The Rise of Social Media, The Fall of Mental Health

Charlie Chaplin once said, "You'll never find a rainbow if you're looking down." His purpose was to address that people should have a positive attitude and perspective in order to see the good in life. His words can be applied to modern day, where people have become so glued to their phones and the online world that they no longer actually enjoy or immerse themselves in their real lives. And who could blame them? When faced with all the obstacles of adolescence, it makes sense that they would turn to a device that entertains, connects, and educates all in one. It is the first time in history when you're able to meet someone who lives halfway across the globe, or look up a question and have an answer in a matter of seconds. We are able to protest against injustice, or meet groups of like-minded people, or fundraise for a person in need even when we never would have met them if not for the creation of an app. And while these traits of social media can help, this powerful tool can also hurt. Gen-Z has experienced these benefits, but they've gotten too attached to it. They consume hours of media on a daily basis. Yet, for every good video or picture, there could be two or three bad ones. Our parents didn't have the same experience as us as teenagers, which prevented them from seeing the impact that it would have on us. The reality is is that while social media can be used for good, it is not suitable for developing kids and teens, when used for long periods of time with no filter on what's being watched. More young people are suffering from a decline in their mental health, lack of sleep, and poorer confidence in themselves and their bodies, due to the effects of social media. We need more regulations, and education on moderation, in order to prevent more adolescents from developing these problems.

We often associate the pandemic with a rise in mental illness due to isolation and increased time on screens, instead of face to face interactions. Yes, attachment to phones and

these apps increased during COVID, but there were also signs before that that point to the fault of social media, not just quarantine. In 2014, for example, an article by *Smithsonian Magazine* described a study of college students who took multiple tests. The students who had used their phones the most that day were more anxious than the ones who had spent minimal time on their phones. But what they also discovered was that the students felt more anxiety if they didn't have their phone on them during the tests and class time (Griggs). Not only was excessive usage during the day impacting their performance and mental stability, but they were also so attached to their devices that they felt panicked and anxious without their phones on their person. Is this normal? I know I have experienced this, when I forgot my phone at home one day. At the beginning of school, I felt anxious that I was missing out on something new, and I felt isolated while watching everyone else using their phones. If I wasn't on Instagram, how would I know what's going on? All my friends and peers will be in on one big inside joke and I'd be the one left out. But as the day progressed, I felt more and more light, and I didn't feel like I was missing a part of me anymore. This was a glaring warning sign to me that I had gotten too attached, and that just like a drug addict, the withdrawal was painful, but after some time free from my device I no longer felt bad; rather, I was feeling better than I did when I had my phone. This is not an unusual experience. Social media apps are contributing to the rise of mental health problems, especially teenagers and young adults, as they are at a more vulnerable time in their lives, emotionally and physically. Even those who are aware of the effects can get caught up in the addictive nature of these apps. I have wasted hours of my time scrolling, when I should have been doing the homework in front of me, or choosing to spend time with my family instead of isolating myself in my room to watch TikTok. Even former U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, views these platforms as dangerous. *The New York Times* reported that Murthy warned,

"there are ample indicators that social media can have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents" (Barry). Regulations need to be made on these social media apps to stop how highly addictive and detrimental they are, or at the very least put a warning on it to inform people of their effects.

The threat to adolescents' mental health is not the only consequence. Already, teens struggle to get to bed at a reasonable time when their evenings are busy with sports, jobs, and homework. But the added on factor that causes many to lose even *more* sleep is their phones. An article from *BBC News* found that when teenagers spent more than three hours a day on social media, they had trouble getting to sleep and were staying up later (Heavy Social Media Use Linked to Poor Sleep). This majorly affects teens, as not enough sleep can lead to harmful impacts on their academic performance and causes a knock-on effect, making them even more susceptible to poorer mental health. Not only are kids staying up on apps that are causing them to be depressed and anxious, but because their brains and bodies are not getting adequate rest, those feelings and symptoms are exacerbated. My parents saw the effects that screen time late at night was having on my sister and I, so they made it a rule to charge our phones in the kitchen at night, far away from our rooms so we were not tempted to go on them. Avoiding social media close to bedtime is beneficial for adolescents, but it's also a healthy practice for anyone to add to their routine, even adults. When Alex Hern, former technology editor for *The Guardian*, made his bedroom a "phone-free" zone, he found that he was able to go to bed earlier, and that in general, he wasn't as anxious (Hern). All he had to do to improve his life and health was simply remove his phone from the room, and it had significant impacts on the amount of sleep he was getting and his mental health. Learning how to use social media in moderation and not at vulnerable times like late at night can help teens and young adults regain control of their lives and not be so

dependent on a device for their happiness. While adolescents are resilient, they are also at the most risk of falling into bad habits when it comes to social media, so they must be the most cautious and on guard when it comes to their usage. The addictive nature of these apps pulls young people in and will do anything to hold their attention; and teens are watching influencers who are feeding them content that is often glamorized. It's become normal to look at someone else's "better" life online, leading many young people to struggle even more to feel good about themselves and their own life.

This envious mentality brings us to our last problem. We all know the saying, "comparison is the thief of joy", and comparison is what these platforms thrive on. When a teen opens up one of these apps, the first thing they see is someone else's body or life. Many adolescents already feel uncomfortable in their body, as they go through the changes that come with puberty. Now though, they not only have to worry and compare themselves to their peers at school or people in their lives, but also strangers online. Instead of viewing realistic videos and pictures, most teens are seeing media centered around unhealthy practices and high standards of what "beauty" is. An article from last summer by *NBC News* stated that people were feeling more negative about their bodies and self esteem, especially girls and young women who are exposed to media that encourages eating disorders. The article claims that 64% of the women had been exposed to pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia content, encouraging them to starve themselves, or to do other unhealthy behaviors in order to attain a certain body type (Rosenblatt). Not only is disordered eating running rampant on apps like TikTok, there is also another contributor to this problem on Instagram, where people, especially women, are posting pictures of themselves that are heavily photoshopped. Do young girls looking at these photos know the truth? What they see are beautiful, "perfect" women with bodies that were most likely achieved

via extreme and risky methods. And when these girls fail to look the same as the women they see on their feed, they feel even worse about themselves because their bodies don't fit the ones that they see online. This has an effect on teen boys and young men too, as they are also seeing these fake pictures, which just amplifies the unrealistic body standards being set on women. They are fighting to reach perfection, but only end up harming themselves in the process. And while boys are not as vulnerable to eating disorders, they still have their own body image and self esteem issues. *The American Psychological Association* (APA) claimed that social media is a main culprit for, "perpetuating the 'ideal male' body image" (Novotney). When people refer to the "ideal female" body, many think of a woman that is thin. But what is social media pushing on boys? The APA report claims that many young men are watching content that tells them they need to be more muscular or that they need to lose body fat. Just like girls, this unsolicited "advice" and "inspo" that is promoted on social media apps leads to disordered eating, excessive amounts of exercise, and more mental health problems. So what should we do? Well, we should make sure to protect adolescents by restricting what can be put on the internet for people to view, and teaching teens to not believe everything they see. It's difficult for everybody to discern the difference between what's real and what's fake, so educating youth to question what they see is important in order to prevent them from getting a false perception of what they should look like.

That's not to say there aren't any benefits to these apps. While social media can very easily fall out of our control and end up harming our mentality, there is still a place for it in our world. We may wish that we could take it back, but that is impractical as it has become such a key component of our lives. What we can do, however, is be mindful about how much media we are consuming, and make sure that we are aware of its effects on us. It is amazing that so many people are able to connect with others that they identify with, when they wouldn't have been able

to before. The online world can create friendships even when they are on different continents, or help a small business become popular. When Australia banned social media for kids under 16 years old, there were some who argued that this was a bad idea. They believed that social media was important for teenager's mental health so that they could feel more represented, like having a connection to the LGBTQ+ community. *AP News* also reported that these advocates believed it would isolate teens, causing them to have worse mental health (McGuirk). Those benefits that help make our lives better are only good if the inappropriate and addictive side of these platforms is reduced. Plus, teens should be encouraged to make friends in the real world, which will not only keep them away from harmful media, but also teach them how to interact with others in person rather than only interacting with people through a screen. Jonathan Haidt, a professor at NYU, was also concerned about these negative consequences. In his book *The Anxious Generation*, he wrote, "We can't expect children and adolescents to develop adult-level real-world social skills when their social interactions are largely happening in the virtual world" (Haidt 99). His research shows that Gen Z are suffering from anxiety, depression, and other problems due to social media and phones, something the older generations did not grow up with. So while there are some benefits to social media, it should be reserved for those that are mature enough to understand how to regulate their screen time, and not for the vulnerable youth.

Social media can have benefits when used in small doses, but not when used heavily on a daily basis, especially for a teengager whose brain is still developing. No wonder teens in Australia were feeling isolated after these apps were banned; they've had unrestricted access for so long that they were unable to handle connecting with people in real life. Social media and phones should not be a "lifeline", as that in itself is a sign of unhealthy dependency for anyone, adults or adolescents. In order to prevent this rapidly increasing crisis of mental illness in youth,

we need to make sure that these social media apps are following strict regulations to protect kids from harmful media like videos that promote eating disorders, and the addictive nature of these apps. Additionally, teens should be taught to not spend too much time online and to make sure that they are not letting social media affect their mental health. A great first step is to encourage teens to go out into the real world, to have meaningful experiences like hanging out with their friends, rather than isolating themselves inside, engaging with problematic apps.

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