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Social media: The answer or the scapegoat behind teen mental health challenges?

By Allie Sharp

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook—initiating a shift in online social habits. Social media has since grown to encompass the constant attention of nearly 45% of teenagers,¹ as reported in a 2019 Pew Research survey and has recently been explored as a “social dilemma”² by a popular Netflix documentary. This dilemma raises concerns for parents and scholars about the potential negative impacts of excessive teen social media use.

The majority of academic research in the past echoed these concerns, painting social media as the answer to increases in teenage anxiety and depression. However, recently released data—stemming from an extensive eight-year study of individual adolescents—provides a different perspective: simply deleting social media apps likely won’t solve the rising generation’s mental health struggles.

The longitudinal research from scholars at Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life found that when adolescents were individually examined across their teenage years, there appeared to be no clear causality between social media use and mental health.

“Thus, the aim of the current study is to test a causal model of the association between time spent using social media and mental health (anxiety and depression),” said Sarah

Coyne, the primary author of the article and a professor in BYU’s School of Family Life. The research involved “both between and within subject analyses, over an 8-year-period of time, encompassing the transition between adolescence and emerging adulthood.”

Although this study was one of the first longitudinal approaches—studying the same individuals over many years—to examine causality between social media and mental health, the findings were supported by a similar cross-sectional study³—that studied different people at a single point in time—which highlighted an analogous underwhelming association between the two variables.

These findings suggest that mental health concerns rarely have a single root cause and that conditions such as depression are better viewed as a multiprocess syndrome requiring consideration of many different factors.

The adolescents in this study varied widely, showing a 54% and 57% variance due to trait-like differences when analyzed. This research, therefore, reiterates the importance of measuring social media and mental health individually across an adolescent’s own experience over the years.

Other than making sure the research measured within-person data, Coyne and her fellow researchers ensured

that their study tested for a direct relationship between the two variables. The analysis included each teenager’s individual increases or decreases in social media use, beyond their normal time, as well as examining their fluctuating mental health, beyond their normal levels. Through monitoring these levels, the research was able to ultimately show whether or not increased adolescent social media use directly causes an increase of depression and/or anxiety.

Researchers analyzed 500 adolescents in this longitudinal study, and the results showed no significant impact on the individual’s anxiety and depression after an increase in social media use, as previously stated. This result remained when decreasing their time on social media, which also had no effect on the teenager’s individual mental health.

This study further discovered critical differences in sex throughout adolescence, recognizing that girls reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than boys. This outcome may initiate necessary questions for future research in the realm of gender differences among adolescent mental health.

Although the longitudinal data for this sample discovered social media to be an insignificant effect on the mental health of teenagers, the researchers

recognize adolescent anxiety and depression rates as important issues that are entitled to continuous attention and urgency.

The researchers aimed to provide an example of longitudinal, credible data that would answer the rising concern of social media use as the overwhelming cause of adolescent mental health declines. This research contributes to the conversation of the possible influence of increased social media use on adolescents, as well as gives clear evidence for the need to move on to other possible factors or

variables behind adolescent anxiety and depression.

“Our findings lead us to wonder if society is in a moral panic, at least concerning the sheer amount of *time* spent on social media and mental health,” Coyne wrote. “We find no evidence that *time* spent on social media is ‘destroying a generation’ a question that has been tackled in recent years, specifically in reference to smartphones.”

Although technology has altered the way teenagers function and

communicate, social media is still just one aspect of the lives of adolescents today, and research needs to continue searching for underlying causes among adolescent declines in mental health. However, as researchers continue to test solutions, those who are struggling can still access many resources including on-campus counselors⁴ for BYU students, countless therapists throughout Utah county, and an emotional relief hotline through Intermountain Healthcare at the number 833-442-2211.⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Anderson, M., & Jang, J. (2018, May 31). *Teens, social media & technology 2018*. [Pew Research Center](#).
- 2 Orłowski, J. (Director). (2020). *The social dilemma* [Film]. [Netflix](#).
- 3 Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behavior*, 3, 173-182. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1>
- 4 Counseling and Psychological Services (2021). *Need some support?* [Brigham Young University](#).
- 5 Intermountain Healthcare. (2020, April 9). *Free emotional health relief hotline is available to anyone feeling emotional distress due to COVID-19*. [Intermountain Healthcare](#).