Social Media: Psychosocial Implications for Adolescents

What We Know

› Adolescence is a time when young people are learning how to manage their emotions, build peer relationships, and develop self-identity and life skills. Many adolescents are trying to develop their personal identity while also being drawn to group affiliations. For some adolescents this means a natural tension between the desire for independence and the desire to make social connections. As a means of facilitating communication and the sharing of personal information, social media offers both challenges and opportunities for adolescents who use it\(^3\,6\,22\)

- Adolescents are more limited in their ability to self-regulate and more vulnerable to peer pressure than adults\(^16\)
- Today’s adolescent clients have never lived in a time without the Internet. Social media may have positive and negative effects on adolescents’ mental and emotional well-being\(^3\)

› Social media refers to any website or application that allows social interactions, including but not limited to social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat), gaming sites and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life, Minecraft, Sims), video sites (e.g., YouTube), and blogs\(^16\)

- Social media sites wax and wane in popularity over time, with new sites constantly coming into use as the market and demands change. Social workers need to stay current on the social media platforms that are popular with adolescents\(^14\)
- A significant number of adolescents access all of their social media via their mobile phones and much of their access is unsupervised\(^11\)
- The Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2015 of social media and technology trends among teens. The researchers found that 92% of adolescents between the ages of 13 to 17 went online daily, with 24% of adolescents stating that they were online “almost constantly.” Only 12% reported once-a-day online use, 6% weekly online use, and 2% more infrequent use than that\(^18\)
  - Almost 75% of adolescents reported having a smartphone, which allows for more frequent online access
  - Black and Hispanic youth reported Internet use that was more frequent than that of White youth
  - 71% of adolescents reported using more than one social networking site
  - According to their self-reports, 71% of adolescents use Facebook, 52% use Instagram, 41% use Snapchat, 33% use Twitter, 33% use Google+, 24% use Vine, 14% use Tumblr, and 11% use other social media platforms

- In 2013 the Pew Research Center conducted a study on the relationship between social media and privacy among adolescents ages 12 to 17. This study showed that many adolescents are sharing more personal information on social media than in the past\(^17\)
  - Only 60% of adolescents kept their profiles private on Facebook
  - Only 9% reported being very concerned about third-party access to their information, whereas 81% of parents expressed that they were either very concerned or somewhat concerned about third-party access
  - 91% had posted a personal photo, up from 79% in 2006
– 71% had posted the name of their school, up from 49% in 2006
– 71% had posted the name of their city or town, up from 61% in 2006
– 20% had posted a cell number, up from 2% in 2006
– 33% are Facebook friends with individuals they have never met in person
– 39% admitted to lying about their age to access a website or sign up for an account

There are varying hypotheses and theories regarding social media use in adolescence and how it affects adolescents’ identity development and ability to connect to others. The stimulation hypothesis theorizes that adolescents may have an easier time with online self-disclosure than with in-person communication. Since self-disclosure leads to closer relationships, adolescents may be able to form close, high-quality friendships through social media communication. The rich-get-richer hypothesis theorizes that it is only the more socially competent adolescents who will benefit from online communication by expanding their social networks, whereas those adolescents with poorer social skills will not be able to develop high-quality connections. In contrast, the social compensation hypothesis theorizes that those adolescents who are uncomfortable with in-person peer relationships can develop relationships and meet their social needs online. The media practice model posits that adolescents choose and will interact with media based on not only who they are but also who they want to be. When adolescents choose to explore certain behaviors or experiences, they may receive reinforcement that will then push them toward further engagement in that behavior choice. The Facebook influence model outlines four concepts related to Facebook and its effects on self-identity, social norms, and connectedness to others. These are: Connection – Facebook both provides and improves peer communication, connection, and networking. Comparison – Facebook takes the always-present activity of comparison among peers and uses actual information, photos, stated preferences, and other elements to provide a point of comparison while also giving adolescents the option of commenting on one another’s material. When a post or photo is not generating as many comments as a peer’s post or photo, this is another point of comparison. Identification – The user can develop an online identity and receive feedback on that identity. Immersive experience – Facebook features create a fully immersive experience utilizing images, video, and text to create an interactive experience for the user.

Use of social media in adolescence can have positive effects by helping the adolescent with identity development, self-disclosure, and forming affiliations. Many adolescents use social media to extend relationships that are found in other parts of their lives. Use of social media can allow adolescents to both provide and receive virtual empathy, taking part in an online fundraiser, receiving supportive comments and messages after posting about an ill loved one. This support may include support for adolescents who are otherwise marginalized by sexual orientation, illness, disability, or shyness. Social media allows adolescents to reach out for health information on topics that might otherwise be hard to talk about. Adolescent use of social media also presents challenges and areas of concern. Social comparison is a common behavior among users on most social media platforms. Responses to posts may provide positive feedback, but negative responses can cause feelings of inadequacy. Adolescents may also post misleading or inaccurate information to present an idealized version of themselves. Many social media platforms have measuring tools such as “likes” or “friends” that are collected and that may be used by adolescents to influence their sense of self-worth. An adolescent may also feel that if a picture or comment is not getting enough feedback from his or her circle of friends, then it should be shared with a wider audience. Adolescents may be compelled to stay continually connected to social media in an attempt to stay linked with others and avoid feeling left out. Extensive use of social media by adolescents has been linked to worsened mood and overall life satisfaction.
This phenomenon is also referred to as “fear of missing out.” In a 2016 study researchers found that persons with a greater fear of missing out experienced more physical symptoms (i.e., headaches, shortness of breath, and chest pain), more depressive symptoms, and engaged in less mindful attention than persons who did not fear missing out. Adolescents are vulnerable to the online disinhibition effect, which describes the tendency to share more personal details and private information in social media formats, which may feel more anonymous and disconnected from the real world, than in face-to-face interactions. Adolescents may perceive that the content they post is protected by the privacy settings of the platform, when in reality anything that is posted online may be considered publicly accessible (e.g., can be hacked, accessed by IT employees, tagged by a friend who does not have a private profile, mined by data collection companies). Adolescents can behave impulsively, and this, coupled with how rapidly information can spread on social media, can have major negative implications for them. Adolescents often do not consider the digital footprint they leave through social media use. Adolescents are often not forward-thinking enough to realize that information or photos they post on social media may be accessed by higher education institutions or future employers. Risk-taking behavior (e.g., alcohol use, substance use, high-risk sexual behaviors) is often promoted by adolescents within their social media profiles and postings. Adolescents are engaging in sexting, the receiving or sending of images, video, or text messages with sexually explicit content, at increasing rates. Some researchers believe that sexting can lead to more high-risk sexual behaviors. Some of these behaviors can result in legal consequences. Of particular concern is adolescents sending and receiving nude pictures of other adolescents. In many jurisdictions, these exchanges are classified as the transmission of child pornography and may result in criminal charges. Cyberbullying, defined as online aggression or harassment, is a concern with adolescent social media use. The attackers’ ability to remain anonymous can result in harsher attacks than those that would take place with in-person bullying. Victims of cyberbullying may feel lonely and isolated. They may experience physical and mental health problems; diminished academic achievement and participation in extracurricular school activities; and increased risk for substance abuse and suicidal ideation. The news media have drawn public attention to extreme cases of electronic aggression in which adolescents have committed suicide as a result of cyberbullying. Social workers need to recognize the impact of social media and ensure that questions about social media and Internet use are incorporated into assessments. The HEEADSSS 3.0 interview, an adolescent psychosocial interview, now includes questions on social media use. Media-related depression, also referred to as “Facebook depression,” is a debated phenomenon that is supported by some researchers and dismissed by others. Researchers in 2014 conducted a study that documented a deterioration of mood after Facebook use; moreover, the longer a subject’s Facebook use session, the more his or her mood deteriorated. The researchers hypothesized that users perceived that being on Facebook was a waste of time, which led to the decrease in mood. Subjects were making a so-called forecasting error: they thought time on Facebook would improve their mood, and instead it made their mood worse. Researchers in a 2016 study found that girls with internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, somatic complaints) who communicated their problems in Facebook posts received more negative and problem-focused posts in response, as well as peer comments offering support. This study adds to the body of evidence that depression and negative emotional states can spread through social media. The marketing that takes place over the Internet is largely unregulated. Adolescents may be exposed to alcohol and tobacco advertisements, which are more restricted on television. In 2013, 30% of adolescents in a study stated that they had received online advertising that was “clearly inappropriate” for their age. Adolescence is a time when good judgment and decision making are still developing, which indicates a need for parental oversight. Social workers may want to suggest the implementation of the physician recommendations for a family media-use plan from the American Academy of Pediatrics. These include setting limits on social media use, designating media-free times together, and creating media-free locations at home.
What We Can Do

› Become knowledgeable about the psychosocial implications of social media for adolescents so you can accurately assess your clients’ personal characteristics and mental health and health education needs; share this information with your colleagues.

› Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client.\(^{\text{4,10,13}}\)

› Social workers should practice with awareness of and adherence to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to psychosocial implications for adolescents of social media use and practice accordingly.\(^{\text{12,13}}\)

› Stay informed about any developing trends in social media technology and the Internet so that you will be aware of how adolescents may be using them and any connected risks.\(^{\text{19}}\)

› Identify adolescent clients who are at risk for social media misuse or are vulnerable to social media exploitation.

› Ask adolescent clients how much they use social media and what they are doing online in order to assess for a lack of parental control or connection, avoidance behaviors, or any behavior that indicates problematic use.

› Encourage parents of adolescent clients to establish rules and limits for technology use both in the home and in outside environments\(^{\text{11,20}}\).

References


