



Social Media and Our Mental Health: A Student Perspective

The effect of social media on adolescent mental health, and how it's designed to be addictive.

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Abstract

Electronic technology has quickly advanced to become part of our lives, all day, everyday. While it's convenient to keep everything in one place, complete tasks faster and communicate, when is it too much to the point where we feel the need to check our phones in our pockets every second? We seem to live through a screen and fill every second with obsessive notification checking, scrolling through short-form content and playing games. Even during 5 minute breaks in school, in between sets at the gym and short car rides to anything else like brushing our teeth. It's now so normalised which is a problem when it comes to children whose brains are still developing. It may be hard for them to recognise the addiction, resulting in sleep loss, decreased academic performance and anxiety from device separation, some factors of increased risk of mental health problems like depression.

A large issue with these types of 'legal' addictions is that they are more 'socially acceptable', therefore aren't taken as seriously and often, if not always, go unnoticed. Another factor is how society is still evolving and learning to take mental health as seriously as physical health. When there are addictions viewed as more severe like illegal drugs, we assume they are very dangerous by the extreme physical symptoms like changes in the face and body. When the effects are internal, it's difficult to recognise until the person suffering is comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings, which is why attention will be brought to steps we can take to highlight the problem. It may become easier to speak about with promoting understanding.

AIM -

To see how social media usage affects self-esteem and mental health in teenagers, especially in school. This includes educational and social life. Is it impacting academic performance? This study includes which online platforms may be contributing the most to these fast rising problems and its direct link to mental health impact. Another goal is to raise awareness about how apps are designed to be addictive, and how we can stop this.

METHOD -

- The google forms survey was conducted mainly in my local community, along with a few responses submitted online, carried out anonymously to ensure participants are more comfortable answering all questions. 16 people submitted an answer in total.
- Although the **lack of generalisability** can be argued, the results show a noticeable negative impact on students which is just in a small area, meaning the statistics for the effects globally may be significantly larger.
- The form included a variety of multiple choice, open ended, likert scale and yes/no (dichotomous) questions. People are more likely to be willing to complete a survey with shorter questions with options, while some long response questions were optional to support the study.
- There is a mix of qualitative and quantitative research, including measuring levels of emotions and impacts on a scale with the open ended questions focusing more on understanding thoughts, opinions and experiences.
- The wide range of questions allow flexibility in data interpretation and finding unexpected trends in results.

Research Discussion:

📌 Social Media and Our Mental Health: A Student Perspective (Responses)

NOTICE: The results are best viewed on a computer or laptop to support the organised layout as mobile devices may alter it.

After reviewing the responses, number 7 appeared to be an anomaly with unsatisfactory responses contradicting themselves. They clearly weren't seriously considered and for this reason will be invalid and not considered in findings from responses. Some answers included the rating for content, selected as 5, causing the most positive feelings despite anxiety and stress experienced. Apps were said to provide enough support despite experiencing friend group exclusion, bullying and conflict from social media, so it's surprising that it supposedly didn't affect self esteem. Educational content seen online that helps with school is never seen despite selecting it to be helpful, but is a distraction during lessons, lowering grades and shortening attention span.

The students who use social media for the most hours everyday answered yes to experiencing anxiety and stress from the content. They use Tiktok the most, with higher usage linked to responses which said it's used mostly after school or at night. All of this group selected that social media shortens attention span and that it's distracting during lessons.

It was mostly the younger respondents, age 14-16 who use snapchat as their main form of online communication rather than generic apps like messages or whatsapp. This may be because of highly stimulating and addictive nature, with streaks, snap scores and stories. As someone in this age range, I know most people in my school and area open Snapchat without thinking, to send "snaps" with photos back and forth to added friends all day, made easy by the camera button being right next to the user's name. Similar to mindless scrolling, an automatic action, the short term dopamine is released by our brain's expectations of finding something exciting and unexpected, as we never know what will appear next. It stops becoming enjoyable but we can't stop, like any other addiction as the dopamine spikes which provide a false sense of reward fade quickly. The cycle of chasing the next hit repeats.

The most answered number is 3 on the middle of a 1-5 scale of online content mostly causing very negative or very positive feelings, by 62.5% of respondents. This 'mindlessness' may make us unsure of how what we see is supposed to make us feel, impacting mental health by numbness to emotions and desensitisation, possibly disrupting emotional development as **other studies found that social media affects young brains differently to adults**. Another reason may be due to the sometimes highly emotional and unrealistic content of everyday lives everywhere, and negative news becoming so normalised, especially since problems like COVID-19 and environmental problems like global warming.

To compare the different impacts, I found that the 3 respondents aged 20 or older had suggestions for what they do when they recognise social media is making them feel negative, whereas most other responses, all from teenagers, usually responded with nothing, or something along the lines of 1 simple answer which was "deal with it". The older respondents were also the few that haven't made friends online. Not only are they more mature, but it may suggest a decrease in communicating skills in the new generation who almost always have technology from a very young age. They may find talking online more comfortable, especially since we know the individuals that selected experiencing bullying in school make friends online more frequently than those who have not.

The highest selected negative impacts on social media affecting education are a shorter attention span in 68.8% responders, and decreased ability to concentrate in 62.5%. Both effects on children found in these studies.

All participants over the age of 20 (20-22) also don't feel pressure to keep updated with classmates posts as they are likely in university and are focused on their own paths, so the teenagers of this age should be provided with more guidance to express their independence and personal goals in order to improve confidence and social skills, reducing social anxiety and fear of missing out (known as FOMO).

The maturity level makes opinions by the individual reliable, one of which is "I think social media has good intent with its purpose but now it's no longer a controlled environment. I think it has made me more **self conscious**." **Adults are also affected in some ways but may be able to problem solve better.** So if app developers include more security like one respondents suggestion to require ID for age verification, there could be specific content designed for lower age groups which promotes activities for positive dopamine and a less overstimulating, fast paced online environment will be present, reducing anxiety and screen time, which in turn will improve average teen mental health and prepare them for more real life situations as adults.

"No Noticeable Negative Effect"

Excluding response 7*, 18.75% (ages 14-16) that selected no noticeable effect selected the range for less than 6 hours spent on social media daily, while the content consumed was also more positive. Only 2 out of the 3 haven't felt anxious or stressed by what they have seen, so this may mean the app strategy of algorithms may still provide negative content for more engagement even if positive content is searched, making it **not entirely avoidable****. A participant said "I guess the content itself could change. Some platforms we don't choose what we consume so it really depends." Nobody answered that social media apps provide enough mental health support resources, and instead were unsure about what should be changed, which is why awareness needs to be raised to ensure adults can become aware and speak out, potentially reaching app developers who design their platforms that keep people hooked.

*The survey was vaguely answered and most questions included random characters to bypass the requirement. While some single-select answers were helpful, this was another clearly rushed question. It contradicts itself as 'Shorter attention span' and 'Lower grades' were selected, even though the participant also selected 'No noticeable effect'. They indicated the internet was more harmful than helpful for education, so it's valid to assume the first two answers were more intentional.

One that selected no noticeable effect was in the lowest range option for social media usage of 1-3 hours per day, using regular messages which is less distracting and more practical rather than Snapchat, popular among teenagers. While still using tiktok, the individual selected not experiencing stress and anxiety due to content seen, showing that a **decrease in usage by just a few hours a day can show benefit**. Self esteem is rated as 1 on the scale, not affected at all. However, this shorter amount of time usage was still enough to decide apps don't provide enough resources to support young mental health.

The positive effects selected are that it's helpful for asking friends about subjects and finding study strategies along with other educational resources, so TikTok can be useful depending on the **type of content consumed****.

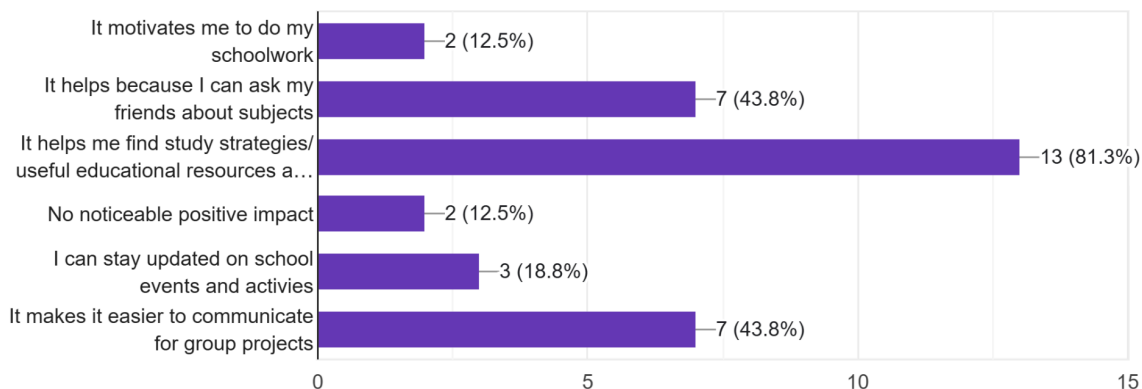
Although they said it was not distracting from completing schoolwork, this outstanding response compared to others might just be from personal discipline to study. They are also always required to use apps and websites to complete work in school and home, so it may be easier to know how to avoid the distractions if it's needed regularly.

The problem for most others is the purposeful design of the app's addictive nature, making trying to use it for studying difficult. From personal experience, I know if I want to search something while studying to support me, a video is provided upon immediate opening and loading of the app, wiring the brain to that 'automatic' response to scroll, sometimes even for up to over 2 hours, **the amount that could make a difference to mental health as found in this participants results**.

Academic Performance

How does it positively affect you? Select all that apply.

16 responses



Those who chose social media as having no positive impact rarely use educational content despite having a high internet usage of 4-5 hours a day. Watching randomised videos for entertainment rather than mainly for learning may negatively

affect self esteem, which they selected on the higher side of the scale, even if it may outwardly be presented as positive (how the content you see mostly makes you feel), both questions being selected with 3's and 4's.

Finding study strategies seems to be the most popular use of online education resources. 61.5% selected using the content sometimes, opposed to rarely. The only individual that selected 'Often' also experiences increased motivation to do schoolwork, but this comes with a downside of increased stress about comparing progress to others, likely due to more exposure of motivational content which comes with seeing others get high grades, which is probably mostly unrealistic and dramatic as earlier analysed. The other negative point selected was wasting learning time because it's hard to get off certain apps. This is once again even further evidence of how severely addicting they are, especially Tiktok which is this respondents most used social media app for videos and other posts.

In addition to this, social media overall was still found to be distracting even by students that don't use it in school, so there's a lot of time wasted with opportunities to study at home, impacting mental health by feeling guilty and out of control after being unable to break the cycle of constant usage.

43.8% said social media makes it easier to communicate for group projects. 71% of them selected that it's also distracting.

The level of requirement to use technology for schoolwork out of these responses were:

1,4,6,6,8,8,9

The median average is at a high 7.5. Some thoughts on this were that it's somewhat beneficial to teachers to stay organised and for personal accessibility, but again, it's bad for encouraging distractions. The students with higher requirements provided perspectives and both pros and cons, while lower ratings had less thoughts or decided there to be no benefit.

This could be another link to the discovery that students who are required to use technology in education more often can use it more efficiently and may be more disciplined to avoid 'scrolling'. Most were unsure on the decision if this learning medium is more helpful or harmful to education, although a student who was required to use technology at a rating of 10 saw an increase in motivation (but they are studying technology). So from this, we know the main problem is recreational social media and not just general screentime.

Social Life In School

43.75% of all participants said they have felt excluded from a friend group because of what they saw on social media. Some examples I had in mind when creating this question are some common experiences of teenagers:

- *Seeing a friend post a story of an activity/'hangout' with other people that you weren't invited to*
- *Discovering a group chat of a friend group that you weren't added to*
- *Everyone being in a video, like a TikTok without you*
- *Being in the group chat, but ignored/others making plans publicly in the group without inviting you*

- *Finding out about a private story/second account that everyone else knew about, but your friend didn't tell you*
- *Indirectly being spoken about - Stories or TikTok videos of a friend saying negative things, hinting at who it's about*

The remaining 56.25% that answered 'No' to this experience compare their physical appearance to others online the least ('Rarely') and shared the most positive experiences using social media for school. This percentage includes all respondents that use messages as their main form of communication, all in the lower range of 1-3 hours social media use per day, opposed to Snapchat which is more addictive (link to findings of Snapchat being highly stimulating and attractive to teenagers).

This again shows reducing your hours from 4-5 to 1-3 can actually have a strong impact and should be encouraged.

On the other hand, those that have felt excluded are mostly in the 4-5 and 6+ hours category, using their phones either all day or at break or lunch, unlike the higher percentage that use them almost never in school.

Every 'Yes', excluding only 1, to experiencing conflict or argument in school that started or escalated on social media platforms were from these exact same individuals in the 43.75%.

On a more positive note, these same respondents also had the majority of 'Yes' for building friendships with people from their school online that they didn't speak to in person before. My assumption is that it's through these group chats or stories, maybe someone who decided to provide support during the said conflict.

87.5% of total students had both yes/no for 'Felt Excluded' and 'Experienced Conflict'

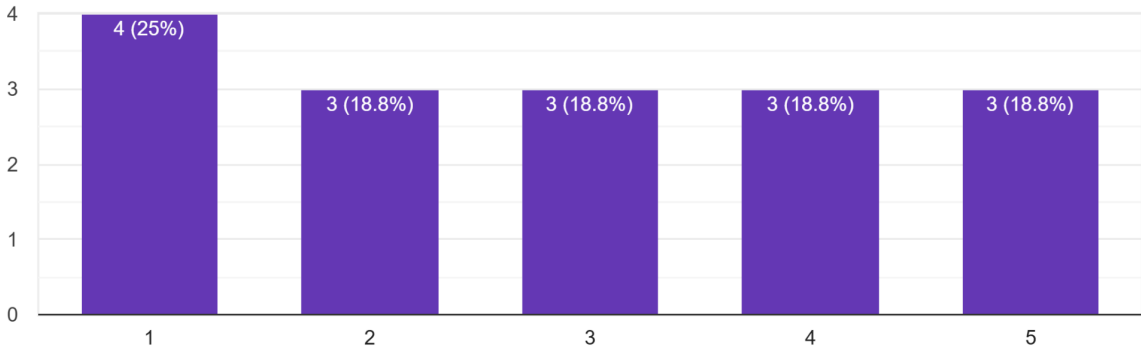
Felt Excluded	Made Friends Online	Experienced Conflict
No	No	No
No	Unsure	No
Yes	Yes	Yes
No	No	No
Yes	No	Yes
No	Yes	No
Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes
No	No	No

No	Unsure	Yes
Yes	Yes	No
Yes	Unsure	Yes
No	Yes	No
No	Unsure	No
Yes	No	Yes
No	No	No

Perception of a person based on online influence

Do you feel anxious about how your classmates might perceive you online?

16 responses



2 out of 3 that selected the highest anxiety level of 5 were the only respondents who submitted 'Decreased motivation to succeed in school', directly opposing 3 out of 4 that selected increased motivation having very little to no anxiety rated 1-2. All students that selected that they compared appearance often selected a range on the mid to higher side of 3-5.

Increased/decreased appeared to relate to the length of time social media is used. Too much consumption decreases motivation as it becomes more difficult to find enjoyment in anything else.

Previous Studies With Similar Findings

- [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) is an advisory released in 2023 including growing evidence that social media is causing harm to young people's mental health.

Up to 95% of youth ages 13-17 report using a social media platform, with more than a third saying they use social media "almost constantly."

A longitudinal cohort study of U.S. adolescents aged 12-15 found that adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety.]

- [The Impact of Social Media on Teen Social Anxiety: What Families Should Know](#) - a blog on an adolescent counseling services website.

How Social Media Contributes to Social Anxiety:

- Comparison Culture
- Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)
- Cyberbullying
- Pressure to Maintain a Perfect or Idealized Persona

Practical Steps for Families - Supporting Teens in a Digital World

- Encourage Open Conversations
- Show Empathy - Understand social media's pressures, be supportive.
- Set Healthy Boundaries
- Encourage Offline Activities
- Model Positive Social Media Behavior

(The blog includes the references to the actual studies)

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Ages 15-22

10 Female

3 Male

3 Genderqueer

Main form of online communication:

10 Snapchat 3 Messages 2 Whatsapp 1 Instagram

Social media platform used most often to watch videos and read posts

1 Snapchat 9 Tiktok 3 Youtube 3 Instagram

Estimated average of hours spent on social media per day:

8: 1-3 hours 5: 4-5 hours 3: 6+ hours

Time of day social media is most often used: (Open responses)

- 1 - No specific time
- 1 - Morning/Evening
- 1 - Afternoon
- 1 - Between 4pm and 10pm
- 1 - Right after school: 3pm - 4pm and late at night: 11:30pm - 12:30am
- 1- 6-8pm
- 1 - After 8pm
- 1 - Anytime
- 1 - 1pm
- 1 - Afternoon
- 1 - Morning
- 1 - After school: Around 3:30pm
- 1 - 4pm
- 1 - Night
- 1 - After school/4pm-11pm
- 1 - Afterschool

Most of the time, how does the content you see on social media make you feel about yourself? 1 Very Negative - 5 Very Positive

10 respondents - 3

5 respondents - 4

1 respondent- 5

Have you ever felt anxious or stressed because of what you see on social media?

9 - No 7 - Yes

How much does comparing yourself to others on social media affect your self-esteem? 1 Not at all - 5 Very much

5 respondents - 3 4 respondents - 4 4 respondents - 2 3 respondents - 1

Do you think social media apps provide enough resources to support young mental health?

8 Unsure 6 No 2 Yes

What do you do if social media negatively impacts your mental health? (open responses)

- 5 - Nothing
- 1 - Try to take a break and do school work
- 1 - Find more positive content
- 2 - Delete app/search positive content to change algorithm
- 1 Take some time away for self care
- 1 - Use it less or stop using it
- 5 - Stay/get off it

Do you think social media platforms should do more to promote mental health awareness?

Yes - 8 Not sure - 1 No - 1

Yes with reason - 4

1. This might be unachievable, but if they issued time limits of how long a single user can be on the app it might allow for people to become more self aware of the time they're spending.
2. I think that they should do something about unhealthy gym culture on their platforms that often give misleading advice about weight loss and nutrition.

3. I believe mental health awareness should be one of the biggest and most important parts of social media.
4. All the time, not just during awareness weeks.

No with reason - 2

1. Because there's already so much promotion for it, it can cause more people to be aware of things and do it themselves instead of it helping others.
2. I think social media platforms and content creators promote mental health awareness a lot.

How social media negatively/positively affects education - Multiple choice

- **Decreased ability to concentrate - 10**
- **Shorter attention span - 11**
- **Distraction during lessons - 7**
- **Distraction when doing homework - 8**
- **Lower grades - 4**
- **No noticeable negative affect - 4**
- **It wastes learning time because it's hard to get off certain apps - 9**
- **It makes me feel overwhelmed by seeing others' academic achievements - 3**
- **It increases stress about comparing my progress to others. - 5**

1 Custom Response - "Literally makes me feel awful when doom scrolling. I hate it."

- **It motivates me to do my schoolwork - 2**
- **It helps because I can ask my friends about subjects - 7**
- **It helps me find study strategies/useful educational resources and advice - 13**
- **No noticeable positive impact - 2**
- **I can stay updated on school events and activities - 3**
- **It makes it easier to communicate for group projects - 7**

How often do you use educational content on social media that helps you with school?

Never - 2 Rarely - 5 Sometimes - 8 Often - 1

Do you feel that social media distracts you from completing schoolwork?

Yes - 11 No - 3 Maybe/Unsure - 2

Social media use during school hours (e.g., in class, at lunch) - Open responses

5- Not at all 1- Sometimes 1- Not much 2- Quite a lot 1- 2-3 hours 1- All day

1- I don't use it during school since the school wi-fi blocks it

1- A lot with substitute teachers. Not much at lunch or with actual teachers.

1- Sometimes at lunch and break time, occasionally once or twice in the lesson.

1- Lunch, break and lesson.

1- Not that often if i'm in class.

The most addictive apps, encouraging procrastination: (Multiple choice/Custom answer)

Tiktok - 11 Youtube - 4 Instagram - 4 Snapchat - 3 Facebook - 1 X - 1

1- Anything with short video formats (All of above)

Block blast (game) -1 None - 1

How often are you required to use apps/websites to complete work in school or at home? (1 = Never, 10 = Always)

4 Respondents - 8 3 Respondents - 6 3 Respondents - 4 2 Respondents - 10

2 Respondents - 9 1 Respondent - 7 1 Respondent - Never

Thoughts on this:

I think it is somewhat beneficial to teachers since all the work that students hand in can be stored in their google drive rather than in large files. I think it is unnecessary for the learning of students though and can make them more distracted.

i think there are many useful resources online that can help with homework and learning, however it should be optional, and a technology free option should always be available

Good on some parts and bad on some, good for learning additional information in certain subjects, bad if we are using apps to answer questions and not use our own knowledge

Can be good for accessibility. But the encouragement of using technology all the time gets overwhelming

good for variation but bad for access due to screen time and internet and reliability

I think it's good for dissertations but other than that I wouldn't see a benefit

think it is bad because it encourages distractions and cheating

i think it's good as it aids you in your learning

Good i am literally in an IT course

It barely works

No thoughts

Have messaging apps helped you to make friends in school with similar interests to you, that you never talked to before?

Yes - 6 No - 6 Unsure - 4

Do you think the internet is more helpful or harmful for your education?

Helpful - 4 Harmful - 4 Unsure - 8

Have you ever felt excluded from friend groups at school because of what you saw on social media?

Yes - 7 No - 9

Does social media increase or decrease your motivation to succeed in school?

Increase - 5 Decrease - 3 No impact - 8

Do you feel anxious about how your classmates might perceive you online?

(Not at all = 1, Very = 5)

4 Respondents - 1 3 Respondents - 5 3 Respondents - 4 3 Respondents - 3

3 Respondents - 2

Do you feel pressured to keep up with your classmates' posts or updates online?

Yes - 1 No - 13 Unsure - 2

Have you ever had a conflict (argument) with someone in your school that started or escalated on social media?

Yes - 7 No - 9

How often do you compare your physical appearance to others online?

Rarely - 8 Often - 4 Sometimes - 3 Never - 1

Because of this, do you feel you have to look a certain way? (for example, wearing something because others around you do)

Yes - 4 No - 10 Unsure - 2

What's one positive or negative experience you've had with social media related to school?

One negative experience I have had with social media related to school is when I joined a niche form called Personality Database where someone I was friends with online sent me Discord messages of someone bullying them and my school called me to the guidance office because their tracking system flagged the file and they thought that I sent the Discord messages.

- *(Personal Comment Supporting Research) False accusations and feeling targeted make school a more stressful and isolating environment. This student may be affected by increased anxiety at the lack of moderation by Discord. Along with this AI may be too heavily relied on in our world today, by a school in this situation, and online messages can be taken out of context.*

A negative probably would be not studying for my test because of it. Once I went on Instagram for 2 hours and then forgot to study completely. - *Proof of platforms' addictive nature*

Bullying. - *Affecting self esteem and confidence*

A positive would be how YouTube has helped me with some of my assignments in college.

- *Platforms with longer, informative videos where infinite scrolling isn't immediately introduced upon opening may be less distracting, increasing productivity.*

Learned some helpful ways to revise, and ways of memorising certain things.

Students helping students with research is great.

Learning how to revise.

Other comments:

I think social media has good intent with its purpose but now it's no longer a controlled environment. I think it has made me more self conscious.

It makes me feel worthless when I'm doom scrolling, makes me feel like I don't deserve nice things

It distracts me a lot

it is addictive

Has the survey made you think differently about your social media habits?

Yes - 7 No - 6 Question left blank - 3

Limitations -

- **Lack of generalisability** and small sample size (low statistical power): There is a small number of respondents with little variety of geographical diversity. Although the survey was posted online, the location of participants is not confirmed.
- Unrealistic responses: Clearly rushed answers that don't make sense. As the survey was posted in an online community made for research, participants may have selected random answers and put little thought into it to get more people in a short amount of time to complete their own survey in turn for their response.
- Distractions from personal environment: A controlled area which allows full concentration is not guaranteed. (Method is very basic and flexible)
- Maturation effect - Mental health could change due to hormonal and developmental changes in general, including increased stress with age from external factors like more responsibility in school and discovering personal identity.

How Should Companies Help?

Respondent suggestions for how social media platforms could better support students:

I think they could set limits for students so that for 30 minutes, the students can watch entertaining content but after that 30 minutes, they can only watch educational content.

I guess the content itself could change. Some platforms we don't choose what we consume so it really depends

Should require ID proof that you're the age you say

Promote more educational information

Apps about how to study

A prominent answer was suggesting how addictive social media is. 1 respondent included how this results in feelings of guilt later, as time is easily wasted away by “doom scrolling”, a slang term for the habit of continuously scrolling through negative content online, even if it causes stress and anxiety, as it's hard to stop. The first step to dealing with this is understanding how these apps are intentionally designed to be addictive:

1. Infinite scrolling - There is no end to the listed videos. People who watch them frequently continue to do the hand action of scrolling, sometimes without even realising.
2. Personalised Content - AI is used to make the algorithm of the content more relevant based on searches, likes and every other action to keep users hooked.
3. Constant notifications - Causes subconscious constant checking of phone notifications. Most are misleading, like saying you've won a reward which isn't true. There is an exaggerated and false sense of urgency, such as “Hurry, limited time!”

There are also friend suggestions and chat reminders disguised as friend requests and messages.

4. Manipulative “FOMO” (fear of missing out) reminders including:

- “Your friends are active now!”
- It’s been a while. See what you missed.”

Developers should make options to limit scrolling and allow users to control a more mindful feed, instead of AI recommendations. The misleading notifications should be stopped entirely.

Ways to currently support yourself:

Encourage Awareness & Education

Set Time Limits

Use App Settings to Reduce Addictive Features (Like turning off the false notifications)

Conclusion And Final Thoughts:

The main findings of this study were that decreasing recreational social media use by just 1-3 hours per day can reduce mental health problems. Companies should support this by grouping younger age friendly content which is more mindful and positive, along with making their apps less addictive which is clearly intentional. Almost all students that felt excluded from in school friend groups due to seeing online content also experienced conflict/arguments which began or escalated through messaging platforms, of which the most popular is Snapchat.

62.5% use Snapchat the most for sending messages. (Highest)

56.3% use Tiktok the most for entertainment. (Highest)

Snapchat and Tiktoks were intentionally designed with an over stimulating and addictive nature that was found to keep teenagers the most hooked, causing feelings of guilt when they are unable to stop using them. Using regular messaging apps can help avoid distractions greatly as they have no extra entertainment, like short videos and stories.

Another study also found that most teenagers who took part (95%) claimed to use social media “almost constantly”, comparable to the “6+ hours” per day responses in this one.

A blog referencing other studies also explained social media causing anxiety by comparing culture, FOMO, cyberbullying and pressure to maintain a perfect or idealised persona, themes also explored in this study, and how the online standards are mostly unrealistic.

End Of Study