

Social Media and the Teenager: Good, Bad, and the Unknown

In recent decades social media has become nothing short of a firestorm in the lives of teenagers, and many adults as well. With the advent of the smartphone, we are more connected to each other now than in any point in our lives. Given that social media is still, in the scheme of technological advance, still relatively new. This presents problems with looking for good data, in that the newness and persistent change in social media platforms make long term studies practically non-existent. However, the work that has been done has shown effective to begin to shed light on the effects, both positive and negative of social media use in our teenage population.

Correlation does not give us causation. This maxim should be remembered as data on social media usage emerges. There have been several corollary studies that indicate negative effects, as well as positive ones. One study by the University of Pittsburgh found a positive correlation between social media usage in their teenage subjects and higher reports of negative body image, as well as eating concerns. One can extrapolate that the intense focus social media puts on appearance is processed in a negative manner by impressionable and body conscious teenagers. Another study by the same institution found that reports of depressive symptoms and sleep disturbances rise with social media use.

The UCLA Brain Mapping Center found that the number of “likes” and related activity on social media activates the brain’s reward center, and thus promotes more effort to garner them. UCLA also found that social media users will likely “like” a post, regardless of content, based on the number of “likes” the post has. This implies a significant herd mentality that lies in social media, and has implications for the action and perception of the user. In the same vein, social media creates a feedback loop system, where posts made (output) feed back to the poster via likes/comments (input), thus perpetuating the cycle. Combine this with the dopamine rewards that people receive for attention to their social media activity, and one could be drug into ill effects of social media without being conscious of it. A former Facebook executive, to the Washington Post, told of negative effects of this loop on the type of information we receive, the erosion of trust, and the lowering of civil conversation and debate.

However, social media use has not shown to be all bad for teenagers. Teens are hardwired towards social interactions. It can be said that social media makes social interaction easier for teenagers. This implies that the socialization on social media is geared in a positive way, say among good friends over random others. Marginalized groups of teens, notably LGBTQ, have found solace and community online, whereas their community may not be as welcoming.

Unfortunately for most teenagers, these positive effects are lost in the sea of negative effect. The teenage years, with all the identity formation and impressionable ways, are ripe for trouble

with social media. Social media can leave the user uninhibited, critical, and scathing in their interaction. One can understand the concern when depression, anxiety, body image issues, and bullying are part of the conversation. It is our responsibility as a society to decide how this technology effects are youth, and what we can do to mitigate this.

References:

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http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Feedback_loop

Summary

Although good data and research on social media usage and the related psychological effect is in its infancy, there are reasonable results that contribute to the growing conversation in regards to the impact of this on teenagers. Numerous correlations have been made between social media usage and depression, anxiety, body image issues. This is to say nothing of the vitriol teenagers can spit at one another, as well as the psychological loops that they can be trapped in. There are positive effects, notably in the realm of socialization and community for those marginalized, but these pale in comparison. This data helps us decide what we will do as a society with this new entity in our lives.