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Impact of Social Media on Student Education and Well-Being: Challenges and Solutions

The decision made by Canadian school boards to sue social media platforms like Meta Platforms Inc. was a significant turning point for social media's damaging impact on Canadian students. With an initial purpose to enhance communication and relationship-building beyond face-to-face conversations, social media platforms have instead become an environment for cyberbullying, social withdrawal, mental health challenges and academic distraction for students across the country. As the lawsuit against these social media companies continues, school boards, educators and policymakers should continue to strive to implement policies and resources and refine classroom learning methods to address the harmful effects of social media.

THE IMPACT ON STUDENT EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

Due to the distractions of cell phones and the use of social media, academic performance is a primary concern for educators, school boards, policymakers and parents across Canada. The heavy usage of social media platforms can be detrimental to education, as procrastination and lack of motivation can rapidly decrease classroom engagement. A University of Delaware study analyzed the academic performance of 1,459 middle school students, which found that increased usage of social media applications (e.g., TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat) resulted in a decrease

in academic performance (Gordon & Ohannessian, 2024). The disengagement from students, as a result of the addictive nature of social media, has made it difficult for young Canadians to maintain focus and motivation towards their academic studies. Peer-reviewed studies show that with every hour students spend on social media, their odds of achieving academic excellence (an 80% GPA) decreased by 24% (Bou-Hamad, 2020).

Aside from academics, social media proves to be a detriment to Canadian students' social and mental well-being. Unrealistic social expectations, especially beauty standards, idolized online personas and toxic masculinity, can lead to students experiencing depression, low self-esteem and anxiety. A study found that approximately 50% of adolescent males and 74% of females felt unsatisfied with their body image (Vuong et al., 2021). For young females, particularly, unrealistic beauty standards can be a significant issue. Research shows that young women feel negatively about themselves when viewing "attractive" influencers, celebrities or peer posts on social media platforms (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). In addition, cyberbullying is another issue that many young Canadians face. With social media allowing more power for students to maliciously bully their peers, many students find themselves isolated and depressed. Three in ten Canadian students say they have been cyberbullied at least once in their lives, causing emotional distress, which can affect their mental well-being, academic performance and motivation (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

SOLUTIONS

It must be acknowledged that it is difficult to find meaningful solutions to reduce the compulsive usage of social media inside the classroom. Especially with approximately 90% of young Canadians owning a cell phone today, it will be difficult for educators and schools to

enforce a complete ban (Alphonso, 2024). However, there are innovative ways for educators and schools to adapt and for policymakers to enforce regulations to stop the widespread use of social media applications among Canadian students.

Compulsory Secondary Digital Literacy Course: Local governments and school boards should implement mandatory digital literacy courses for all secondary students, making it a requirement for graduation. To elaborate, this course will help educate students on online safety, appropriate online conduct, ways to prevent and report cyberbullying, and social media's harmful effects. Not only that but topics such as discrimination, emphasis on diversity and inclusion (e.g., gender, religion, identity, background or sexual orientation), body image and self-esteem should be addressed in the course so that students can have a stronger and more positive learning and social environment in classrooms.

Increasing Interactive and Engaging Learning in Classrooms: School boards and educators should implement interactive learning to encourage student engagement and lower the use of social media and phones in classrooms. More interactive lessons and activities can effectively increase classroom engagement and retention. For instance, implementing hands-on group activities like solving a complicated math question with peers will allow more active participation. As it is difficult to enforce a complete cell phone ban in classrooms, educators and schools can take action to draw students' attention to lessons by making the environment more interactive.

Accessible and Confidential Student Support Resources: To combat issues like toxic masculinity and beauty standards in school, which are rising rapidly with the use of social media,

local school boards and policymakers need to make more accessible and confidential ways to report misconduct. Student victims of cyberbullying face barriers to reporting online misconduct due to limited confidential and anonymous resources. A study found that fear of social repercussions was the most significant barrier to youth cyberbullying prevention (21% of youth) (Mehari et al., 2018). Hence, support resources must be available, such as a designated school social worker, for students to contact when encountering cyberbullying, social withdrawals and overall mental well-being, while all being anonymous. Research shows that only 61% of Ontario schools have regularly scheduled access to social workers, 39% to child and youth workers, and 8% to mental health specialists (People for Education Ontario, 2024). Following a complaint of online misconduct, policymakers need to implement harsher and stricter punishments for students who violate the rules. If severe actions are taken against inappropriate behaviour, students will be prevented from misusing online resources.

CONCLUSION

As the lawsuit proceeds, Canadian educators, school boards and policymakers must continue to implement ways to combat the compulsive use of social media, increasing student engagement, self-esteem and academic performance. Whether it be mandating a compulsory online safety course, new interactive learning changes in school curriculums or implementing an accessible yet confidential way for students to report online misconduct, focusing on these innovative solutions can accelerate the creation of a safer and more enjoyable learning environment for all Canadian students.

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