

Literature Review: Social Media's Influence on Adolescent Minds and Mental Health

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Significant research has been done regarding the effects and implications of social media use on adolescents' mental health. (Curtis et al., 2023; Engeln et al., 2020; Halliwell et al., 2011; Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Steele et al., 2019; Youn et al., 2019). While scholars agree that there is a "complicated picture of the relationship between digital media use and psychological outcomes" (Steele et al., 2019), most scholarly studies have historically explored the negative effects of social media use on teen mental health. Social media's influence on adolescents can be analyzed through three main lenses: psychology (Engeln et al., 2020; Halliwell et al., 2011; Steele et al., 2019), public health (Curtis et al., 2023; Papageorgiou et al., 2022), and advertising (Youn et al., 2019).

Clinical psychology scholars such as Ric G. Steele (2019) argue that while using social media can stunt psychological functioning in adolescents, the negative effects are minimal and must be weighed against the positive associated outcomes before one can say that social media is more harmful than helpful for an individual. In breaking down digital media's influence on adolescent psychological functioning, Steele et al. (2019) found "four potentially related components of digital stress, including availability stress, approval anxiety, fear of missing out, and communication overload." Considering these findings, scholars of clinical psychology now agree that when addressing digital stress in patients, the positive and negative effects of digital media usage should be assessed in the context of the patient's overall psychological and social functioning and considering their specific uses of digital media/what each patient looks to gain from their engagement with social media.

Many studies have been published exploring social media's impact on adolescent girls' body image and appearance comparison tendencies (Curtis et al., 2023; Engeln et al., 2020, Halliwell et al., 2011; Papageorgiou et al., 2022). Psychology scholars agree that "exposure to appearance-related Internet content is positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and internalization of the thin ideal depicted in media" (Engeln et al., 2020). Scholars like Emma Halliwell et al. (2011) have examined the potential benefits associated with showing media literacy videos before presenting artificial digital content to adolescent girls. Halliwell found that showing the media literacy video "prevent[ed] girls from making damaging social comparisons with media models...adding to the growing evidence that media literacy interventions may be useful tools in protecting young girls from body dissatisfaction" (Halliwell et al., 2011). While scholars have historically only looked at social media's influence on adolescent *girls'* body image and self-esteem, Halliwell believes "there is growing evidence that adolescent boys may also be negatively affected by exposure to idealized media models" (Halliwell et al., 2011).

Furthermore, public health scholars such as Alana Papageorgiou (2022) have analyzed adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images of women in social media to better understand social media's impact on adolescent girls' self-esteem and their correlation between personal value and appearance. Papageorgiou et al. (2022) found that in rewarding and endorsing girls for posting sexualized images of themselves online, an expectation is created for adolescent girls to post sexualized images of themselves. Scholars believe that the normalization of social media's sexualization of women tells adolescent girls that they are "nothing but their bodies" (Papageorgiou et al., 2022).

In attempting to understand the relationship between "fitspiration" social media accounts' credibility and adolescents' body satisfaction levels, public health scholars like Rachel G. Curtis et al. (2023) found that "while many popular Instagram fitspiration accounts offer credible content such as example workouts, many accounts contain sexualization, objectification, or promotion of unhealthy/unrealistic body shapes." Curtis et al. (2023) allegedly conducted the first study attempting to develop an evidence-based audit tool for gaging the credibility of social media "fitspiration" accounts.

In researching the interaction of persuasion knowledge, ad skepticism, and benefit-risk assessment in teens as it relates to digital information disclosure, advertising scholars found that "adolescents' persuasion knowledge of social media newsfeed advertising (SMNA) has a positive impact on their benefit assessment (message relevance), but not on risk assessment (privacy risk), influencing their skepticism towards SMNA, which in turn leads to information disclosure" (Youn et al., 2019). This evidence suggests that adolescents are persuaded by targeted ads and lack the skepticism towards SMNA necessary to avoid information disclosure and digital harm.

While extensive research has been done to identify social media's negative influences on adolescent mental health and well-being, how these negative influences differ between the sexes as well as evidence for potential solutions remain unclear. As social media becomes more integral to modern life, it is crucial to understand what can be done to help teens maximize the benefits of social media (high connectedness, relatability) while minimizing harm (information disclosure, body dissatisfaction/low self-esteem). To do so, more research must be done regarding social media's influence on adolescent boys' self-esteem; the relationship between adolescent skepticism, persuasion knowledge, benefit-risk assessment, and digital information disclosure; audit tools for analyzing content credibility; and the potential benefit of showing media literacy videos to social media users. In exploring these topics, scholars will understand more about the specific ways in which social media negatively influences adolescent minds, increasing the probability of creating lasting solutions.

References

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