
The Pandora's box of social media and technology in the lives and evolution of children

Over Thanksgiving, I watched my 10-year-old niece navigate her iPhone with ease, using the device better than my college roommate does. Next to my niece was her friend who instantly sent me a friend request on Facebook after asking my name. Moments like these make me wonder if our general society is moving towards a culture that allows social media and technology raise today's generation. The adeptness my niece exhibited over her mobile device highlights the increasing impacts social media has over the lives of most humans in the modern society, and brings to question the legitimacy of its benefits and introduce the detriments. Are we opening up Pandora's box when it comes to social media and its effect on our generation? Although social media makes interactions among people much easier, it is harmful especially for young people. When children are still forming their perspective of themselves and their world, they are impressionable. Consequences of this belief include basing self worth on Internet popularity, suppressing the development of real world relationships, and limiting overall perspective.

People have the ability to portray themselves as how they want to be in the online world, and lose touch with reality. For a child who feels awkward or isolated, this escape can become their only reality. This is definitely harmful for the young people in the long term. Being only active in this Internet world where deep, personal relationships are hardly developed, they are losing sight of reality, thus not being prepared for the real world. Therefore, social media, if misused, is dangerous for the healthy development of young people. In order to analyze the problem of social media in depth, my partner, Natalie, and I have created a five-step process which examines how an individual is negatively affected by social media. The first step of the process is "Desire to gain likes" in which young teenagers often seek validation of their popularity through social media platforms. Since human beings are interdependent, they need peers, friends, and families to corroborate what they believe. Social media has only made this human inclination visible to a greater public. Through this process, social media acts as a catalyst that spurs young people's yearnings to seek attention as teens witness posts about what their peers, families, celebrities are doing, eventually setting up social comparisons. According to the social comparison theory, people determine their personal self-worth based on how they compare themselves to others. Seeing lavish lifestyles of celebrities and an idealized version of people's lives on social media, young adults think less of their own lives.

In fact, in 2012, Dr. Raunch and a "team of researchers in the UK surveyed users, 53% of whom said Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter had changed their behaviors; 51% directed the cause at negative behaviors such as feeling dejected as they experienced attenuation of their confidence due to unfair comparisons to others." (Raunch, 2012, p.13) As the study shows, upward social comparisons inevitably distress people by hurting their confidence. However, people do not turn away from the stressor, but instead go back to it. In other words, to not feel dismayed by such posts, teenagers in turn gravitate towards "fishing for likes" on social media to seek attention and validation, thus creating an endless cycle of "desire to gain likes". The second step is "Acting upon it" phase where people actually take the initiatives for validation of popularity by various means such as self-bullying and uploading provocative contents. In her Podcast, Danah Boyd, a leading social media researcher, discussed an emerging trend of cyber

self-bullying on Formspring, where teens were anonymously posting vicious questions and comments to themselves in order to seek consolation from others. Comments like “You are Awesome!” and “Don’t worry” are what teens who engage in cyber self-bullying looking for in order to feel better about themselves. “By creating many fake profiles on Facebook or Twitter and using those accounts to make harsh comments about themselves, teens invite an audience and expect to be defended by them.” It is a coping mechanism that represents a cry for attention and a way of fishing for compliments. The problem is that cyber self-bullying, like cutting, is a physical response to emotional pain, distracting the person from that pain. It is extremely worrying because repeated behavior of this kind will lead to teens who engage in it being less sensitized to the concept of actual, physical self harm because the notion of physical response to emotional pain is the same in both self cyberbullying and physical self harm. With that being said, adolescents, especially in their underdeveloped brains, will more likely to engage in cutting, burning, or even suicide. In addition, self bullying is not just a simple lie but clearly an act of deceiving others. This fraudulent behavior, when performed at an adolescent phase when teens are still developing social skills, can have detrimental, long term effects such as bad Aside from cyber self-bullying, many teens uploading provocative contents to gain attention also leads to their loss of identity and bad reputation.

Along this trend is a fifteen-year- old skateboarder Steven Fernandez who now mostly posts videos of him partying with half- naked women rather than skating videos. By posting pranking videos such as slapping others’ butts in public, he has gained much more popularity which in turn earned him sponsorships from skateboarding companies that use him as an advertising method. Another figure is a thirteen- year-old Daniella Diaz from the film *Generation Like* where she uploads half naked photos on Instagram in order gain likes and attention. Both Fernandez and Diaz are following what the public would want to see. Pursuing viewers’ joy rather than their own happiness, they are only driven by fame and companies’ exploitation. This inevitably leads to loss of their identity as teens are supposed to explore their interests during the adolescent development. Once these young adults get a sense of attention through online comments, likes, and sharing, they feel instant gratification. However, that gratification is not long-lasting, exemplified in *Generation Like*. In the end of the film, the narrator asks a rhetorical question, “Do they feel happy?” Right after, the last scene shows Diaz looking weary and concerned after she finished filming her Step three “Addiction” refers to excessive social media use which interferes with daily lives and eventually destroys friendship. After getting a taste of attention via social media likes and comments, teens try to regain satisfaction by posting more provocative contents in hopes of captivating attention of larger audience. This continued cycle leads to addiction which can have detrimental consequences. According to Ryan Higa, a famed Youtube Star, many “Youtubers spend about 8 hours, filming and editing their videos.”

In addition, William Deresiewicz from *Faux Friendship* compares this instance to an “electric cave where a lonely child plays with dolls” (Deresiewicz, 15) His statement suggests that although social media makes people feel connected, in reality, it isolates those from the real world. The original intention of social media has produced an exact opposite outcome, encouraging people to sit in front of computer alone rather than going out and interacting in person. Deresiewicz also points out that even the interaction we have online with friends is no longer aimed at one particular person, but instead towards one large, homogenous group of Facebook friends whom we have never even met in real life. With the ability to post a message to the world in one click, people have lost the intimacy of talking to one individual. As such instances show, social media has changed the concept of friendship by cheapening it.

The last step “impacts on user” highlights the overall negative effects of social media on teens who continue to misuse these internet platforms. Having encountered the previous three steps and their effects, young people are still susceptible to more negative outcomes such as eating disorders and aspiration for idealistic beauty. The connection between social media and eating disorders is that media promotes unrealistic standards of beauty especially for women, causing them to adopt dangerous diet methods. For the past couple years, society has supported the beauty standard of a “thigh” gap which has been originated in 2013 from a Victoria’s Secret fashion show.

Since then, according to Hannah Davis who is frequently featured in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issues, people have gravitated towards fad dieting which is known to cause serious health concerns such as dehydration, malnutrition, and digestive inflammation. This led to higher occurrences of anorexia nervosa, binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa. The Florida State University study of Facebook use and Disordered Eating led by Professor Pamela Keel confirms this correlation: the more one uses social media, the greater the risk of developing eating disorders. “Those on Facebook demonstrated greater maintenance of their anxiety, weight and shape concerns” said by Keel. As such recent phenomenon and study show, social media clearly plays a role in inflicting physical and psychological damages on today’s teens. In consideration of this four-step process model of social media and its effects, social media does more harm than good to people. Although it facilitates enhanced connection with others, it bombards especially young people with negative social, physical, mental, and psychological effects that are detrimental to their development. From cheapening friendship to hurting teens’ confidence, social media is an impediment once it passes a certain threshold. Gone are the days when children played in the playground. Today, technology and social media are, in all aspects, entrenched in our generation that their effects are never to ignore.