

## THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

### **Social Media: An Untamed Legacy Wearing Sheep's Clothing**

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#### **The Initial Interaction**

"Hi, nice to meet you! What's your insta?"

This is a phrase quite commonly heard nowadays whenever you meet someone new. Ever since the first social media site "Bolt and Six Degrees" was created in 1997, social media has become an extension of many individuals' identities, with a handful of youths glued to their phones (Hines 2022).

My initial interaction with social media was when I entered middle school. I still vividly remember the first day of class when all of the new classmates were sharing their Instagram handles and Facebook profiles, and myself trying to still wrap my head around what social media really was. Personally, social media usage had been somewhat normalized by the time I reached these pubescent

years, and the digital "legacy" was handed down without much of a manual book. To be honest, the first few years of my interaction with social media were not healthy in the slightest. As an expatriate Japanese teenage girl navigating through the jungles of an American middle school, I was already struggling with self confidence, self image, and maintaining a social life, and the "likes" and "followers" of this online drug only added fuel to the fire. I saw that it was not only impacting my mental health, but also my physical health, with more fatigue and shorter attention spans the more I used social media.

According to Pew Research Center, roughly 70% of adults and 80% of teens use social media daily, with over 90% of teens using it for over 4 hours a day. With this much outreach, we should be cautious of any harmful effects this media

can pose. As a medical student currently devoted to bettering human health and well-being, I am gravely concerned of the negative consequences that social media, this technological legacy that my previous generation has created, has on our and future generations' physical and mental wellness, and suggest the later discussed actionable solutions to address this pressing issue.

### **Social Media's Influence on Mental Health**

Over the past few decades, there has been countless research highlighting the detrimental effects that social media has on the mental health of users, especially young. I first handedly conducted research on this matter as well when advocating for mental health to be included in the G7 2021 agenda as a G7 Youth Summit (Y7) Japanese delegate. The negative effect is largely due to the nature of social media, where users portray unrealistic images of themselves as if they were real. Humans are naturally social beings who like to compare, and these curated posts lead to users having a distorted lens on reality. According to one study, the way users depict themselves on social media can start to shape their real world experiences, and this exaggerated self-flaunting can lead to a vicious cycle of comparison, which can ultimately lead to thoughts of inadequacy (Hall et al. 2018). In fact, Alexey Makarin, assistant professor at MIT Sloan Management School found that college-wide access to social media sites such as Facebook led to a 7% increase in severe depression and 20% increase in anxiety disorder among university students.

In warping reality, social media disfigures body images as well. A widescale survey conducted by OnlineTherapy.com found

that over half of American social media users experience body image issues, and especially among young girls, research has shown that there is a significant positive association between time spent on Instagram and their disordered eating (Wilksch et et al. 2019).

This past year when I was researching human flourishing in the field of public health, social media showed to also have harmful impacts here. Human flourishing is a notion proposed by Professor VanderWeele from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and it serves as a holistic measurement of human well-being. One of the domains of flourishing is close social relationships, which social media has ironically shown to hinder, possibly due to users' satisfaction with feeling pseudo-connected through these platforms (Nix et al. 2022). In Japan, this effect may have led to the increase in "Hikikomori", or those who stay inside their homes all day, which make up a considerable portion of the high suicide population (Tateno et al. 2019 & Yong et al. 2019).

### **Social Media's Influence on Physical Health**

There has also been emerging research exploring the effects of social media on physical health. In particular, social media has been shown to have damaging consequences on the human brain. Social media companies design their platforms to be highly addictive, manipulating the release of dopamine in the human reward center (McLean Hospital 2022). This brain duping can hook humans to a cycle of getting instant reward just by checking their social media, which can decrease the joy we feel out of real-life long term rewards. According to Dr. Sperling from McLean Hospital, it is especially dangerous for

middle schoolers who have access to social media but have their frontal lobes not fully developed, which lead to them lacking impulse control and being more vulnerable to addiction.

Social media can damage cognitive performance as well, notably attention spans and memory. Due to how social media bombards feeds continuously with new stimulating content, heavy social media users find it difficult to ignore small distractions, and overtime this causes the prefrontal cortex to shrink, decreasing users' ability to maintain concentration (Frenette 2021). Additionally, when people use social media to record memories, this diminishes people's internal ability to store memory in the hippocampus (Frenette 2021).

Outside of the brain, excessive social media use has also been tied to lower quality of sleep, and also higher levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), an inflammation marker (McLean Hospital 2022 & Gambini 2022). Both of these factors are significant precursors to a decline in overall human physical health.

As can be seen, the devastating effects of social media are countless yet oddly, inadequately dealt with: This is why it is imperative that we take immediate action to avoid these ramifications.

### **Changing the Image of Social Media Through Education**

Firstly, we must change the societal view towards social media as harmless, and properly educate new generations of how to deal with social media as an actual digital drug and possible weapon against their health.

To promote a mentally healthier relationship between youth and social media, social media literacy classes

should be mandated from at least 5th grade, before the age of 12, which is the reported average age most kids start using them (Bower 2022). The classes should emphasize teaching kids that what they see on social media is a very curated reality, and that it should not be used as a guide for how real people look or behave. A pilot study conducted in Australia where they had young girls take social media literacy classes proved to be beneficial in decreasing the risk of them developing eating disorders (McLean 2016). The classes consisted of three 50-minute lessons designed so that the girls can develop their defense against social media, such as by learning how to critique manipulated fake images or wiring their brains to not make upward comparisons. The success in these pilot classes suggests the realistic potential for such education to be successful on a larger scale as well, with the curriculum additionally tailored to accommodate for male students.

Separately, I also call for classes that properly educate students to view social media as a drug: A digital drug but nonetheless one which you can get just as easily addicted to. For this intervention, I suggest educators to follow the model of the American "keepin' it REAL (kiR)" program, a substance use and abuse prevention program which has been scientifically proven to be effective. It was featured by the U.S. Surgeon General in 2016 as being "cost-effective and powerful", and is unique in its class design in that it takes on a method called "active learning". All lessons are based on real teens' stories and are taught "from kids...through kids...to kids" (Keepin' it Real Homepage). This is a thought-out change from the program's predecessor "D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education)", which was not as successful due to its passive learning style. The kiR

program has been successful in that rates of discontinuing all substance use was roughly 60% higher for students who partook in the program versus those who did not. If we can implement a similar program for social media addiction, or add social media as one of the “substances” in the pre-existing kiR, we can expect curbs in youth social media addiction rates as well. Even limiting social media usage to 10 minutes per platform per day has been shown to lead to significant reductions in loneliness and depression, and so if social media addiction is alleviated through this curriculum, the burden on youths’ mental health can simultaneously be alleviated (Hunt et al. 2018).

### **A Third Party to Police Social Media Companies from the Inside**

Now, as much as the aforementioned educational reforms are crucial in empowering the next generation to healthily use social media, we cannot let the companies that operate them keep running amok. There must be some measures taken to tackle the core root of the problem.

Whistleblowers from Facebook have published on the Wall Street Journal of how Facebook workers are well aware of the harmful effects that their product has on users. Facebook researchers had already found that 1 out of every 8 of their users use their platform compulsively to an unhealthy level, and Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram (currently owned by Meta, the parent company of Facebook) has been recorded to mention kids under the age of 13 as a “valuable but untapped audience” with the company laying plans to attract this demographic. These facts highlight how, indeed the social media companies are cognizant of the poison they are selling, but this is not going to

stop them from running their business. Dipayan Ghosh from Harvard Business Review has mentioned that some of the reasons why social media companies are hard to control include how they do not produce their content with editorial oversight, and also how they are profit driven so are not incentivized to steer away from models that are too addictive to its users. In addition, with the international power and wealth some of the social media mega companies such as Meta and Twitter have accumulated, it is difficult for a sole government entity to suppress them, as I personally witnessed while serving as a Y7 delegate or as an American Embassy Youth Council member, and having to navigate through the power balances between legislation and business.

Nevertheless, there must be a system put in place to keep these companies in check, and for this I propose a regulation for every major social media company to have at least one World Health Organization (WHO) representative in their board of directors, overlooking the operation and making sure that their business and media algorithms do not hinder users’ mental and physical health beyond a certain limit. For this suggestion, I conferred the United States Food and Drug Administration’s Cannabis Product Committee (CPC), which overlooks all cannabis related business to check that they do not take advantage of their consumers. As repeatedly mentioned in this essay, social media should be seen as a drug similar to and most likely more addictive than cannabis (which does not have any addictive properties), and so if cannabis sales are monitored by a third party, so should social media sales (San Antonio Recovery Center 2022). I specifically chose the WHO to police social media operations since their mission is to better the

“physical, mental and social well-being” of people across the globe, something that is jeopardized exactly as social media usage spreads beyond borders (Constitution of the World Health Organization).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, social media is a potentially quite virulent technological legacy that has been passed down to my generation from prior generations, and I vehemently urge the actuation of the proposed solution plans in order to allow current and future global citizens to flourish while maintaining a healthy distanced relationship with this digital platform.

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