



Understanding Social Media's Impact on Adolescents

Şura Demir
demirsura@gmail.com

Abstract

Social media plays an increasingly major role in adolescents' (14–17-year-olds) lives, influencing their mental health, social interactions and relationships, identity formation, personality, and everyday behaviors. This paper examines the benefits and risks of adolescent social media use, understanding how individual characteristics shape its positive and negative effects. Excessive use, social comparison, cyberbullying, negative comments, and exposure to influencers can contribute to lower self-esteem, anxiety, being unwell, and changes in adolescents' opinions about themselves. Influencers and online interactions can also shape adolescents' belief systems and attitudes. Conversely, social media can offer valuable opportunities for adolescents to express themselves, maintain friendships, discover shared interests with peers, receive emotional support, and develop a sense of belonging. This paper emphasizes that the effects of social media depend not only on screen time but also on the context of online engagement. It highlights the struggles adolescents face in managing their social media use, including fear of missing out (FOMO) and platform features that nudge users to check constantly. This paper also examines the effects of digital literacy education, parental and peer support, responsible platform design, and school policies that help adolescents maintain healthier digital experiences, and it highlights how schools should help students develop the skills to use technology responsibly and effectively rather than resorting to smartphone bans. Finally, the paper highlights the need for further research to better understand its effects on adolescent development.

Introduction

There has been a surge in the usage of social media worldwide, and as a result the medium has become a fundamental part of the lives of many adolescents. As social media platforms continued to evolve, society's concerns about social media's influence on adolescents is now a major topic of public discussion. In recent years, governments have begun taking action, with Australia introducing a minimum age requirement of 16 for accounts on many social media platforms in December 2025. Such developments reflect growing international debate about how young people should engage with digital technology.

Still, deciding how to manage adolescents' access to social media remains a very hard challenge. While some people argue that harsher restrictions are necessary to protect adolescents, others bring up the importance of education. Finding an appropriate balance has become an important topic for families, educators, policymakers, and technology companies as society adapts to a constantly improving digital world.



Risks Associated with Social Media

Social media has become an important part of adolescents' routines, influencing how they learn and shape their identities. According to Pew Research Center (2024), 46% of U.S. teenagers aged 13 to 17 report being online almost constantly, which shows how frequently digital technology is integrated into their lives. Social media can provide opportunities for self-expression and access to information, but it can also put adolescents at risk for social comparison and mental health challenges.

Social media's impact varies among teenagers; it is shaped by how they use it, their experiences on social media, and their individual and social characteristics. Sala et al.'s (2024) umbrella review identifies several key factors that influence these outcomes, including time spent on social media, whether use is active or passive, the type of feedback received, and the motive for using social media.

The amount of time adolescents spend on social media is an important factor in their social outcomes. More time spent on social media is associated with lower well-being and happiness, partly because excessive use can replace real-life relationships and other activities. Senekal et al. (2022) similarly found that time spent on social media, and whether use is helpful or harmful, are distinct variables that influence social outcomes.

The type of engagement also matters. Active use, such as sharing, commenting, and messaging, creates opportunities for social engagement and support. In contrast, passive use, such as browsing or viewing other users' content, has been linked to social comparison, lower perceived social support, negative mood, and anxiety. However, Sala et al. note that findings on active and passive use are inconsistent, suggesting that consequences depend on context and the purpose of engagement. Problematic use, including excessive use and utilizing social media for mood control, is connected to depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, peer pressure, bullying, and exhaustion.

Adolescents' reasons for engaging with social media shape its potential effects. Social media can support self-expression and online openness, help build and maintain connections, connect people with others who share their interests, foster a sense of belonging, and provide or receive social support. These uses can be connected with better mental health. Positive comments may provide social validation and boost confidence, self-worth, positive self-image, life satisfaction, and personal well-being. The benefits of feedback may also depend on the relationship with the person delivering it, with feedback from close friends potentially having a stronger positive impact than comments from strangers.

In contrast, using social media for social comparison can lead to negative self-assessment and lower well-being, while using it for mood regulation may become problematic when it increases time spent online. Social comparison and exposure to unrealistic depictions of others can be linked to negative self-evaluation, poor body image, reduced happiness, and lower well-being. At the same time, cyberbullying is associated with low mental health outcomes, lower self-esteem, and lower life satisfaction, as feedback and online disapproval may damage

self-esteem and confidence and harm adolescents' sense of belonging (Senekal et al., 2023). At the same time, peer and parental support can act as protective factors, buffering some of the negative effects associated with social media use.

Overall, these findings suggest that social media's impact depends not simply on how often adolescents use it, but on the amount and nature of their use, the type of engagement and feedback they receive, their motivations, their online experiences, and the individual and social factors surrounding them.

However, controlling one's social media use is difficult. Throuvala et al. (2019) studied six focus groups of 42 adolescents from UK schools and concluded that adolescents' social media use can gradually shift from controlled use toward reduced control. Social comparison, peer pressure, anxiety about missing out or losing social connections, and the need to receive responses from other peers can make it more difficult for adolescents to standardize their use. Platform features, such as notifications and login rewards, can encourage repeated checking and continued online use. Throuvala et al. developed a "control model" demonstrating that self-management is not only dependent on an adolescent's ability to control their own behavior, but is also shaped by social influences and the design of social media platforms.

Identity Formation

Growing evidence suggests that social media can powerfully shape identity development in adolescents. Pérez-Torres (2024) notes that routine online feedback, such as likes, comments, and replies, serves as a mechanism of reflection, validating or changing how adolescents see themselves. Wilska et al. (2023) build on this self-concept framework, showing how social comparison with influencers and peers shapes how youth develop their consumer identities. These studies show that social media is not just one factor affecting youth buying behaviors; it is also a mechanism through which young people construct their identity and edit the image they present to the world.

Social media can also shape new beliefs through regular exposure to other viewpoints, actions, and social models. Lajnef et al. (2023) found that influencer characteristics, such as credibility and attractiveness, can shape adolescents' attitudes and decisions. Through repeated interactions with influencer content, adolescents may develop new ideas about themselves or how they should behave.

These views can also be modified when teens compare themselves with others or receive different sorts of criticism online. Avci et al. (2025) found that social comparison is associated with identity discovery. On the other hand, Suhag et al. (2024) found that access to idealized pictures and influencers may alter adolescents' self-body-image judgments. This suggests that attitudes are not permanent and can change as adolescents respond to social recognition and the expectations they receive on social media.

Researchers have also examined how social media influencers affect adolescents' attitudes and behavior. Lajnef (2023) discovered that the credibility and attractiveness of the influencers

shape the perceptions of adolescents about themselves and their ability to make decisions about their bodies, potentially contributing to eating disorders when adolescents are repeatedly subjected to slim influencers or celebrities and unrealistic body images. Also, adolescents may be influenced by online content that portrays self-harm as a way of asking for attention or help to escape emotional distress, which may lead them to adopt harmful coping behaviors. Repeated exposure to influencer content can shape adolescents' mental models and behavioral choices. While this study focuses on influencer effects rather than self-management, it highlights the kinds of online pressures adolescents may need to manage in their everyday social media use.

Discussion

How can teenagers positively utilize social media?

While social media can be dangerous for teenagers, the evidence in my paper also shows it can benefit mental health when used appropriately. As Senekal et al. (2023) analyzed, social media may help establish current peer relations and foster identity development. In particular, online peer interaction was linked to better mental wellness, and maintaining existing friendships on social media was linked to better relationships. These findings show that social media use is most beneficial when it complements adolescents' existing social relationships rather than replacing them.

Adolescents can use social media to interact with people who have similar hobbies and backgrounds and to explore their identities in apps like Reddit, Discord or Tumblr. Apps like Discord and Reddit have over 90 million visits a day. This is especially important during adolescence, when peer interactions and identity development become more crucial.

Gender differences could also be notable when it comes to being affected by social media differently. For example, girls tend to use social media more frequently for interaction, which may lead to better outcomes, such as online support and deeper online relationships (Sala et al., 2024). This positive behavior may be countered by girls' stronger propensity to monitor social content or compare themselves online, so it should be considered with nuance.

Furthermore, an individual's emotional regulation skills and social skills can impact whether they have a positive or negative experience on social media (Sala et al., 2024). Thus, individual differences must be considered when evaluating the potential impacts of social media. Improving emotional and social skills may be a promising approach to helping all types of social media users.

Adolescents can develop emotional control and social skills through online experiences such as Apps like Smiling Mind: Mental Wellbeing. Self-awareness, empathy, and resilience grow when they reflect on their interactions. Critical thinking improves as they learn to evaluate what they see. Parents and peers who talk openly about online experiences can help reduce harm (Senekal et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that making the most of social media is not simply a matter of reducing the amount of time adolescents spend online. Instead, attention should be given to the purpose and quality of their online experiences, as well as their skill development. Social media may provide greater benefits for the development of young users when it is used to share thoughts and experiences that are meaningful to them with others.

Every country, and even different cultures within countries, can have different regulations or interventions regarding technology in education. For example, Turkey has banned mobile phones in classrooms. Every morning, when students go to school, they must hand in any electronic devices they have. However, completely removing and separating technology from education may not be a valid approach. The internet offers many valuable resources students can use. In some cases, these resources may even help them understand certain topics more effectively than a teacher can. Rather than completely restricting technology, schools can use the internet as a valuable tool and find ways to use it responsibly as part of the learning process.

If schools are willing, they can also play an important role by teaching students to use digital technologies and gadgets responsibly without restricting them. Campbell et al. (2024) found limited robust evidence that one-size-fits-all mobile phone bans consistently improve academic outcomes, mental health and wellbeing, or reduce cyberbullying. Instead, they emphasized responsible device use and digital literacy, meaning the ability to use communication tools and digital technologies effectively.

In contrast, Böttger and Zierer (2024) reported a small overall effect of smartphone bans, with stronger effects on social wellbeing and social status than on students' academic performance. They suggested that restrictions should be combined with educational measures that teach students responsible digital behavior as well. Overall, these findings suggest that schools may benefit from combining clear, appropriate boundaries on smartphone use with education on responsible, effective engagement with digital technologies, rather than relying only on device bans.

Social media platforms can also help reduce screen time by improving their design and giving young users more control over smartphone notifications. This matters because platform content and design can shape how social media affects adolescents. At the legal level, policies could encourage better platform design and stronger protections for young users. Although these are opinions, specific legal approaches require further research to determine their effectiveness in different contexts.

Suggestions for future research

Future studies should further investigate the connection between adolescent growth and social media use. While there has been increased attention to this topic, research has not fully determined if social media use affects mental health or whether teenagers who are already struggling are more likely to use social media. This underlines the need for more long-term studies.

Greater attention must be given to the diverse cultural and social contexts in which adolescents engage with digital platforms. Future research should discuss different cultural and qualitative frameworks to understand how localized media use shapes teenagers' vulnerability or resilience online.

Conclusion

Understanding adolescents' relationships with social media requires looking beyond the platforms or restrictions themselves and considering the environment in which those mentioned adolescents grow up. During early adulthood, everyone is still developing their values, confidence, social skills, and understanding of themselves. Online experiences are now a part of this progress, influencing how teenagers interpret other people's opinions, make decisions, and define their place in society. This makes it important to consider not only what adolescents encounter online, but also how they learn to interpret and respond to it.

One key takeaway is that we cannot blame teenagers. Even though being able to self control and thinking critically are important parts, young users are also influenced by peer expectations, the design of digital platforms. Expecting adolescents to manage everything they see and every struggle they face on social media on their own misses these larger influences. Good solutions yet require cooperation between adolescents, families, schools, and technology companies, with support rather than restrictions alone.

This research also revealed that there is no single approach to this topic which will work equally properly for every adolescent. Differences in personalities, social environments, cultural backgrounds and laws among different countries make continued investigation necessary, especially through long-term studies.

Finally, preparing adolescents for the digital world or at least teaching them before it's too late means helping them become independent and thoughtful users of technology. Success should not be measured solely by which teenagers spend less time online, but by their ability to recognize harmful influences. Developing this ability will ensure that social media becomes a space adolescents can navigate with greater awareness rather than something they can't control.

References

1. Avci, H., Baams, L., & Kretschmer, T. (2025). A systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development. *Adolescent research review*, 10(2), 219-236.
1. Böttger, T., & Zierer, K. (2024). To ban or not to ban? A rapid review on the impact of smartphone bans in schools on social well-being and academic performance. *Education Sciences*, 14(8), 906.
2. Campbell, M., Edwards, E.J., Pennell, D., Poed, S., Lister, V., Gillett-Swan, J., Kelly, A., Zec, D. & Nguyen, T.A. (2024). Evidence for and against banning mobile phones in schools: A scoping review. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 34(3), 242-265.



3. Gottfried, J. (2024). Americans' social media use. *Pew Research Center*, 31, 1-29.
4. Lajnef, K. (2023). The effect of social media influencers' on teenagers Behavior: an empirical study using cognitive map technique. *Current Psychology*, 42(22), 19364-19377.
5. Pérez-Torres, V. (2024). Social media: a digital social mirror for identity development during adolescence. *Current Psychology*, 43(26), 22170-22180.
6. Sala, A., Porcaro, L., & Gómez, E. (2024). Social media use and adolescents' mental health and well-being: An umbrella review. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 14, 100404.
7. Senekal, J. S., Ruth Groenewald, G., Wolfaardt, L., Jansen, C., & Williams, K. (2023). Social media and adolescent psychosocial development: a systematic review. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 53(2), 157-171.
8. Suhag, K., & Rauniyar, S. (2024). Social media effects regarding eating disorders and body image in young adolescents. *Cureus*, 16(4).
9. Throuvala, M. A., Griffiths, M. D., Rennoldson, M., & Kuss, D. J. (2019). A 'control model' of social media engagement in adolescence: A grounded theory analysis. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(23), 4696.
10. Wilska, T. A., Holkkola, M., & Tuominen, J. (2023). The role of social media in the creation of young people's consumer identities. *Sage Open*, 13(2), 21582440231177030.