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The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health

The rapid adoption of social media among adolescents has generated significant concern among psychologists and public health researchers. While social media platforms offer genuine social benefits — including peer connection and identity expression — a growing body of evidence suggests that excessive or passive use is associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among young people. This essay argues that the relationship is real but conditional: the psychological impact of social media depends heavily on how it is used, not merely how much.

One of the most consistent findings in the literature concerns social comparison. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory proposes that individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others. Social media provides an unprecedented environment for this process, with platforms like Instagram and TikTok constructed around curated self-presentation. Fardouly et al. (2015) found that upward social comparison on social media — comparing oneself to people perceived as more attractive, successful, or happy — was significantly associated with body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms in female adolescents. The effect was stronger for passive scrolling than for active interaction, a distinction that has important implications for how we think about use patterns.

However, the picture is not uniformly negative. Valkenburg and Peter (2009) found that social media use was positively associated with well-being when it facilitated meaningful

communication with existing friends. For adolescents who are geographically isolated or belong to marginalised groups, online communities can provide social support unavailable in their immediate environment. This suggests that the key variable is not screen time per se, but the quality and nature of social interaction. Passive consumption of idealized content differs psychologically from active participation in a supportive community.

Critics of the harm narrative point to methodological limitations in much of the existing research. Most studies are correlational rather than experimental, making causal claims difficult to sustain. Adolescents who are already experiencing depression or anxiety may be more likely to use social media in maladaptive ways — scrolling passively, seeking reassurance, or avoiding offline interaction — rather than their social media use causing the distress. Longitudinal studies have produced mixed results, with some (Coyne et al., 2020) finding no significant association between social media use and mental health outcomes over time.

In conclusion, the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health is genuine but complex. The evidence supports a conditional harm model: passive, comparison-driven use is associated with negative psychological outcomes, while active, socially engaged use can support well-being. Future research would benefit from experimental designs and more granular measurement of use patterns rather than aggregate screen time. From a practical standpoint, the focus of intervention should be on how adolescents use social media — not simply whether they use it at all.