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The Serial Killer That Was Never Caught: Social Media

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Have you ever been bored and decided to go on social media to relax for a little bit? This is a normal thing to do in today's day and age, and on the surface, it doesn't look like it poses any type of risk to your well-being. That may be true until your 10-minute social media session turns into 2 hours, and you find yourself lost in the virtual world. The reason you're able to stay on social media for so long without noticing is due to the addictive measures put into place by these social media creators. People find love in this virtual domain because it allows them to escape the real world and traverse a plethora of content, all adjusted to become an immersive, individualized experience.

The release of online and social media took the world by storm. Today, social media is one of the biggest and most used things in everyday life worldwide. With the release of different apps where you can share whatever you want with very few limitations, people have gravitated towards using these applications to the point where it has become almost addicting. This

addictive aspect of social media plays a significant role in people's mental health, and it starts to make people neglect their real identity to uphold their online persona. Many factors lead to these results, all of which stem from the harmful usage of social media. Social media has a direct relation to people's mental health, and while having many adverse effects, like depression and even suicide, it can have some positive ones as well. A close examination of social media and mental health, social media and inclusion, and real-world case studies focusing on body dysmorphia reveals that social media is genuinely negatively impacting mental health.

I. Social Media and Mental Health

Social Media plays a significant role in mental health. It's used every day and worldwide, massing over billions of users. The creative nature of social media and the almost limitless possibilities that people have on social media have been seen to cause many adverse effects, like depression and anxiety. Anxiety is the feeling of dread or uneasiness that comes from overthinking and constantly stressing over what might happen. The approval system of social media, which is controlled by likes on posts and the interactive features that others can use on someone's post, is a key factor in causing this anxiety. (Mclean Hospital) It makes people continuously search for that next like, and when someone's post doesn't attain as many likes as one would deem acceptable, it makes the user anxious about whether or not they are accepted in said community. Social media platforms are aware of this, and they make their platforms like this so people can get hooked and addicted due to their emotional responses that come from wanting to be accepted.

The addictive nature of social media is due to aspects like the dopamine feeling you get when you post something and get likes from it.(Mclean Hospital) Dopamine is a complex hormone and neurotransmitter that gets released when a person experiences pleasure, which

affects a person's mood, based on feeling good. This good feeling causes you to find ways to increase your likes constantly and follow on platforms, no matter the cost. This causes people to start living an online lifestyle that doesn't reflect their real life in any way, shape, or form.(Yale Medicine) It causes them to start trying to live up to these unrealistic expectations they see on social media and causes them to start comparing themselves to others. It ties back into the adverse effects, where depression starts to come in, and anxiety, because they aren't receiving the attention they want.

Studies also show that people spend so much time on social media, which attests to how addictive it is and why, because of these limitless restrictions, they can live whatever life they want people to think they live.(Yale Medicine) Addiction is "a neuropsychological disorder characterized by a persistent and intense urge to use a drug or engage in a behavior that produces natural reward, despite substantial harm and other negative consequences." By breaking this definition down, it becomes evident how this pertains to the case explained above. People are constantly active on social media due to this "natural reward" they receive which in this case would be the feeling of pleasure gained, being dopamine. The substantial harm that comes from this short feeling of joy would be the anxiety and depression stemming from the constant demands that come from social media use. The reason all this is possible and the main reason that social media is genuinely addicting is because of the limitless restrictions that are on these platforms. In detail, this means that users can create and portray almost anything they want to with little to no consequences. Some platforms do offer guidelines, but most of the time they are either bleak or very easy to work around, and even if a platform restricts a user from doing something, there is always another platform that will allow it. This is why it's the perfect escape for somebody already dealing with things in their real life and looking for a place where nobody

truly knows them.(Yale Medicine) This is why it's so easy to get addicted to it; it's yet another thing people use to escape, like drugs and alcohol, which are also very harmful once addicted. This addiction leads to many harmful things, like anxiety and depression, which were previously mentioned, but also life-threatening things like cyberbullying and even suicide.

Social media has a high audience from people ages 10-19, and this is due to the vulnerable aspects of people of these ages, such as the fact that they are going through puberty and other things. Their brains are in peak developmental stages. This makes them highly vulnerable, and social media plays directly into those vulnerabilities because of social media's unrealistic norms and comparison aspect on people. Researchers have linked social media use to high depression and an increase in suicide rates among people ages 10-24. Specifically among people age 10 to 24, the suicide rate is 10.7 per 100,000 people. This is very high given that the number of people who die by suicide regardless of age is 14 per 100,000 people.(Social Media Victims Law Center) Also, the average percentage of male and female suicide rates *has* increased as well since the release of social media. At the same time that these suicide rates have been increasing, so has the use of social media. (Social Media Victims Law Center) *Due t*o sources provided by researchers, it's evident that social media has a hand in explaining why these numbers are the way they are. These kids who are using social media at a young age are proven to be at higher risk for depression and suicide as young adults. Even though social media already affects mental health and is contributing to these high statistics by itself, there are also many cases of cyberbullying throughout the different platforms. As previously mentioned, social media doesn't have a lot of restrictions on the platforms; not only does this give people free rein to post things, but it also gives them free rein to say whatever they want to other users. People

can anonymously torment others without receiving any consequences due to the lack of security

that these platforms provide.

Most negative treatment of others online goes overlooked until it is too late. A case that is

relevant to this is the case of Sadie Riggs, who was a 15-year-old high school student who was

bullied for how she looked. This bullying wasn't just in person but also on social media. The

students doing this made posts encouraging her to kill herself and harm herself, which she

eventually ended up doing.(Hadero) Social media has allowed traditional bullying to evolve to

where people can become targets not only in person, but also in what they thought was the safety

of their home. Cases like Sadie's show how the creators of these apps don't have strong enough

guidelines and rules to stop things like this from happening. The worst part about this is that

neither the bully nor the creators of the app face any consequences for pushing somebody to kill

themselves.

Instances like this are always significant controversies when it comes to cyberbullying,

which usually all have the same result. This is why in 2024, the CEOs of big media platforms all

went in front of the Senate to testify on the child exploitation issue (Hadero). The senate brought

up all the main problems talked about so far: the addictive nature of social media, bullying, and

depression. Lawmakers and children's advocates say that these major corporations are doing a

good enough job setting rules and regulations to protect people from these things. They are

showing a lot of concern about how social media affects young people's lives. There were real

accounts from families whose children had been exploited who gave their testimony in front of

Congress. Even families who lost their children to suicide were in attendance. The senator from

Missouri, Josh Hawley, used this to fuel his question to Mark Zuckerberg, where he asked "if

any of the families were compensated for their loss", and he also asked if he wanted to apologize

to the families. Zuckerberg responded by saying "he doesn't think any of the families were compensated," and he also apologized to the grieving families in the crowd (Hadero). This trial just shows how unaware the CEOs of these apps are of the dark side of their platforms.

II. Social Media and Inclusion

One of the dark aspects of these apps is the isolation chambers that are ultimately created from how people interact via social media. Due to the vast world of social media, there are many different types of users, and it's almost like there are different cliques on social media. From athletes to gamers to troll pages, you can see so many other things on social media, and your algorithm for what you see can vary in many ways. Due to this, people are usually dragged into a specific category of the internet, which causes them to be isolated from other viewpoints or perspectives. Another thing that can happen is that people try to be a part of a particular group of people that they might think are "Cool" and try to do things to fit in that don't reflect their actual life. It causes them to be isolated in their real life, because the life they portray online doesn't reflect them. This causes a divide in people's real lives that isn't that bad when it starts, but can spiral into something that genuinely affects someone's life. An example of this digital divide is a video, and it's a perfect real-world example of how social media negatively affects people in real time (Lemon). It shows a woman documenting her life on social media, portraying an ideal, happy life to fit in with other people she sees doing fun things and looking like they are enjoying life as well. When in reality she's depressed and doesn't live up to any of her online expectations. It isn't until she looks in the mirror and realizes her image online doesn't reflect anything of her actual life. It's a perfect example of the digital divide, because it shows how people will work hard to improve their online life, rather than their actual life away from the

screen. It highlights the addictive nature as well because she is constantly looking to get her next "Fix," which would be the accreditation from people online.

This digital divide isn't discussed frequently because so many people are affected by it without fully realizing what it means. The woman in the video is just one of many examples of the pressure it takes to maintain a perfect online persona. It emphasizes how drained people began to feel after feeling inadequate compared to others online. When comparing themselves, their sense of self-worth diminishes like hers did when she saw herself portraying this fake life. Another thing social media plays right into is F.O.M.O. The fear of missing out is when people see others doing things they aren't doing and don't want to miss out. This fear of not being included amplifies the feelings of exclusion tremendously. It ties back into the unrealistic expectations that social media has, where people's lives could be just fine in reality, but due to these expectations, their representation of a "good life" is clouded. Exposure to feelings like this, where the online life is prioritized over real life for long periods, can lead to true disconnection from genuine relationships and authentic human interactions. Another real-world example of social media negatively impacting people's lives is the problem of body dysmorphia.

III. Real World Case Studies: Body Dysmorphia

Body dysmorphia is a mental disorder where people spend a lot of time obsessing over their appearance and flaws ("Body Dysmorphic Disorder," *NHS*). Most flaws aren't even recognizable to others, but they cause the person to stress and be insecure about their appearance. Symptoms of this are obsessing over certain parts of your body, constantly comparing yourself to others, and doing a lot to try and conceal or hide any of your flaws that you think you have. Comparison is one of the leading causes of body dysmorphia, comparing yourself to others and seeing people on social media who make you insecure and make you feel bad about yourself.

Overall body dysmorphia is a popular mental illness, and social media contributes to how many people have it and deal with it.

If you have body dysmorphia, Social Media can be the perfect platform for you to obsess over your appearance. Your feed can be full of "Perfect" Looking people, and some studies talk about how social media has normalized the standard beauty criteria, and due to these judgmental views that are so widespread on the different apps, it can leave people feeling bad about themselves and constantly critiquing their appearances. The creative aspect of social media which gives people the ability to apply filters, body shaping tools, and a plethora of other things they can use to create the perfect human and enhance their appearance while making it look as realistic as possible to promotes themselves like they're better than others, because it can be hard to distinguish if that is them. These unrealistic beauty standards can lead to low self-esteem in people and body dissatisfaction. An example of this that shows many people struggling with this problem is a video from Jesse James West that directly talks about and interviews everyday people, including some of the fittest people on earth, about body dysmorphia and its effects (West). It highlights exactly what it is and how it affects different people, and even goes to show how some people could have dream physiques and still deal with body dysmorphia and the insecurities that come with it. It provides direct examples of what it is, and shows how social media directly influences and increases the negative feelings of body dysmorphia. How can the addictive nature of social media and unrealistic expectations ruin a person's mind? Body dysmorphia is just one of the side topics that social media influences, and this topic is good because it shows how even people who are in the 1% still deal with problems and the power that social media has on everybody.

IV. Positive Side Of Social Media

Social media isn't all that bad, though, like most things in life, social media could have positive effects. However, its power is misused in most cases, leading to harm. Social media could be an outlet for providing people with helpful and positive information very efficiently. The ability to foster connections, express yourself to millions worldwide, and build communities for many people is a very powerful ability that people can access.(Harvard T.H) Many users use these abilities to promote messages and connect with others to try and better their real life. These people understand the importance of digital literacy and self-awareness in protecting themselves from the negative effects of social media. Understanding these concepts and realizing that online life isn't as important as your life opens many doors for positive social media use. Consuming information that promotes your true self provides the possibility of counteracting the many negative effects of social media.(Harvard T.H) This stems from the way people engage with social media. If the positive side of social media were embraced more than the negative side, social media wouldn't be that bad. This brings back the question of why, when somebody goes on social media, all of the most popular posts that attract the most views are always negative. This is because the social media algorithm prioritizes money gain over the safety and health of its users. Researchers attest that the mental health problems of social media users come from how the different apps are set up and how users use them ("Social Media Use Can be Positive"). How are the apps set up to be addicting when they can be easily switched to promote a more positive online routine? Social media is one of the most powerful inventions in the past decades, and the infinite amount of possibilities that could be done with social media is truly amazing. It has allowed people to break many boundaries that wouldn't be possible without the creation of social media. For some, it has become a powerful tool to inspire positive change, so regardless of the many negative effects of social media, there is a possibility that it can be transformed into

something that could change the world for the better. It starts with the creators of these apps, who take accountability for their setup and change them to better protect users instead of using people's suffering for revenue.

V. Discussion

Incorporating social media in people's everyday lives has become universal regardless of race, gender, religion, and nationality. It truly has been an amazing feat and has significantly progressed civilization since its release. No matter the age of people around the world, most people are familiar with social media or even use it. However, this ability to post whatever you want and connect with people with no restrictions or physical effort has its drawbacks. The influence of social media has impacted the way people interact with each other, shifting face-to-face communication to connect behind a screen. It has reduced the depth of personal relationships. Superficial relationships have become very prevalent today, severely impacting the younger generations. This constant exposure to online content and idealized images has severely affected the mental health of daily consumers of social media. Especially the younger generation, who are more inclined to be susceptible to these adverse effects of social media. CEOs of these apps have become aware of these issues and have had to have meetings in front of the Senate because of their negligence (Hadero). With this being said, future developments of social media should include solutions that increase the support for mental health and mitigate the vast mental health issues that stem from social media. Restrictions and more specific guidelines could be implemented to weed out the highly prevalent misinformation on social media and regulate what users can post to suppress the harmful effects of negative posts on apps. Simple changes and admins that care can easily increase awareness of social media's adverse effects, and prioritizing users' well-being over their platforms' success can make these platforms viable for people of all

ages. Overall, Social media's impact on the world has been both negative and positive. The future development of social media will need to focus on decreasing the distance between the online world and reality, so the dissociation of social media and real life isn't as prevalent as it is today. If social media could strictly be a place to promote true information and keep people's online lives accurate to their real lives, then the mental health problems that run rampant because of social media could drastically decrease in quantity.

Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized how people communicate and interact with each other. Despite these fantastic feats, it has undeniably come with significant consequences for mental health. The addictive nature of these platforms, mixed with the unrealistic beauty standards and harmful comparisons, has led to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicide, particularly among younger users. Specific examples like cyberbullying and body dysmorphia further highlight this dark side of social media. However, these problems can be addressed and solved by taking accountability for their existence, implementing stricter guidelines and rules, and promoting positive mental health support. Focusing on things like this when further developing social media offers an excellent opportunity for social media to become a healthier environment for people of all ages. Ultimately, balancing the power of social media with a focus on well-being and authenticity could significantly mitigate its negative impact and allow it to create genuine, meaningful connections.

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