

HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT US?



By: James Mast, LPC

We live in the age of mass-multimedia. Research on media use estimates that Americans spend between 10 and 12 hours a day using some form of media. Many of us listen to the radio when we drive. We listen to music when we exercise, and we watch television while we relax at home. Whether we realize it or not, we are surrounded by disembodied electronic voices most of our waking hours.

The term “social media” refers to platforms that allow people to interact or form communities online. Common social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitter. To get a sense of the growing magnitude of social media’s role in our lives, consider this. In 2008, nearly 28% of Americans were using some form of social media. By 2017, that number had risen to nearly 81% of Americans (*Edison Research*). It is no longer a question of *whether* or *not* social media changes our lives; rather, it is a question of *how* social media changes our lives.

A link between social media use and happiness has been well-established in research. Basically, the more you use social media, the more unhappy you become. Teenagers who use social media for more than two hours a day are more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression. But why might this be true?

Nearly all social media platforms require users to create a personal profile. Over time, the personal information that is shared in the online community is evaluated, liked, or not liked. It doesn’t take long to learn that certain aspects of your online profile are more popular than others. Many “likes” for awesome vacation photos. Fewer “likes” for posts about a stressful workday. The resulting belief can look like this: it is not okay to think, feel, or behave in certain ways. One of the costs of social media can be that we learn to push more and more of ourselves into the category of “unacceptable.”

The lens we use to view ourselves significantly impacts the way we think, feel, and behave. Does my lens show me a person worthy of love? Or does my lens show me a person who isn’t worthy of love? The natural response to feeling unworthy is to take some sort of corrective action towards worthiness. The social media platform Snapchat offers users the ability to alter their appearance using filters to make their skin look smoother, eyes larger, or other modifications. This type of technology is sometimes referred to as “augmented reality.” Augmenting how we appear can be entertaining. But what are the hidden consequences of presenting such a highly curated version of ourselves to the world?

A 2017 *Washington Post* survey determined that 55% of plastic surgeons had patients request surgery for the purpose of appearing more attractive in selfie pictures. Some patients bring filtered selfies as templates for their surgeons. The term “Snapchat Dysmorphia” has been used to describe the state of such patients.

Anxiety is the most common form of mental health disorder in the United States. Data from the National Institute of Mental Health suggest that anxiety significantly impacts more than 40 million Americans each year. But what contributes to such staggering statistics? There is no simple answer to such a question, but it is certainly worth considering the impact of social media on the subject of mental health.

Studies have shown that people are more likely to post or repost something that evokes anger or fear than anything else on social media. This suggests that

businesses and politicians may be incentivized to make you feel angry or scared online. The term *clickbait* refers to content for which the main purpose is to attract attention and encourage people to click on a link to a particular website. Most clickbait is designed to illicit fear, loathing, or anger. Let’s face it, it is hard to go online without being saturated with the worst examples of humanity.

Issues of cyberbullying are increasing as social media use increases. One reason may be that interactions on social media occur through a screen—which short-circuits

our natural tendency to empathize with others. The anonymity of the Internet allows people to act out cruelty more easily. Time-delays allow people to make a harsh comment and walk away—without dealing with immediate consequences. Using screens can also make bullying seem like a game.

This article has only scratched the surface of the ways that social media impacts our lives. And like many things, healthy social media use requires us to moderate our level of consumption. If you enjoyed this article, please consider “liking” us on Facebook. Just kidding.

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