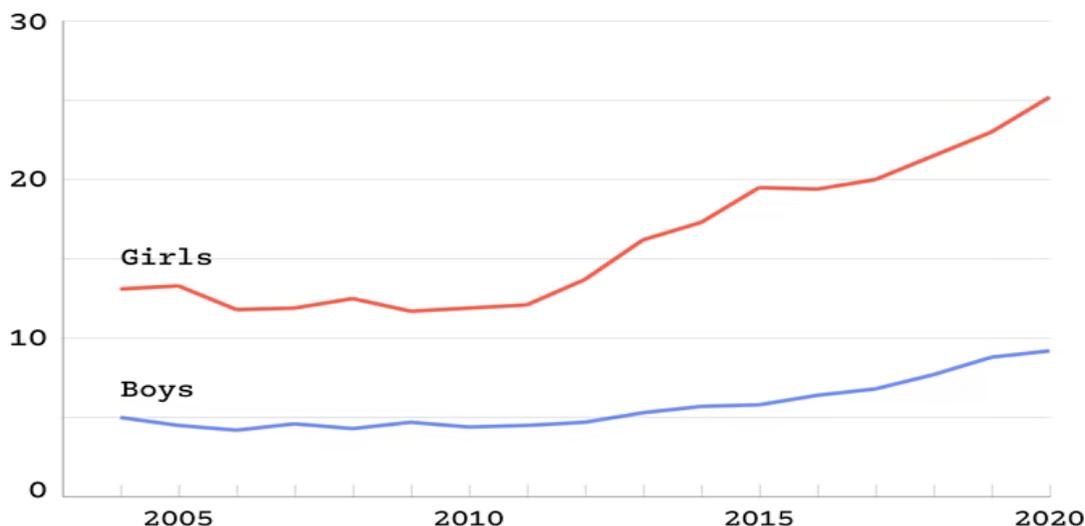


### **Social Media and Its Horrific Impact on Adolescents**

“It is all because of Tiktok”, my mother points at my device aggressively and lunges in my direction in an attempt to grab it. My parents used to consistently blame my phone and especially the social media applications on it for my moodiness, distorted sleep schedule, work ethic and many other aspects of my life that I may not have risen above their expectations in. Social media has taken over the lives of teenagers to an aggravating extent, with over 45% of US adolescents reporting that they are online “almost constantly” according to a 2018 survey from Pew Research Center – with the percentage being doubled from Pew’s survey in 2015 (Anderson et al. 2018). This feeling from parents being concerned over their children's mental health, productivity, and life as a result of social media is more common than I expected. From a 2020 poll from Ann & Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, 67% of the 2,909 American parents surveyed have felt concerned over their teen’s addiction to social media. Truthfully, parents pointed out a great social phenomenon that arose in recent years with generation Z as the result of the increased popularity of social media - the negative effects of social media on teenagers are harsh; it is a sword that penetrates the lives of teens from mental well-being, their concepts of beauty and even fundamental sleep patterns. It is time we start to recognize these serious problems.

A social psychologist who I admire named Jonathan Haidt has done extensive research on the relationship between teen mental health and social media. He presented his research on the relationship between social media and teen mental health in an article with The Atlantic, “Something terrible has happened to Gen Z...when we look at what happened to American teens in the early 2010s, we see many such turning points. The data for adolescence depression [is] noteworthy” (Haidt). The evidence for the increase in major depressive episodes is clear and alarming, especially for girls:

### Percentage of Americans Age 12–17 Who Had at Least One Major Depressive Episode in the Past Year



Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health

(Haidt, The Atlantic)

Some have argued that the correlation between major depressive episodes for Gen Z and the rise of social media is merely the result of more willingness from Gen Z to report their mental health issues (Friedman). But there are also data linking the depressive episodes to hospitalization for suicide attempts for adolescents aged 11-18 – where the attempts doubled from 2008 to 2015 and suicide is the third leading cause of death amongst adolescents in the United States (Plemmons, Gregory, et al.). By all means, correlation does not prove causation; however, Haidt states in the same article that there are simply no plausible alternative reasons, and why does it affect girls in particular? Those reports that only show small effects focus on “screen time” rather than social media particularly, as the fault does not lie in watching movies or FaceTiming (Haidt, Allen). Some other researchers have pointed to the economic crisis of 2008, the 9/11 attacks or school shootings (Vermeulen). The question then becomes why do similar trends exist among teens in Canada in the same time period (Government of Canada)? What should be of the utmost concern is not the fact that there is a harmful impact from social media, but the extent to which the harm has been reached. On platforms where anonymous peer feedback, personal information and borderline-illegal activities such as sexting are constantly available (Matte) – the victims of these features are our dear teenagers.

One can think of platforms of social media as platforms full of various personas from teenagers, where displaying your authentic self is a rarity. This is supported by a 2019 survey from Pew Research Center where 77% of adolescents aged 13-17 agree that “people are less authentic and real on social media than they are in real life” (Lenhart, Amanda, et al. 9). The forms of inauthenticity can range from politics to body images where users are typically exposed to “idealized” bodies and would spark comparison between themselves to peers and models (Heger). The effects of scrolling through Instagram and browsing videos of fitness instructors or models are also especially pressing for young girls; one 2015 study found that female-identifying college students who are on Facebook more had worse body image, that “young women who spend more time on Facebook may feel more concerned about their body because they compare their appearance to others (especially to peers).” (Aparicio-Martinez, et al). There is also evidence supporting the correlation between time spent on social media, negative body image, and disordered eating (Aparicio-Martinez, et al). Neha Chaudhary, an adolescent psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School remarked on this psychology further, “People end up creating unrealistic ideals for themselves based on what they see and feel distressed when they aren’t able to meet [their own] self-expectations.” (Heger). The keyword from that quote is “distressed”, unlike traditional television and magazines where one may compare themselves to celebrities where the ideal is farther away, with social media, people can compare themselves to their close peers at school or simply people their age – oftentimes those pictures are the most attractive images they have which can also be edited and/or filtered (Fardouly, Vartanian). The consequence of those enlightening features of social media along with its addictive nature (Hilliard) are worsened body image, eating disorders, and in rare cases but without a doubt alarming – could lead to self-harm and attempting suicide.

According to a study by Harvard University, the neurological effects of social media are addictive because activities such as acquiring intriguing information and self-disclosure on social media trigger the same areas of the brain when taking addictive substances (Hilliard). So, how does this affect the sleep of adolescents – when sleep is particularly crucial for physical and intellectual growth during the period of puberty? Sadly, social media is not doing sleep a favour either, as research found the more time adolescents spent on screen-based activities such as social media during the day (especially in the hour before bed), the harder time they had falling asleep and the less sleep they got during the night. More hauntingly, those sleep issues were then found to be linked with increased symptoms of insomnia and depression (Li, Buxton, et al.). The blue light from electronic devices is

notorious for interfering with the circadian rhythm (Harvard Health Publishing), and experts have been suggesting that people should resist using electronic devices the hour before bedtime (Pacheco, Truong). Why would one check social media just minutes before going to bed? The answer is added to the addictive nature, another reason is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)(Newsom), where people are lured by the opportunities for communication and the desire of staying connected. According to a 2013 paper, those who check their social media more often before bed experience FOMO anxiety in their lives (Przybylski, Andrew, et al.). In truth, regardless of how much teenagers (including myself) want to refute social media affecting sleep, the scientific literature is clear.

The technological revolution with the emergence of smartphones has benefited many of our lives. However, if you turn to social media particularly, there are substantial negative effects on mental health and physical harm, especially for adolescents. It is time that science devote more time and resources to this concern, as there is already clear evidence about the rise of the issues and harm from social media just within fifteen years of its invention. Haidt exclaimed a warning to many researchers, “[they] seem to be thinking about social media as if it were sugar: safe in small to moderate quantities, and harmful only if teenagers consume large quantities...[but] when most of the 11-year-olds in class are on Instagram (as was the case in my son’s school), there can be pervasive effects on everyone.” (Haidt, Allen). This warning should not only be addressed to the scientific community, but society at large. The rise of social media has given a generation a dent in their development and well-being. From the way online communication and digital addiction is heading, this may only be the beginning.

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