

Unhealthy influencers? Social media and youth mental health



Adolescents are spending increasing amounts of time immersed in a digital world—checking messages on X, counting likes on Instagram, or watching YouTube or TikTok. According to the latest evidence, 36% of teenagers reported continuous online contact with others. 11% of adolescents report pathological use and addiction-like symptoms: they are unable to control their use, have withdrawal symptoms of anxiety and low mood when not able to use social media, neglect other activities, and report negative consequences on their usual daily life. Concomitant with growing use of social media in the past 15 years, rates of mental illness and self-harm in people aged 10–24 years have also increased. These trends have prompted many questions about the effects of social media on the mental health of young people, including from the likes of the US Surgeon General.

That life will continue to be increasingly virtual for both adults and young people seems inevitable. However, concerns are growing that children, who often use social media in disparate ways unknown to their parents or guardians, are specifically being manipulated and harmed through algorithms and targeted marketing deliberately aimed to grow hours spent online. While browsing, teenagers will see advertisements for alcohol, fast foods, vaping, and gambling, and with greater exposure comes increased opportunity for the platforms to monetise.

The adolescent brain goes through much neurobiological change as synaptic connections are strengthened and neurons are selectively pruned, making it particularly vulnerable and malleable. At the same time, children are expected to become independent adults capable of managing a new set of identities and responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, psychological and emotional difficulties during adolescence are common. Awareness of such vulnerabilities has prompted heated debate about at what age young people should be allowed smartphones, whether mobile phones should be banned in schools, and whether legal frameworks are needed to provide protection.

However, attempts to conclusively link rising rates of mental illness or find any clear brain changes with the growing use of social and digital media during adolescence have proved difficult. In the *Lancet* Commission on self-harm, published today, Paul Moran and colleagues acknowledge the potential harms and arguments put

forward by scientists such as Jonathan Haidt, but conclude that research on the effects of social media has so far produced mixed results. Indeed, for some young people, it might have benefits, facilitating connections for those who are isolated, providing online support networks, and delivering therapies.

More study is clearly needed. Research thus far has focused on time spent online as the unit of exposure. But social media provide diverse environments and individual user experiences are highly specific. Users' perceptions—such as ideas about how many people will view their content or how long the content will be visible for—should be considered. Although rates of mental illness have gone up alongside rates of social media usage, many other ecological changes affecting young people have taken place in the past 15 years, including widening inequalities, tightening job markets, and climate change concern. If there is a meaningful causal link between social media and mental illness, it is likely small, although it may also be important.

There is a bigger picture of mental health to consider. The Commission, which reports unprecedentedly high lifetime prevalence rates of self-harm—including 14% in children and adolescents—argues for the importance of addressing psychological and social factors. Most crucially, the social determinants of health. Poverty, specifically, is known to heavily influence the distribution of self-harm in all communities. Self-harm practices are also shaped by social relationships and class dynamics; Indigenous people across the world, especially Indigenous youth, have high rates of self-harm, with colonisation and racism having potentially important roles in driving behaviour. Reducing rates of self-harm, which by extension would likely have a substantial effect on distress in adolescents using social media, requires a whole-of-government approach to tackle upstream drivers. Services and society need to reduce misery and build healthy communities.

If teenagers are to spend their lives online, they should be able to do so safely and free from manipulation. The rise in mental health disorders in young people is extremely concerning, and we certainly need to better understand the role that digital media and smartphones might have. But such efforts should not detract from the continued need for action against well established determinants of mental illness. ■ *The Lancet*



See **The Lancet Commissions**
page 1445

For more on the **rates of social media use among young people** see <https://hbosc.org/new-who-hbosc-report-sheds-light-on-adolescent-digital-behaviours-across-europe-central-asia-and-canada/>

For the **comments from the US Surgeon General** see <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/23/surgeon-general-issues-new-advisory-about-effects-social-media-use-has-youth-mental-health.html>

For more on **concerns about manipulation of young people online** see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_2664

For more on **exposure of teenagers to harmful advertising** see <https://iht.deakin.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/2024/06/Digital-Youth-brief-Final-2.pdf>