

The Impact of Social Media Pressure on Teenager's Mental Health

Canran Wen

Shenzhen Grit Academy, Shenzhen, China

chierewen@gmail.com

Abstract. Social media plays an indispensable role in the lives of today's teenagers. Whether it's WeChat (a popular Chinese social media and messaging app) for chatting, YouTube for news and knowledge, or TikTok and Instagram for relaxation and entertainment, social media has become an integral part of their daily routines. Modern teenagers place a high value on social interaction and connection with the outside world, making social media increasingly significant in their lives.

Keyword: social media, teenagers, daily routines, social interaction, connection.

1. Pressure and Mental Health

However, the pressure from social media is constantly affecting teenagers' mental health. Mental illness is often defined as a disturbance in the brain's function, with depression and anxiety linked to changes in brain regions such as the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, which control decision-making, mood, and memory (Millan et al., 2012). Adolescent mental health concerns have become a growing focus of societal attention in recent years, with studies showing that excessive use of social media exacerbates these conditions (Primack et al., 2017). The following data sets highlight the prevalence of mental health issues among this population. The World Health Organization (WHO) has previously released suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 - 29-year-olds and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds. Besides Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has previously released in the United States, the suicide rate among teenagers has increased by 56% over the past decade, becoming the second leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 24. To be more specific, a survey found that about 43% of teenagers feel pressure from social media, especially from comparing themselves to others in terms of appearance, lifestyle, or success, in addition, in the UK, over 70% of teenagers reported feeling stress related to social media use, with a strong correlation between social media exposure and increased anxiety and depression.

2. Appearance-Related Anxiety

The creation of perfect images on social media will adding to the stress experienced by adolescents. On social media, teenagers are constantly trying to project a perfect image and persona, to be candid, most individuals are, to varying degrees, mindful of their public image and personal persona. However, their cognitive development is still not fully mature. They hold themselves to high standards for every photo and comment they post, and frequently feel anxious about how others perceive their social media presence and persona. Besides, teenagers may also see what they perceive as perfect images on social media, which can lead to feelings of envy and even inferiority.

The first comes to appearance-related anxiety. Teenagers are often sensitive about their appearance, and seeing idealized images on social media can fuel dissatisfaction with their own looks. Research indicates that repeated exposure to these images can exacerbate body image concerns, as adolescents compare their appearance to the often unattainable online standards (Fardouly et al., 2015). This continuous comparison can lead to severe body image anxiety, where teens focus excessively on perceived flaws while ignoring their positive attributes. The pressure to conform to these socially constructed ideals can lead to heightened body dissatisfaction, which is a well-documented predictor of body image anxiety and disordered eating behaviors (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Low self-esteem can also result in potentially serious outcomes. Low self-esteem refers to an excessive negative view of oneself, characterized by a lack of confidence and an inability to accurately recognize one's true strengths. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to focus on their weaknesses and overlook their strengths. According to Festinger (1954) in his Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others, where frequent upward comparisons can lead to low self-esteem, while downward comparisons may enhance self-esteem (*Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*). On social media, many people share the highlights of their lives. Teenagers may overly focus on or interpret certain bloggers' highlight moments and compare them to their own less favorable situations, leading to a loss of self-confidence. So on social media, where the curation of a seemingly "perfect" life is prevalent, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to making upward social comparisons, leading to feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). Studies have shown a strong correlation between the frequency of social media use and lower levels of self-esteem in adolescents, largely attributed to this cycle of comparison (Stapleton et al., 2017). In summary, low self-esteem not only impacts their daily life but can also have long-term negative effects on their mental health, hindering the development of a healthy sense of self.

Secondly, social validation and fear of missing out is also one of the sources of pressure. In today's digital age, anyone's strengths and weaknesses can be magnified endlessly online. When teenagers receive social recognition, it often doesn't ease their anxiety. Instead, gaining attention and approval can make them even more obsessed with and anxious about likes and comments from others. Burke and Kraut (2016) explored the relationship between social media feedback and mental health (*Journal of Social Media Research*, 2016). Their study found that teenagers are highly dependent on external social feedback, particularly in the form of likes and comments. Furthermore, they identified that when teenagers do not receive sufficient recognition on social media, they are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Burke & Kraut, 2016).

If it's the other way around, when teenagers face negative comments, they often become more anxious, and some teenagers may struggle to distinguish whether the criticism is valid or not. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) focused their research on the impact of cyberbullying, including negative comments, on adolescents' mental health (*Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2004). The study found that adolescents who experience cyberbullying or negative feedback are more likely to develop symptoms of depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies. The data indicated that negative comments not only affect adolescents' self-esteem but also lead to long-term mental health issues (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). To give the most common example, trolls are unavoidable on social media platforms, and when a teenager encounters one, it can lead to ongoing self-doubt or even cause them to emotionally break down.

Constant judgment of what's right and wrong on social media can leave teenagers feeling perpetually confused, so after a social media overload, significant pressure originating from social media tends to emerge. The news and information teenagers come across on social media are often disorganized and fragmented. With a constant stream of updates influencing their lives and perceptions daily, even hourly, they can easily fall into cognitive mistakes due to their limited ability to filter and analyze what they see. In 2016, a suicide game called the "Blue Whale Challenge" spread rapidly on social media, especially among teenagers in Russia and other countries. The game involved tasks that encouraged teens to perform dangerous acts, eventually leading to suicide. Many teenagers, unable to recognize the danger, were lured into participating, suffering severe mental and physical harm. So teens will easily fall into cognitive mistakes due to their limited ability to filter and analyze what they see.

Neuroscience research shows that the prefrontal cortex in teenagers—which is responsible for decision-making, critical thinking, and problem analysis—is not fully developed during adolescence. For example, a 2011 study published in *Cognitive Development* (Sturman, Hollis, & Hargreaves, 2011) found that teenagers are more likely to be driven by emotions rather than rational analysis when

assessing risks and making decisions. This indicates that they are prone to making inaccurate judgments when faced with complex and chaotic information on social media.

3. Cyberbullying and Its Consequences

The most serious, of course is the impact of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying refers to the use of digital platforms, particularly social media, to deliberately harm, harass, or threaten others. Studies indicate that more than 60% of teenagers have experienced some form of cyberbullying, which may include malicious comments, rumor-spreading, public humiliation, or persistent harassment through fake accounts. The anonymity afforded by online platforms often exacerbates the problem, as bullies can engage in harmful behavior without immediate consequences. Therefore, the probability of cyberbullying in today's society continues to grow. A study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that teenagers who experienced cyberbullying were twice as likely to suffer from depression compared to their non-bullied peers. This research highlights the direct and serious impact of cyberbullying on adolescents' mental health. The severe consequences of cyberbullying are beyond our ability to predict.

The long-term psychological consequences of cyberbullying can be severe. Research indicates that teenagers who are subjected to cyberbullying are at a higher risk of developing depression or anxiety. In more severe cases, they may turn to self-harm or even suicide. In 2017, a 12-year-old American girl named Mallory Grossman took her own life after enduring prolonged cyberbullying on social media. This tragedy sparked widespread public debate and calls for stricter legislation to combat cyberbullying. A 2018 survey by the UK Anti-Bullying Alliance found that 34% of teenagers reported experiencing cyberbullying. The survey also revealed that 64% of teenagers believe social media platforms are not doing enough to protect them from cyberbullying. Cyberbullying relentlessly violates the victims' well-being, while the bullies persist, causing victims to withdraw and become less likely to seek help. The psychological damage caused by cyberbullying is often profound and irreversible.

4. Solutions and Interventions

Certainly, these current issues need to be addressed and resolved. Regarding the various contextual connections affecting adolescents, it is essential to seek appropriate solutions. Therefore, I will discuss these issues from three perspectives: the family, the school, and society. Families should engage in more open communication with their children, reminding them that there's no such thing as a "perfect persona." The flawless images on social media often hide untold stories behind them. By helping teens see the reality behind these online portrayals, parents can give them a more balanced perspective. Additionally, by spending time fostering critical thinking and analytical skills, parents can help their children better recognize negative content and understand its potential impact, preventing their emotions and behavior from being swayed by harmful online influences. In terms of schools, they need to build on family education by incorporating these theories into their curriculum. Additionally, schools should monitor students' social media accounts to detect and address any issues promptly. Ideally, they could also provide students with tools and resources for healthy social media use. Last but not least, Society should provide timely psychological support and counseling when it identifies mental health issues in children, helping them overcome depression or anxiety caused by social media. Additionally, it's crucial to use social resources to intervene and stop online harassment, ensuring that the internet does not become a lawless zone. Holding seminars on healthy social media use for minors can also educate more teenagers on how to use social media responsibly. Social media platforms should implement features specifically designed for young users to address these issues from the root.

In today's society, where the internet and social media are so prevalent, it's essential to address the challenges teenagers face in a timely manner. Ensuring their safe use of social media requires a

collective effort from families, schools, and the broader community. By coming together, we can effectively tackle the issues posed by social media and promote better mental health for young people.

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