

Continuum of Social Networking Use

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

Positive Impacts

Social networking sites are designed to facilitate the exchange of information, encourage social interaction, enhance friendships, and promote new relationships. Virtual communities have become an inherent component of a young person's developmental process offering a platform for youth to explore and develop their identities and culture [1].

Social networking sites can have a positive impact on youth's psychosocial development. These platforms serve as tools for connection, particularly for individuals who are socially isolated, marginalized, or facing other barriers. They provide a space to share experiences, offer support, and foster a sense of belonging [2, 3].

Effective social movements and social justice initiatives increasingly use social networking sites to support social activism, elevate marginalized voices, and offer alternative perspectives from mainstream media [4, 5]. For example, social networking has been an effective tool for creating social connections and disseminating health promotion information to transgender youth, as well as to youth with autism spectrum disorder, facilitating peer support and the dissemination of health promotion information [6]. Moreover, these platforms offer accessible information on mental health and addictions, further broadening their utility in promoting well-being [1]. Social networking also enhances cultural exchange and global awareness. Research highlights its potential to support refugee integration, offering opportunities for cultural expression and identity formation in diverse contexts [3].

When Social Networking Use Becomes Problematic

Despite the benefits, the misuse or overuse of social networking sites can pose significant risks and harm. Common concerns include:

- fears about excessive and problematic use
- exposure and sharing of inappropriate information and material (sexting, pornography)
- negative influence on body image due to unrealistic portrayals
- sourcing of harmful content or advice, such as websites or social networks promoting self-harm
- negative impact on mental health and well-being [1]
- cyberbullying, which can take many forms, including:
 - sending or posting offensive or intimidating messages
 - creating and sharing photos or videos of a sensitive nature without consent
 - sharing secrets about someone
 - leaving somebody out of an online activity or social group

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- voting on someone in an offensive poll
- creating a website with critical content about somebody
- creating a false profile or hijacking online identities to damage someone's reputation
- sending explicit messages or encouraging a young person to send an explicit text, then sharing that more widely
- cyberstalking: constantly harassing with threats of physical harm [1, 7]

Biopsychosocial Perspective

An example of problematic use is when repeated and pathological social networking causes significant problems in daily life. Process addiction can be examined from a biopsychosocial perspective to understand the complex relationship with social networking sites.

The six components of process addiction are:

- Total preoccupation with social media use (salience).
- Changes in emotional state (mood modification).
- Increasing use of social media to obtain the same pleasure (tolerance/craving).
- Experiencing distress, negative feelings, and other psychological symptoms if prohibited from using social media (withdrawal).
- Unaccomplished expectations in important life areas and interpersonal problems because of social media use (conflict/functional impairment).
- Failure to control the use of social media after a period of abstinence (relapse/loss of control) [8, 9].

Understanding the issue using a biopsychosocial framework helps service providers, youth, and families understand what motivates individuals to engage in social networking, and what rewards or gratification they're looking for when using those types of sites [10, 11]. Service providers and families should aim to educate youth on healthy social media use, promote media literacy, and create spaces for open conversations about online behavior. Proactive strategies can help reduce the risks associated with social networking while maximizing its potential benefits.

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