



World Health Organization (WHO)

Topic A. Efforts to address the impact of social media on youth mental health

Introduction:

Essentially, adolescence is a fundamental process in human development because it is the moment in life that matures the thoughts of young people. Nonetheless, nowadays, they are so exposed to the digital space that it certainly influences their perception of the world and of themselves. Social media, specifically, has become a two-edged sword for young people. On the one hand, it sometimes allows them to feel closer to family and friends, it betters their social and technical skills, it enables them to interact with people that maybe share the same interests or experiences about something in particular, which gives them a sense of community, it shows them how life is in different countries and cultures, among others.

On the other hand, unfortunately, social media can also impact young people negatively and even induce them into risky behaviors. For example, it can bring adolescents near extreme beauty standards, which can lead to eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, or body dysmorphic disorder. Also, it can expose them to online harassment, including cyberbullying, which can cause anxiety, depression, and in some cases even suicide. In addition, the excessive use of social media entails too much screening time, which especially at night can cause sleep disorders and result in neurological problems, since adolescents' brains have not fully developed.

Thus, there are elements to social media that may be detrimental for youth mental health, so they need to be addressed. In this regard, the WHO has recently emphasized the importance of mental health and created campaigns and programs aimed at young minds to promote a moderate and balanced use of social media. Moreover, the WHO has released statistics that show that the numbers concerning adolescents that experience mental illnesses and disorders due to the use of social media are quite high. These have shown how necessary it is to raise awareness about this matter and figure out immediate responses to alleviate the situation.





Concepts and definitions:

- **Anxiety:** feelings of fear, dread, and uneasiness. It might cause sweating, feeling restless and tense, and a rapid heartbeat. It can be a reaction to stress.¹
- **Depression:** common but serious mood disorder. It causes severe symptoms that affect how a person feels, thinks, and handles daily activities, such as sleeping, eating, and working.²
- **Mental health:** state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic value and is integral to one's well-being.³
- **Social media:** variety of technologies or digital platforms that facilitate the sharing of ideas and information among their users.

Current issue:

Today, practically all teenagers have accounts on at least one social media site. Research estimates that up to 95% of teenagers use social media daily, making it almost universal among young people. At the same time, 40% of children between the ages of eight- and twelve-years old use social media.⁴ Still, despite this widespread usage among adolescents and children, there is currently insufficient data (even less from non-Western countries) about the effects that social media has on them, since they are at a particularly vulnerable time frame for their brain development; as a result, it is not clear if social media is safe

¹ MedlinePlus. *Anxiety*. National Library of Medicine, United States. “No update date”. In: <https://medlineplus.gov/anxiety.html#:~:text=Anxiety%20is%20a%20feeling%20of,before%20making%20an%20important%20decision>. (16/11/2024).

² NIH. *Depression*. National Institute of Mental Health, United States. “No update date”. In: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression> (16/11/2024).

³ WHO. *Mental health: strengthening our response*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response> (16/11/2024).

⁴ Pew Research Center. *Teens, social media and technology 2022*. Pew Research Center, United States, (12/08/2022). In: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/> (16/11/2024).





enough for them to use at all.⁵ Besides, social media can have varying effects on different teenagers and kids depending on their unique advantages and disadvantages, and other historical, cultural, and socioeconomic considerations.⁶

In general, the positive aspects of social media include bringing together people globally, exposing content that may interest a group of people, and offering countless hours of entertainment. Through social media, young people communicate with friends, share personal stories, and introduce themselves to the world. Some adolescents can even benefit from social media because it provides the means of communication for young people who are frequently marginalized, like LGBTQ+ community and individuals with disabilities, offering content that is uplifting or affirming of one's identity, fostering an environment that encourages self-expression and makes young people feel welcome.⁷

However, endless scrolling can also have drawbacks. Some evidence suggests that there is cause for concern regarding the potential harm associated with social media use. First of all, it has been reported that young people can engage in addictive use of social media, so even if it is unbeknownst to them, they may be dealing with an addiction. Recently, a study was carried out in the Netherlands and almost one in three teenagers that participated on it said they use screens on a normal weekday (most typically social media related) until after midnight, and there is a connection between excessive social media use and restless nights, bad sleep quality, decreased sleep duration, youth depression, and sleep difficulties.⁸ In like manner, a study that was accomplished in the United States showed that the girls involved, who are between the ages of 11 and 15, reported feeling "addicted" to

⁵ Common Sense Media. *The Common Sense Census*. Common Sense Media, United States, 18/08/2018. In: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf (16/11/2024).

⁶ Beyens, Pouwels, van Driel, Keijsers and Valkenburg. *The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent*. Springer Nature Scientific Reports, United Kingdom, 01/07/2020. In: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-67727-7> (16/11/2024).

⁷ Hollis, Livingstone and Sonuga-Barke. *Editorial: The role of digital technology in children and young people's mental health – a triple-edged sword?*. Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 24/07/2024. In: <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/icpp.13302> (16/11/2024).

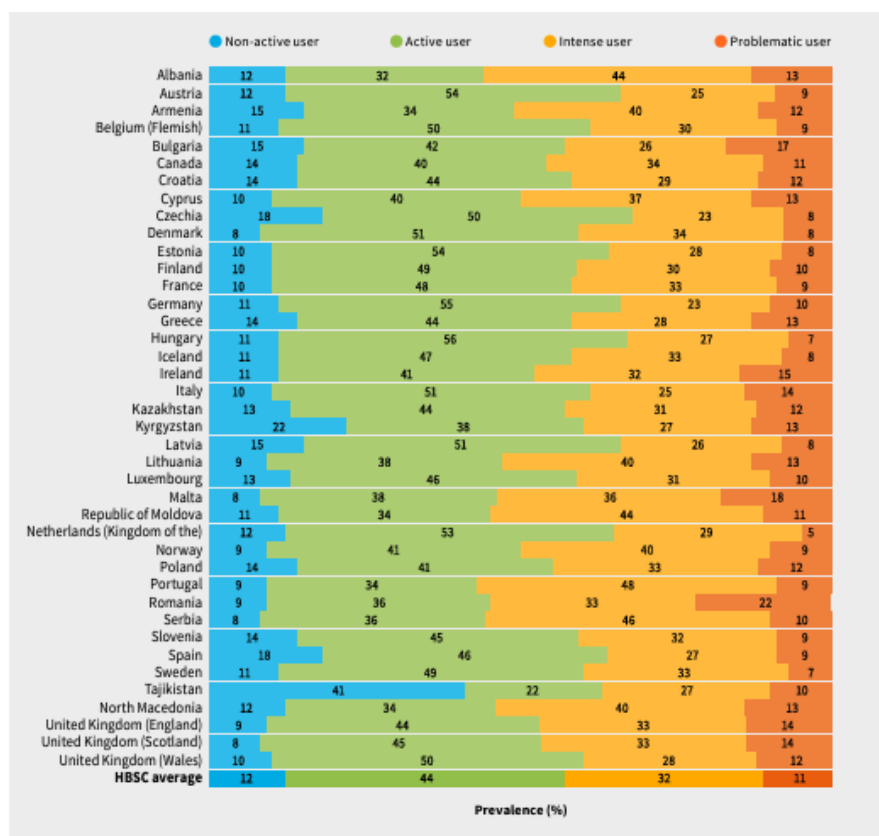
⁸ Alonzo, Hussain, Stranges, and Anderson. *Interplay between social media use, sleep quality, and mental health in youth: A systematic review*. ScienceDirect, Netherlands, 2021. In: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S108707922030157X?via%3Dihub> (16/11/2024).





some social media platforms, and more than 50% of teenagers confirmed it would be difficult for them to stop using social media.⁹

In this regard, the Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) study is a large school-based survey carried out every four years in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe. Therefore, the HBSC data is used at national, regional and international levels to gain new insights into adolescent health and well-being, and the results from 2022 illustrate how attached adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 years are to social media and gaming across 44 countries in Europe and central Asia, including Canada also.¹⁰



Note: no data were received from Belgium (French), Denmark (13-year-olds), Denmark (Greenland), Slovakia and Switzerland.

Figure 1. Social Media Use (SMU) divided in four categories by country/region.¹¹

⁹ Common Sense Media. *How girls really feel about social media*. Common Sense Media, Estados Unidos. 2023. In: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/how-girls-really-feel-about-social-media-researchreport_final_1.pdf (16/11/2024).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ HBSC. *A focus on adolescent social media use and gaming in Europe, central Asia and Canada*. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children. WHO. 2024. In: <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/378982>. (16/11/2024).





Secondly, through social media, young people are frequently exposed to harmful, inappropriate, and extreme content. Approximately 64% of teenagers who participated in a study that was carried out in the United States have been exposed to hateful content "often" or "occasionally".¹² This content frequently displays unrealistic physical stereotypes and disordered eating patterns, and can lead to adolescents comparing themselves to others, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem, particularly in teenage girls. Also, extreme content on social media can refer to suicide and self-harm, including images of self-harming behaviors and posts that have been connected in some tragic cases to deaths in children.¹³

Thirdly, according to research from the United States, 46% of teenagers (40% of those between the ages of 13 and 17) who were considered in the study claimed social media made them feel worse than they did before its use.¹⁴ Similarly, young adults who use social media are three times more likely to experience depression, which puts a significant portion of the population at risk for suicidal thoughts and harmful actions.¹⁵ Likewise, individuals who spend more than three hours on social media each day double the risk of mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.¹⁶

Initiatives taken by the international community:

The international community has been actively working to address the negative impact of social media on youth mental health through various initiatives, recognizing the growing concerns about several issues in this regard, such as cyberbullying, social comparison,

¹² Digital Wellness Lab. *Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences*. Digital Wellness Lab, United States. "No update date". In: <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wp-content/uploads/Pulse-Survey-Adolescent-Attitudes-Effects-and-Experiences.pdf> (16/11/2024).

¹³ Dyer. *Social media content contributed to teenager's death "in more than a minimal way," says coroner*. BMJ, United Kingdom, 03/10/2022. In: <https://www.bmj.com/content/379/bmj.o2374> (16/11/2024).

¹⁴ Digital Wellness Lab. *Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences*. Digital Wellness Lab, United States. "No update date". In: <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wp-content/uploads/Pulse-Survey-Adolescent-Attitudes-Effects-and-Experiences.pdf> (16/11/2024).

¹⁵ University Of Utah Health. *The Impact of Social Media on Teens' Mental Health*. University of Utah, Utah, 20/01/2023. In: <https://healthcare.utah.edu/healthfeed/2023/01/impact-of-social-media-teens-mental-health> (04/12/2024).

¹⁶ Riehm, Feder, Tormohlen, et. al. *Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth*. JAMA Psychiatry, United States, 11/09/2019. In: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2749480> (05/12/2024).





anxiety, depression, and addiction. These efforts involve governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and tech companies.

Significant efforts made by governments

- The European Union has adopted two pieces of legislation called the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. Both aim to regulate online platforms more effectively, avoid harmful content, protect minors, and promote safer online environments. These legislations include specific provisions for protecting children and addressing disinformation and harmful content.¹⁷
- The Commonwealth has implemented the Commonwealth Digital Literacy Initiative, which is a program that emphasizes responsible social media use, understanding mental health risks, and fostering resilience against online harm, especially focusing on young people.¹⁸
- The United Kingdom has established an Online Safety Act, which is a piece of legislation aimed to regulate online platforms and social media companies to ensure that they protect users, particularly children and vulnerable groups from harmful content like cyberbullying, self-harm promotion, and explicit material. The bill mandates that social media platforms take down harmful content and impose strict penalties on companies that fail to comply.¹⁹

Significant efforts made by international organizations

- The United Nations conference that takes place on the International Day for Mental Health brings together policymakers, mental health professionals, and tech industry

¹⁷ European Parliament. *EU Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act explained*. European Parliament, 24/08/2023. In: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20211209STO19124/eu-digital-markets-act-and-digital-services-act-explained> (09/12/2024).

¹⁸ The Commonwealth. *The Commonwealth Secretariat and SAS join forces to secure an equitable digital future for young people*. The Commonwealth Secretariat, 13/08/2024. In: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-secretariat-and-sas-join-forces-secure-equitable-digital-future-young-people> (09/12/2024).

¹⁹ Department for Science, Innovation & Technology. *Online Safety Act: explained*. United Kingdom Government, United Kingdom, 08/05/2024. In: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer> (09/12/2024).





leaders to discuss the intersection of social media, youth, and mental health, often resulting in new initiatives and recommendations for global standards.

- The WHO implemented a plan called Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030, which aims to strengthen global mental health, with a particular focus on youth, by promoting policies that prioritize prevention, access to mental health services, and the creation of safe environments online.²⁰
- The WHO has created and promoted guidelines to encourage mental health among adolescents,²¹ campaigns to reduce the negative impact of social media on the self-image and self-esteem of young people,²² and a collaborative effort with digital platforms to design mechanisms of early intervention regarding the negative effects of social media in youngsters and children.²³
- The UNICEF and the WEF have partnered with digital platforms to launch programs that provide young people with direct access to mental health services through online counseling and support networks. Specifically, the UNICEF created the Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health, which brings together partners such as Spotify, Sony, Pinterest, Zurich Insurance, among others, to finance projects that seek to reduce the global burden of mental disorders in young people.²⁴
- The UNICEF has created a Framework on Children's Digital Rights, advocating for a rights-based approach to digital technology use, including the recognition of

²⁰ WHO. *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030*. United Nations, New York, 21/09/2021. (05/12/2024).

²¹ WHO. *New WHO guidelines on promoting mental health among adolescents*. United Nations, New York, 28/09/2020. In: <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-09-2020-new-who-guidelines-on-promoting-mental-health-among-adolescents> (06/12/2024).

²² WHO. *WHO and UNICEF release guidance to improve access to mental health care for children and young people*. United Nations, New York, 09/10/2024. In: <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-10-2024-who-and-unicef-launch-guidance-to-improve-access-to-mental-health-care-for-children-and-young-people> (06/12/2024).

²³ WHO. *Report of a virtual roundtable meeting on online mental health content for young people and guidance on communication*. United Nations, New York, 04/10/2023. (06/12/2024).

²⁴ UNICEF. *The Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health*. United Nations, New York, 2022. In: <https://www.unicef.org/partnerships/coalition-youth-mental-health> (06/12/2024).





children's rights to protection from harm online and their right to access digital content in a healthy, supportive manner.²⁵

Significant efforts made by non-governmental organizations

- There is an organization called On Our Sleeves which aims to break the stigma around mental health issues in children by providing free evidence-based guides and partnering up with digital platforms to offer social-emotional learning resources for kids. The organization focuses on promoting mental health for children in the United States.²⁶
- There is a mental health-centered international initiative, called Being Initiative, that works with young people in twelve priority countries to improve their mental health and overall well-being. Its work focuses on prevention and promotion, addressing early drivers of mental health issues through research, innovation, and ecosystem building.²⁷
- There is a summit called YMCA World Accelerator Summit that brings together global stakeholders to share knowledge and strategies for empowering youth and fostering their well-being. It emphasizes the crucial role of young people in shaping solutions for mental health globally and motivates them to care for a change in the content they receive and share via social media.²⁸

Significant efforts made by tech companies, especially social media platforms

- Instagram has introduced several features aimed at promoting mental well-being among its users, especially youth. These include tools that allow users to manage their screen time, limit notifications, and access resources on mental health. It has

²⁵ UNICEF. *Protecting and Prioritizing Children's Rights and Safety in Digital Environments*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://www.unicef.org/innovation/stories/protecting-childrens-rights-in-digital-environments> (09/12/2024).

²⁶ The Kids Mental Health Foundation. *On Our Sleeves*. The Kids Mental Health Foundation, United States. "No update date". In: <https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/> (09/12/2024).

²⁷ Being Initiative. *Being Initiative*. Being Initiative, Canada. "No update date". In: <https://being-initiative.org/> (09/12/2024).

²⁸ World YMCA. *Accelerator Summit*. World YMCA, Geneva. "No update date". In: <https://www.ymca.int/accelerator-summit/> (09/12/2024).





also worked with experts to create pop-up messages and resources when users search for terms related to self-harm or suicide.

- Facebook and YouTube have also rolled out features to protect younger users, such as setting default privacy settings to restrict interactions with strangers and creating content that promotes mental well-being. YouTube in particular has a “Digital Wellbeing” initiative that includes parental control options, screen-time management, and access to mental health resources. These actions have also been replicated in other social networks, such as TikTok, Snapchat, Google, and others.

Guiding questions:

1. How is the situation within your delegation regarding youth mental health in general?
2. Do most young people in your delegation have access to social media?
3. Do young people in your delegation tend to use social media excessively?
4. Is there enough research that connects young people, social media, and mental health in your delegation?
5. Has your delegation identified the positive and negative effects that social media entails for young people within its territory or its region?
6. How can your delegation contribute to amplifying those positive effects and eradicating those negative ones?
7. In your delegation, do the negative effects tend to affect girls more and, if so, why is that and how can it be addressed?
8. Has your delegation identified groups within its young population that are more vulnerable to the negative aspects of social media?
9. Does your delegation currently foster any mental health programs or campaigns aimed at young people that face the negative impacts of social media?
10. Has your delegation collaborated with social media platforms to protect youth mental health in some way, or has it adopted any measure to regulate tech companies regarding aspects that endanger the mental health of young users?





11. Has your delegation been involved in any international initiative that aims to protect youth mental health from the negative consequences of being exposed to social media?

12. How could your delegation contribute to addressing this situation worldwide?

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