
Social Media Is Detrimental To Our Society

My whole generation commonly referred to as 'Gen Z' but also notably as the 'generation', is the first generation to have lived our lives and grown up alongside the rise of social media. In just around a decade, social media and sites like Facebook (launched in 2004), have gone from being a cultural phenomenon to part of almost everyone's everyday life. With this drastic change in our society's lifestyles, there has no doubt been a major evolution in how we communicate with each other, and with the current number of people using social media being estimated at around 3 billion, it seems on the surface like everyone is happy with this change. However, now more than ever, a question that is lingering on many people's minds and can be seen through countless news articles and media such as the popular TV show 'Black Mirror', is whether social media is having a detrimental effect on society. Well, is it?

Firstly, I feel it is important to look at the advantages of social media and why exactly we use it in the first place. A major 'selling point' of all social media platforms has been to connect us to people across the globe from the comfort of our phones and computer screens. Keeping in touch with family and friends who live far away has been made simple. You can also find new friends via public groups for people with similar interests and connect with friends of friends that you don't already know. A study conducted at the Pew Research Centre, in 2014 found that 83% of teen social media users say social media makes them feel more connected to information about their friends' lives. Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, cites the reason for creating it as 'You could find music; you could find news; you could find information, but you couldn't find and connect with the people that you cared about, which as people is actually the most important thing.'

You can make a strong argument for social media strengthening our awareness of the world. Most social media platforms have the ability to streamline our news for us according to what sources we like, and dislike and articles can easily be shared with us through our online friends. According to the BBC in 2016: - "28% (of people aged 18-24) cited social media as their main news source, compared with 24% for TV". Social media is also very often used to promote noble causes and charities as a word can spread much more quickly there than it would just by word of mouth or from getting exposure on TV.

Social media has become a significant source of our entertainment in the digital age. One study carried out in 2016 stated that 88% of people observed social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook as tools for this purpose. At the push of a button, we can see what our friends are up to, interact with them and share photos and videos with them. The stream of content available to users is practically infinite. It can also be argued that social media's appeal is unique compared to other entertainment sources such as television, as we are given much more control over what we want to see on our screens. Instead of waiting for a TV channel to show content you want to watch, through social media we can find and view it instantly and can also let these social platforms' powerful artificial intelligence know what we do and don't like to see when they recommend content to us.

However social media has also been seen to have clear negative effects on society, too. One of the more obvious negative effects that can be observed about social media is how integrating it

into our lifestyles can affect our physical health. With the worrying rise of childhood obesity in the UK, (according to The Times '4.07 percent of boys and girls aged 10 to 11 were classed as being severely obese' in 2017) many recent studies have shown that there is a correlation between the amount of time spent by children on social media and their BMI. Another issue that social media usage can feed into is sleep deprivation as it has now become far more common for people to use their phones before bed. Studies have shown that exposure to blue light from smartphones and computer screens can heavily interfere with our bodies' production of the hormone melatonin which we produce to help us get to sleep.

A huge concern currently about social media is how it can affect people's mental health too. Whilst social media is very often used for entertainment purposes, it could actually also be the cause of a lot of people's stress too as one survey conducted in 2015 by researchers at the Pew Research Centre in Washington DC suggests. One of the conclusions of the survey (of 1800 people) was that women reported being more stressed than men and that Twitter was found to be a "significant contributor" to this because it increased their awareness of other people's stress. Another study conducted in 2016 at the University of Pittsburgh, USA, surveying 1787 young adults aged 19-32, found that the people who used the most social media platforms were roughly three times more likely to have high levels of depression and anxiety symptoms than those who used the least social media platforms. Whilst these studies may not have a large enough number of survey participants to be fully conclusive in their results, it is clear that there is a definite link between the use of social media and mental health issues.

The main point of social media is to give people the ability to have better connections with family and friends and even make new ones. However, there is an argument to be made that the widespread use of social media has actually made many people feel more socially isolated than connected. One study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine in 2017, surveying 7000 19-32-year olds found that those who spend the most time on social media had twice the odds of reporting feelings of social isolation. They felt that viewing other people's posts online could cause users to feel negative about themselves. The study states that: - "Exposure to such highly idealized representations of peers' lives may elicit feelings of envy and the distorted belief that others lead happier and more successful lives, which may increase perceived social isolation."

There are some very obvious arguments as to why we can observe that social media has been a benefit to modern society, such as its capability to allow us to connect with people across the world and give us a greater awareness of the environment in which we live. At the same time, although the studies of the negatives that social media may bring about are extremely new and hard to obtain conclusive results from, many of them conclude very similar results and it could be argued that social media is a bad thing for the wider communication of our society in the way that we currently use it.

This, in my opinion, makes it quite hard to argue for the use of social media, or at least not the excessive use of it. This is because the early evidence that we have currently, about the downsides of this relatively new technological innovation, signals that this could become less of a benefit to future generations and more of a hazard.