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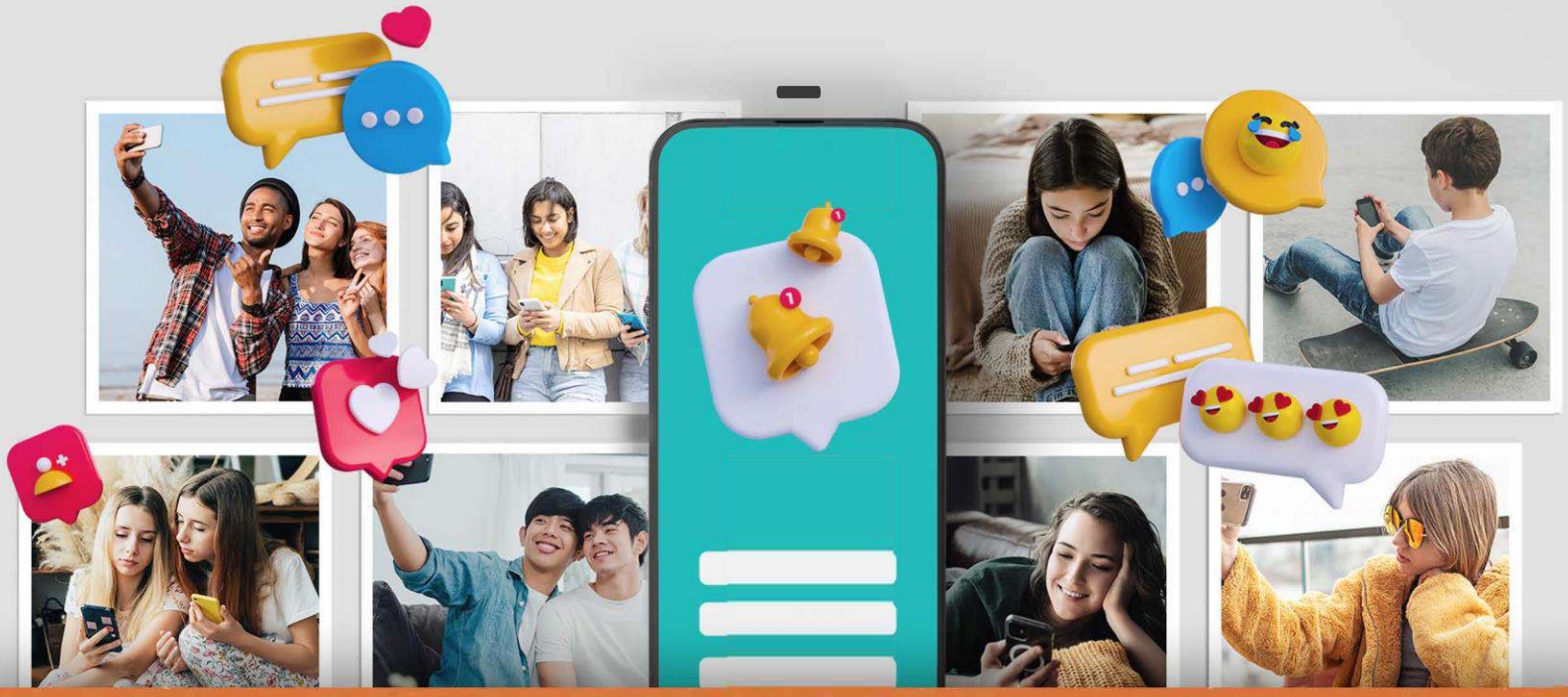

Youth Social Media Use and Mental Health and Well-Being

EVIDENCE SUMMARY

RESOURCE 3-200 03/2025

Youth Social Media Use and Mental Health and Well-Being
An Evidence Summary

Most youth regularly use social media, i.e., online platforms that enable interactions through the sharing of content, pictures and/or videos, comments and reactions (Perlmutter et al., 2024; Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Current popular social media platforms include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter/X. [1]

In Canada, 91% of youth 15 to 24 years old use social media, more than any other age group (Kerr & Kingsbury, 2023). In the U.S., approximately nine-in-ten teens (13 to 17 years old) reported using YouTube; and a majority of teens use TikTok, Snapchat, and/or Instagram; with higher use for those 15 years and over (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). Daily use of social media was reported by close to 60-70% of the teens, and nearly one third of teens are on social media 'almost constantly' (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). It is argued that social media use (SMU) by youth has increased dramatically; although comparable data was not available for 'social media use', available data for 'online use' shows that in 2024 almost 50% of teens reported being online "almost constantly", and this is nearly double what it was a decade before (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024).

Parallel with the increase in teens being online and using social media, is the increase in mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety experienced by youth (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022). These simultaneous increases have led to a widely held belief that SMU is a primary cause of the increase in mental health challenges in youth (Keles et al., 2020; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Concern regarding this association led to the U.S. Surgeon General and the American Psychological Association putting out public advisories warning of the potential harm social media poses to the mental health of children and adolescents (American Psychological Association, 2023; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). The Canadian Paediatric Society released a call to action regarding social media and youth stating that although there are gaps in the evidence, there is enough concerning evidence to support taking action to protect youth from harm when using social media (Ponti & Canadian Pediatric Society, 2023).

The purpose of this evidence summary is to summarize the evidence regarding potential impacts of SMU on youth mental health and well-being, and recommendations for protecting youth from potential harms related to SMU. The extensive research in this area has been summarized in reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, and these are the primary sources for this summary. Emerging concerns regarding the reliability of the cross-sectional and self-report research and recommendations for research moving forward are also discussed.

[1] To keep the length of this evidence summary manageable, the focus is limited to social media use. It is recognized that social media is a part of a larger picture of online digital technology use.

Impacts of Social Media Use (SMU) on Youth Mental Health and Well-Being

This section summarizes the findings regarding the associations between SMU and various factors related to youth mental health and well-being. Some factors are indicators of mental health and well-being, some are mediators, i.e., the pathway through which SMU influences mental health and well-being outcomes, and some might be considered both.

Mental Health (including Depression and Anxiety)

Research (completed prior to, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) has found SMU to generally be correlated with mental health issues (including depressive symptoms, anxiety, internalizing symptoms, psychological distress, and poor well-being), however the results are mixed, with some studies finding small to moderate positive association with mental health variables, others finding no relationship, and some finding a negative association (Boer et al; 2020; Fassi et al., 2024; Keles et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). The causes of associations between SMU and mental health remain unclear, with the mixed findings suggesting that the relationships are complex and interrelated.

Sleep

Research suggests that sleep difficulties are a mediator between SMU and mental health (Kerr & Kingsbury, 2023). Both intense and problematic SMU (e.g., preoccupied, increased tolerance, withdrawal, persistent, displacement, deception, escapist, and/or linked to conflict) are associated with sleep difficulties (Khan et al., 2023). Sleep issues have been shown to contribute to mental health issues, including development and emotion regulation (Anam & Harness, 2024; Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Suicide and Self-Harm

Higher social media use is associated with higher suicidality (Kerr & Kingsbury, 2023). Content about suicide and self-injury may increase risk due to exposure and normalization of these behaviours for coping, and social contagion (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Experiencing cyberbullying may contribute to suicidality (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). The picture is made complex by the fact that youth may also benefit from SMU in relation to suicidality, (e.g., referrals for mental health services after posting about how they feel), and 'online support' from peers can be either protective or detrimental regarding suicidality or self-injury (Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Cyberbullying

Youth report being exposed to bullying through social media, also known as cyberbullying (e.g., hurtful comments, name-calling, public humiliation, and intimidation) (Perlmutter et al., 2024). Most youth report having experienced some form of cyberbullying and this can contribute to a variety of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). The ability to post anonymously means there are seldom consequences for the perpetrator, and youth feel powerless against it (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Youth also experience anxiety due to concern about privacy and feeling a lack of control over content about themselves (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Problematic SMU is associated with being both a perpetrator or a victim of cyberbullying (Craig et al., 2020).

Displacement

Time spent using social media may displace other behaviours and experiences that contribute to mental health and well-being, such as in-person interactions, time spent with family, sleep, exercise/physical activity, chores, and hobbies (Weigle & Shafi, 2024*).* Intense and/or problematic SMU in particular displaces in-person social activities that promote healthy social development (Craig et al., 2020). On the other hand, there may also be positive displacement, with time on social media displacing risky behaviours such as substance use, risky sexual behaviours, and risky driving (Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Sexting

Sexting, defined as "the transmission of partially or fully nude digital images or videos of oneself" (Weigle & Shafi, 2024, p. 4), has become common among youth, and often happens without harmful consequences, or even results in positive outcomes such as improved confidence and closeness with a romantic partner. However, there is potential for a variety of negative outcomes, including anxiety, victimization, public humiliation, and bullying. An association has been found between sexting and mental health issues such as depression, but the causality has been shown to go both ways (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Unwanted sexting (receiving or sending) is predictive of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and when a sext is shared with unintended others, it can cause severe mental distress (Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Contagion

The phenomena of contagion of mental health conditions such as suicide in adolescents was documented far before social media existed. With the advent of social media, the opportunity for the spread of this phenomena has increased. Examples of social media transmitted contagion includes tics, eating disordered behaviour, and self-harm (Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Social and/or Appearance Comparison

Youth are at a stage where peer acceptance and defining oneself according to your peers takes on particular importance (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Youth SMU is associated with social comparison (Perlmutter et al., 2024). Navigating this stage of development in an online format can create specific challenges. Peer acceptance is quantified through the number of likes, friends, followers, and comments, which can have profound effects on the self-perceptions of youth. Youth reported becoming 'addicted' to seeking 'likes' and 'comments', and lack of this validation often results in youth negatively judging themselves, and developing low self-esteem and mental health issues, even when they are aware that the posts of others are generally highly curated (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Image-focused social media platforms can be particularly damaging to youth self-esteem through appearance comparison. Even though youth are aware that the practice of photoshopping images is common, they still compare their own bodies to the unattainable bodies they see (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Posting body images online make youth vulnerable to body shaming, with youth who have pre-existing anxiety or eating disorders being particularly vulnerable to harmful effects (Anam & Harness,

2024). Girls may be more vulnerable to this as they can feel more pressure to post selfies and are particularly susceptible to the negative impact of viewing images that have been processed through beauty filters (Anam & Harness, 2024; Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Girls of colour have the added experience of racially biased beauty filters that adjust their images to make their features more typically white (Anam & Harness, 2024).

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

FOMO is the anxiety that someone feels when they fear that they are being excluded from an event or experience that others are enjoying (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). This is heightened by the curated way that other people's lives are presented. FOMO is associated with anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties and problematic (e.g., addictive) social media use (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Exclusion (lack of invitations or responses) can have a profound effect on a youth's sense of belonging (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Pressure to Stay Connected

Online connection is a significant part of daily life for many youth (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). This includes the pressure to maintain "streaks" of contact, and distress when thinking about being disconnected and the associated risk of being excluded. This can lead to compulsive scrolling of social media, and reduced offline social engagement, which affects time and relationships with family and friends. Some youth describe associated health issues, including poor sleep (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Stress Posting

Youth describe 'stress posting', in which they post impulsively when upset or angry, which can contribute to conflict both online and off (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Harmful Content

Youth are exposed through social media to harmful content, including frightening images that affect their ability to sleep, or content about self-harm, which those with pre-existing mental health issues are particularly vulnerable to (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Benefits of Social Media for Youth

SMU has the potential to benefit the mental health and well-being of youth in a variety of ways, including providing opportunities to express creativity; build on existing friendships and create new ones; find community and increase social support; receive education, community and supports related to health; and explore identity, self-expression, intimacy, sexuality, and civic discourse, particularly for those youth who may not have the opportunity to find like-minded peers in their home community e.g., LGBTQIA+ youth (Anam & Harness, 2024; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). When face-to-face interactions are not possible (e.g., when youth do not have access to appropriate peers, or during times requiring social distancing), social media provides the opportunity for positive social interactions and friendships, which can alleviate feelings of loneliness and stress (Anam & Harness, 2024).

Youth describe ways that social media can be used to actively promote positive mental health (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). For example, 'challenges to improve well-being' encourage and allow for the spreading of positivity, and discussions around mental health inspired by celebrities telling their stories provide opportunities for validation, the formation of support networks, and the sharing of educational resources. Youth also noted that education on sensitive topics can be accessed anonymously; and online discussion forums on health issues, moderated by a healthcare professional, are appreciated by youth as a safe space that provides support, modeling, and encouragement to seek help (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Recommendations for Preventing Harms Due to SMU

Social media has been shown to have important benefits for youth, and therefore they should have the opportunity to access social media, but at the same time they should be protected from the potential related harms (Anam & Harness, 2024; Ponti & Canadian Pediatric Society, 2023). The importance of protecting youth from the negative effects of SMU is highlighted by pointing out that youth are at a stage of psychosocial, educational, and neurological development that is particularly vulnerable to the pressures shaping their thoughts and behaviours (Anam & Harness, 2024; APA, 2023). Adolescent brains are still developing and as a result, youth are less likely to have their prefrontal cortex fully engaged, impacting their ability to reason, think through decisions, and recognize risks or what is socially appropriate (Anam & Harness, 2024). As a result, youth are more prone to impulsive behaviour and are more vulnerable to having negative beliefs and thought patterns reinforced (Anam & Harness, 2024).

To protect youth from harms related to SMU, a web of strategies have been proposed, with each of the following groups having a role; social media companies, parents, schools, healthcare providers, youth, and policy makers (Anam & Harness, 2024).

Social media companies need to be ensuring there are protections in place, including making their app's functionality and permissions developmentally appropriate for the youth using them (APA, 2023). This includes controlling exposure to psychologically harmful content (APA, 2023).

Parents and caregivers must take an active role in protecting their youth, including taking the initiative to educate themselves about the risks and protections that exist, and then educating their children with developmentally appropriate information, and managing their social media use (Anam & Harness, 2024). Parents are advised to have a plan for social media use within the family (Anam & Harness, 2024). To implement the plan, they need to monitor their children's social media habits, and what they are being exposed to; assess if the use and content is appropriate for the child's stage of development, and if it is a potential source of harm; and be prepared to limit access if needed, using available parental controls on devises and platforms, when necessary. This includes ensuring SMU does not interfere with important activities such as sleep and physical activity and restricting access to inappropriate or harmful materials (APA, 2023). While taking a youth's need for privacy into account, monitoring should include ongoing review, discussion, and coaching around SMU and content (APA, 2023). Autonomy can be increased gradually, as a youth demonstrates their digital literacy, skills, and responsibility. It is also important that

parents model healthy social media use and ensure that their use does not interfere with meeting their children's needs for interaction (Anam & Harness, 2024).

Within schools, education needs to be provided regarding how to safely navigate social media. Prior to being given access to social media, youth should receive training in social media literacy that helps to develop competencies and skills for healthy and safe social media use (APA, 2023). To help combat pressures for unhealthy comparison and behaviours, education should include efforts to enhance body positivity, acceptance of diversity, and taking the focus off of the individual (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Healthcare providers can also provide education to youth about the potential harms of social media and how to mitigate them (Anam & Harness, 2024). This requires providers to be educated about the potential risks; the individual and contextual factors that may influence vulnerability; how to assess social media use, risks, and harms; and how to guide youth to make changes. Youth should be screened routinely for problematic SMU that may impair functioning, development, or present risk for serious psychological harm (APA, 2023). Providers should also be knowledgeable about the potential benefits of social media use for the youth in front of them, particularly youth who are marginalized (Anam & Harness, 2024).

Youth themselves often have concerns about the amount of time they spend on social media, or the type of content they are consuming, and many have come up with strategies for managing these factors (Harness et al., 2022). These include using settings or features of the social media platform to manage use or block content, or deleting the account in question from their device, permanently or for a period of time. Other strategies used by youth include limiting or changing who they follow, changing their privacy settings, and setting personal limits with reminders (Harness et al., 2022).

There are a variety of factors that influence how knowledgeable an individual youth might be about the options available for managing their SMU, including examples set and information shared by peers or caregivers, their understanding of technology, formal education on the topic, and their own curiosity (Anam & Harness, 2024). Opportunities can be created to share with all youth the strategies recommended by youth for managing social media use.

Policymakers should strengthen standards that prioritize user safety within SM apps (e.g., age-verification, restricting harmful content, advertising), require social media developers to adhere to strict standards regarding data collected from minors, give youth more control over their data, fund continued research on impacts of SMU on youth and results shared publicly, and ensure that critical media literacy is part of curricula and teachers are adequately prepared to teach it (Ponti & CPS, 2023).

Mixed and Contrasting Research Results

The majority of research examining the relationship between SMU and youth mental health has found a positive correlation between SMU and poor mental health, however, some found no correlation, and some found a negative correlation (Kerr & Kindgsbury, 2023; Perlmutter et al., 2024; Weigle & Shafi,

2024). Metanalyses found that overall, the correlations between SMU and youth well-being are only small to moderate (Weigle & Shafi, 2024), and this correlation is mediated by other factors (Kerr & Kindgsbury, 2023).

Taken together, the research suggests that there is a complex interplay of factors mediating the relationship between SMU and youth mental health and well-being, including individual internal factors, behaviours, and context. Beyond the typical measurement of quantity of SMU, other characteristics of usage (i.e., intensity, investment, active vs. passive use, and problematic/addictive use) may impact outcomes (Anam & Harness, 2024; Boer et al; 2020; Kerr & Kindgsbury, 2023; Perlmutter et al., 2024; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Other factors that may play a mediating role, that were not included in the list of mediators provided earlier include gender, age, digital literacy, pre-existing mental health status, rumination, social status, self-esteem, social support, parental management of SMU, and marginalized status (Anam & Harness, 2024; Boer et al; 2020; Keles et al., 2020; Kerr & Kindgsbury, 2023; Lee et al., 2022; Perlmutter et al., 2024; Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). It has been noted that the same factors can have both positive and negative effects, e.g., connection with peers can be positive, yet the pressure to stay connected can lead to compulsive use of social media (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Marginalized youth experience the same risks and benefits from social media as other youth, but they also experience additional risks and benefits. Marginalized youth are at elevated risk for social media-based bullying, harassment, and abuse, all of which are associated with mental health consequences, including depression and anxiety (Anam & Harness, 2024). Youth of colour are at risk of witnessing, or personally experiencing stereotyping, racism, and traumatic events, which can contribute to depressive symptoms, social anxiety, PTSD, and problematic substance use (Anam & Harness, 2024).

On the other hand, social media can provide some positive benefits for marginalized youth. Youth of colour may use social media to obtain social support to buffer the impacts of negative experiences (Anam & Harness, 2024). For youth who do not have access to peers who share their identity, social media can provide access to a community that provides representation, social support, and opportunities for identity exploration and affirmation (Anam & Harness, 2024). As an example, LGBTQIA+ youth may access health-related information that they may not feel comfortable accessing in their home community.

Limitations of the Literature and Proposed Changes

Most existing studies looking at the relationship between SMU and mental health and well-being are cross-sectional studies using self-report (Perlmutter et al., 2024; Sewell & Parry, 2024). Such data can only identify correlations, not causation. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that people are not very good at accurately reporting their SMU, leading to unreliable data (Perlmutter et al., 2024; Sewell & Parry, 2024). There is a growing interest in moving away from relying on retrospective self-report, to other more accurate methods, including log-based measures of SMU, physiological measures of stress, neuroimaging, and something called digital phenotyping, which involves real-time measurement of

individual social media usage on a personal digital devices, such as a smartphone (Perlmutter et al., 2024; Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

In addition, up till now discussions about the relationship between SMU by youth and mental health and well-being has used language that is deficit-based and shame-based, suggesting devastating consequences for youth mental health and well-being, and lacking recognition of the value seen by youth. Such a narrative can create feelings of guilt and shame, and lead youth to hide their SMU, rather than seeking to make the most out of it (Moreno & Rodesky, 2023). Some are recognizing how powerful language and narrative can be and are proposing that it would be more productive to take a strengths-based approach that promotes self-efficacy and values the lived experience of youth (Moreno & Rodesky, 2023). They have proposed that rather than focusing solely on time spent on social media, it may be more helpful to look at how social media is used, along with individual strengths and vulnerabilities, and the context that shapes the social media experience (Moreno & Rodesky, 2023). Within the reality of the youth experience today, SMU can be reframed as a developmentally appropriate activity that provides opportunities for developmental tasks such as peer connection, independence, identity exploration, risk taking, and learning (Moreno & Rodesky, 2023). In this context, SMU can be approached as an integral part of current youth existence, recognizing that it involves positive, negative, and neutral relationships to mental health.

Conclusion

Research has generally found a positive relationship between SMU and poor mental health and well-being of youth, but the findings have been mixed, suggesting that the relationship is complex and mediated by many other factors, including internal factors, behaviour, and context. Preventing potential SMU related harms to youth mental health and well-being requires addressing the issues at many levels, including social media companies, parents, schools, healthcare providers, youth, policymakers, and further research. Research needs to pivot to be using accurate, real-time measurement of SMU, and examining the complexity of factors that influence the role that SMU plays in youth mental health and well-being. Findings should be shared broadly, to influence further prevention efforts.

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