

Social Media and Students: A Balanced Solution for the 21st Century

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Within the last two decades, social media has infiltrated every facet of daily life. To find a teenager without Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok on their phone has become nearly impossible, and to find nuanced, effective strategies to balance their damaging impacts with their benefits even more so. But steps can be taken in the right direction. In this essay, I discuss the impact of social media on students' daily lives, argue that bans are ineffective, and propose an alternate solution centered on adequate education and support.

Social media has the capacity to harm the well-being of youth. In the United States, a 2019 study found that children aged 12-15 who used social media for more than three hours a day were twice as likely to develop symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who kept to a more moderate level (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Similarly, another study concluded that the increased use of social media may have contributed to as many as 300,000 new cases of depression among college-aged youths (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), while 46% of respondents aged 13-17 to a 2022 survey reported feeling worse about their body image after being online (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). This connection between using social media and mental health symptoms is expected. Through popular apps like Instagram and Snapchat, it has become easier than ever for teenagers to continuously compare themselves to their peers, not only in terms of followers or likes (which suggest popularity and social acceptance, or a lack thereof), but also with regard to lifestyle and success. For instance, seeing a classmate's posts from a party they were not invited to, or an expensive trip abroad they could not afford. This constant avenue of comparison can significantly impact one's mental health.

Furthermore, social media can also harm academic performance. Recent years have seen the rise of short form content, like the sub-minute long videos seen on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Such content perpetuates a need for instant gratification – the idea that every scroll brings with it the possibility of enjoyable content. Even if short form content is taken out of the equation, the same idea remains: every notification, like, and follow request brings a feeling of joy; a hit that needs to be chased. This makes it exceedingly difficult for students to be

able to concentrate on one task for prolonged periods of time. Indeed, in a 2018 Pew Research poll, 31% of teens admitted that they often or sometimes lost focus in class because they kept checking their phones (Jiang). The implications of this are grave. Social media has fostered an entire generation of students unable to focus on long form tasks like essay-writing or even active listening, tasks critical to their academic – and future – success.

To claim that all social media is bad, however, is unjustifiable. Teenagers can connect with their friends in times of need, expose themselves to new perspectives, or quickly read and share important news. Marginalized groups, too, like LGBTQ+ youth, benefit enormously, as social media can provide an accepting space for self-expression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Rather, the root cause of the issues surrounding social media lies in the fact that it is highly addictive. Their algorithms have been perfected to hook users, manipulate emotions, and encourage the “doomscroll” that many teenagers have grown accustomed to; as Dr. Michael Rich from Boston’s Children Hospital explains, “the internet is a giant hypodermic [needle], and the content, including social media..., are the psychoactive drugs” (Richtel). They are inherently designed to keep people from leaving. Take, for instance, Snapchat’s Streaks feature, which publicly shows how many days a user has “Snapped” someone else, thus encouraging repeated, daily use (Price). Statistics show these design features work. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 78% of Ontarian students in grades 7-12 reported spending more than three hours a day in front of a screen for recreational purposes (Boak and Hamilton), while 23% said they spent more than five hours a day on social media (Boak and Hamilton). Today, it has become almost a chore for users to put down their phones and stop consuming content.

To address these issues, some jurisdictions have implemented bans for students, including Ontario. In April 2024, the government announced an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” policy for phones (Ontario Newsroom), while some school boards have taken matters into their own hands – for instance, the Peel District School Board blocks certain social sites like Discord and Snapchat from their servers (Smith et al.). But these restrictions are doomed to fail. A student only needs to set up a VPN or switch from the school’s Wi-Fi to personal data to circumvent them. The phone ban, too, is largely ineffective; even assuming teachers are willing to disrupt

class time to enforce it, students can simply access the same sites from their laptop, and laptops are much too important to daily classwork to ban.

A better solution for schools would be to focus on educating students and providing them with adequate supports. Schools should ensure that students are aware of the risks associated with social media use and know how to deal with them; for instance, recognizing disinformation, to counter the plethora of lies and dubious claims that often trend online; and learning self-love and self-respect, to understand the reality behind Instagram models and starvation diets. Schools should further ensure an adequate support system is in place. Youth mental health has seen a significant decline (Boak and Hamilton), and thus responses like counselling and wellness are desperately needed. Students should also be made to feel comfortable reporting cyberbullying or other harmful online behavior. This balanced approach addresses social media's negative effects, while still respecting the benefits it can provide; it also represents concrete action, rather than a ban or block tech-savvy teenagers can easily sidestep.

In conclusion, social media is inescapable. Its negative effects on the well-being and academic performances of youth are undeniable, but its benefits must also be acknowledged. To properly deal with social media, schools should move away from ineffective bans and restrictions and focus instead on education and support.

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