school students' grades and academic performance. However, scientific studies do not corroborate this seemingly logical notion. Instead, a meta-analysis of almost sixty studies conducted by researchers from the University of Bamberg, examining the impact of social media on scholastic performance, revealed mixed results, from some positive impact to no impact to some negative impact (Emmerich). Essentially, the results were inconclusive with just a few noticeable findings. Students who use social media platforms to communicate with classmates about school assignments perform better academically than those who do not. While it may seem counterintuitive, the amount of time students spend on social media does not appear to detract from the time they spend studying (Emmerich). Although there seem to be no overwhelmingly harmful consequences of social media on intellect; social media use does somewhat negatively impact teenagers academically. For example, teenagers who use their phones frequently and while working on homework receive lower grades than their peers who do not (Emmerich). Overall, the impact of social media use on high school studies seems negligible at best.

Of more significance seems to be the impact a student's social media posts have on their future academic endeavors. In 2017 Harvard University took a stand by revoking ten admissions offers to accepted students because of the offensive content prospective Harvard students sent each other in a Facebook group chat. According to the online edition of *The Harvard Crimson*, the content was "sexually explicit memes and messages that sometimes targeted minority group[s]" (Natanson). What teens recklessly post in their high school years may detrimentally impact their futures into college and beyond. While students may assume that social media posts are temporary, some of the consequences of posting on social media can

be permanent. Future employers seeking to hire an individual may scan old posts to make sure there is nothing incriminating posted there. Eight percent of 16 to 24-year-old Americans were denied jobs because of material posted on their social media accounts according to On Device Research (Sherman). Those eight percent of people could have easily prevented this outcome if they had been more mindful in what they had chosen to post. Students must be mindful that the things they post on social media in the present could potentially impact future opportunities and experiences.

Social Effects

The fact that these Internet platforms that teens spend so much time on are dubbed “social” media implies an intentional design to encourage and enhance social opportunities for students. Therefore, one would expect that students’ social skills would be improved by time spent on these platforms. However, like the other domains being examined in this paper, the results are mixed. On the positive side, many teens feel social media helps improve their relationships. Around seventy-five of teens feel their phones have strengthened their relationships with their parents, while almost ninety percent say they have improved their relationships with their friends (Peacock and Sanghani). Eighty-one percent of teenagers feel more connected to their friends via social media (Anderson and Jiang). So, in some respects their social skills and being impacted. The question is whether these connections are real or imagined.

Although social media may curate an online social experience for many teens, it inhibits offline social growth in teens, and in some cases it can even have catastrophic consequences on social life and social skills. Many teen users of social media exhibit antisocial behavior as well as poor social and communication skills. According to clinical and developmental psychologist Dr. Donna Wick, “Kids text all sorts of things that you would never in a million years

contemplate saying to anyone's face" (Ehmke). Furthermore, in a CNN special report teens claimed they would rather not deal with things in person ("#Being13"). Avoiding in-person confrontations hurts teens rather than helps them because it promotes isolation and denies them the opportunity to gain valuable peacemaking and conflict resolution skills. Social media also encourages superficial and shallow relationships rather than deep meaningful connections even when teens are physically together. Instead of having meaningful conversations with each other while hanging out, teens pull out their phones, scroll their Instagram feeds, and take videos of each other for their Snapchat stories, concerned more about their popularity than about deepening their relationships with their friends. Teens can make the decision as a group to put their phones away when they are together so that instead of having phone-to-phone experiences, they will have more face-to-face connections.

Spiritual Effects

The desire for meaningful connection stems not just from the heart, but from the soul. The inner spirit craves relationship and belonging, a God-given desire to promote unity with Him and fellow believers. For many young Christians, the struggle to live in the world is growing more difficult as our culture becomes increasingly darker spiritually. The pressure a godless society puts on teenagers to develop an accepting, tolerant, or "cool" online image can be difficult to navigate, especially for those who are serious about their relationship with Christ.

Social media does provide young Christians with some opportunities to deepen and share their Christian faith. Young believers can share the message of the gospel with their friends by inviting them to read the Bible with them on discipleship and Bible study platforms, such as the YouVersion Bible app. There are a multitude of Bible reading plans for teenagers to choose from, some for seekers and new believers and others for those desiring more spiritual depth. Christian teenagers also have the opportunity to be a witness to others by sharing pure

and God-honoring posts on social media. The influence many teens have today is wider than previous generations could have imagined possible because of the global reach of social media. Christian apologist Dr. Ravi Zacharias encourages youth to use their presence on social media platforms, what he calls “the new Tower of Babel,” for godly influence (“Dr Ravi Zacharias”). Some teenagers may feel led to use social media as a platform to share the gospel message with their peers, while others may choose to be an example for Christ by simply not gossiping on social media or not posting things that are selfish and self-satisfying. This may then lead to a conversation in which a teen can share his or her faith. Clearly, the Internet makes sharing one’s faith easier than ever before.

Unfortunately, the consequences to some teens’ spiritual health can be so devastating that they may outweigh any potential benefits. Social media exposes teenagers to material that causes them to be distracted by impure things. Pornography and other explicit content is readily available and arguably the most detrimental to teenagers’ spiritual health. Moreover, this accessibility has impacted the moral thinking of an entire generation. Young people today view pornography as “good for society” (Kinnaman). According to a 2016 Barna Group study, “85% of teens and young adults who have viewed pornography did so using online videos” (Kinnaman). However, they appear to be oblivious to the disastrous effects of pornography on their spiritual health and well-being. Pornography use effects a person’s entire being, but its impact on a person’s soul may be the greatest. “Pornography changes the habits of the mind, the inner private self” (Fagan). A person’s connection to God comes from communion with God’s spirit and one’s inner self. When this self is compromised, a healthy relationship with God is compromised. For many young Christians, Bible verses like 1 Corinthians 10:31 guide and direct their offline and online behavior, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (New International Version). Christians believe that seeking earthly glory from

others does not fulfill God's purpose for them. In a world where exalting one's own name and seeking personal glory is the norm, Christian teens may even find it easier to live without the pressures of social media, especially by not having a presence on the platforms at all.

Conclusions

The positive and negative consequences of social media platforms on teen users can impact their physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual health in various ways, which can be life-altering. There is little doubt that platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram allow teenagers access to constant communication and connection. If used properly, readily available information about self-care, exercise, and health resources may be able to counter some of the negative effects of social media. Teens who join social networking platforms may benefit from the emotional support of friends and others during stressful situations. Platforms such as YouTube contribute to awareness about mental health issues, which can also provide support for struggling teens. Communicating with peers about school work on social media may contribute to better grades, while communicating with friends may generate social experiences and provide a place to share their spiritual faith using platforms such as YouVersion.

Teenagers who proactively choose to embrace social media's potential benefits must acknowledge the risk of negative consequences that can result from improper social media use, negative effects that may manifest themselves differently in different individuals. Poor sleep, diminished eyesight, and crooked posture are three significant consequences of extended and improper social media use. False or unhealthy online resources, potentially fatal social media challenges, online predators, self-harm, and suicide are among the more drastic physical consequences. Cyberbullying, unhealthy body image, comparison, and the fear of missing out can be crippling emotional effects of social media use. Social media can exacerbate pre-existing

anxiety, depression, other mental illnesses, and addiction as well as create these issues in people without preexisting conditions. Because the social experience on social media is online, it inhibits offline social experiences and growth. Social media can destroy a teen's good reputation if his or her posts are inappropriate and offensive. Teenagers intending to create a positive impression on future employers need to be careful that their posts reflect the offline image they want to create. Lastly, the most dire consequence of social media is its potential to devastate a teen's spiritual health. Pornography, explicit content, and simply having a social media presence can disrupt a Christian teen's relationship with God.

Some teenagers may be able to think through and design a clear solution for their social media use; however, others may be confused as to what behaviors and patterns they should enforce in their own lives. Recognizing that there are factors outside of teenagers' control may help teens and parents as they work to create a plan to govern social media use. Informed peers, adults, or health professionals can provide insight and support for a teen questioning his or her social media use. Coming up with a plan while being mindful of the pitfalls of social media is what is important. For some teenagers, a "no social media" policy may work best for their health and well-being. For others, restrictions on certain platforms, allotted hours of social media use, or other parental guidelines may work better. Because many teens function differently and are affected in different ways, an individualized plan is the best option. Ultimately, teenagers must decide for themselves whether or not they will use social media, taking into account all sides of the issue and the negative and positive consequences that can result from social media use.

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