

Social Networking: Prevalence & Trends

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

In this document service providers will find statistics and trends on gender differences, diverse populations, peer pressure, relationships with family and community, pre-existing mental health and addiction issues, and personality traits that influence technology use.

Gender

Young people are early adopters of technology and are more prone to losing track of time on social media platforms [1, 2, 3]. Research highlights they are more susceptible to involvement in unsafe and illegal activities such as harassment, privacy violation, defamation of character, intentional infliction of emotional distress, bullying, and exposure to inappropriate information [4].

Problematic social media use is higher in girls than boys. Girls are possibly more inclined to develop addictive behaviours in activities involving social interaction, whereas boys may tend to develop problems during more solitary activities such as video gaming [1, 3, 5-7]. Boys take more risks when disclosing personal information than girls [4]. Teenage girls who have body image concerns and spend time on social networking sites worry more about being thin and dieting and have lower self-esteem [1].

While girls use these sites for communication with peer group members, entertainment, passing time, and socialization, boys use them for social reward, learning, and social identity gratifications [8].

Diverse Populations

Youths in marginalized or vulnerable communities face unique challenges with digital technology. Youth in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (or questioning), and other (2SLGBTQI+) communities may use social networking sites for self-expression. 2SLGBTQI+ youth tend to disclose their sexual orientation more comfortably on social networking sites than in person and find those sites provide a useful context to connect with their 2SLGBTQI+ peers [9].

Social media can be used to target vulnerable children and youth. Research shows that Canadian Indigenous girls are at higher risk of recruitment and sexual exploitation through social media avenues [10].

People with intellectual disabilities or psychological symptoms and disorders, such as depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are also more likely to engage in socially risky behaviours, exploitation, and abuse. Using the internet increases their vulnerability

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[8, 11]. These vulnerabilities are based on research that analyses patterns of youth experiences related to drug smuggling, threats, and trafficking [12]. It is important to note that it should not be predicted that a young person with similar features described above will become a victim of these experiences.

Peer Pressure

When younger children encounter a difficult experience on social media, they may ask their parents or caregivers for help. Older children are more likely to turn to friends, potentially exposing themselves to even more harmful information and risks. Youth can access unsafe information or make online connections with people who encourage self-harm and eating disorders.

Youth with low self-esteem may feel pressured to remain active online to gain validation, often at the expense of mental well-being [9].

Relationships with Family & Community

Students who use the internet to study may be easily distracted by checking their social networking sites, so their grades may drop [3].

When students experience challenges in school, have difficulty with peers or family relationships, or feel like they are failing, they may turn to the internet and social networking sites as a coping mechanism [8]. This reliance can deepen isolation and reinforce feelings of inadequacy.

Parents' excessive use of social networking sites can also influence their children. When parents struggle to provide appropriate role modeling, supervision, or recognition, it can lead to feelings of isolation, mistrust, and insecurity among youth. This absence of connection can create a deep-seated need for validation and a sense of belonging, which some youth may seek through social media or other online platforms [8].

Pre-Existing Mental Health & Addiction Issues

A correlation exists between the problematic use of social networking sites and pre-existing mental health issues, such as ADHD, obsessive-compulsiveness, anxiety, and depression. High impulsivity and poor inhibitory control may also correlate with problematic use of such sites. This implies that youth with these issues could be susceptible to excessive use of social networking sites, which in turn may intensify symptoms of anxiety and depression [3]. For these individuals, social media can become both a coping mechanism and a source of psychological distress, creating a reinforcing cycle of dependency.

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Personality Traits

Certain personality characteristics, such as narcissism and low self-esteem, are associated with the problematic use of social media [5]. Narcissistic tendencies characterized by self-centered grandiosity, overconfidence, manipulation, a sense of being special or unique, and lack of empathy often drive individuals to actively engage with social media platforms like Snapchat, Facebook, where they can construct and project idealized versions of themselves to a wide audience [4, 13].

The design of social networking platforms further fuels these behaviors by offering tangible feedback, such as “likes,” comments, and emoticons, which validate self-presentation and reinforce continued engagement. Users with narcissistic tendencies are particularly drawn to this environment as it empowers them to seek external validation and recognition [14]. Basic cognitions also play a role in addictive social media use. These include attributions, core beliefs, automatic thoughts, and schemata that have the power to cause problematic behaviours on social media. If a person believes “I am not likable” or “I have poor social skills”, this may trigger continued use of social networking sites to get approval from other users. Many users believe that accumulating many followers or friends will alter their self-conception or improve their social standing, further driving excessive use [13].

In summary, people who are young, single, and experiencing relationship difficulties and underlying mental health issues tend to be at greater risk for problematic use of social networking sites [1, 2, 6]. Understanding these underlying factors can inform the development of targeted interventions and support strategies to mitigate the impact of social media on mental health.

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