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Study Says Instagram Is Ranked The Worst Social App For Causing Young People To Feel Depressed

Amit Chowdhry Contributor ⓘ
Consumer Tech
Tech enthusiast, born in Ann Arbor and educated at Michigan State

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Instagram logo on an iPhone (Photo Credit: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg)

According to a study conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) and the Young Health Movement (YHM), Instagram is ranked the worst out of all the major social media platforms in terms of detriments to the mental health of young adults. Instagram is a rapidly growing photo social network owned by Facebook that is used by over 700 million people. Around 91% of 16-24-year-olds use the Internet for social media in comparison to 51% of 55-64-year-olds and 23% of 65-year-olds and above. So determining the effects of social media usage on teenagers is important since early adulthood is a potentially vulnerable time for emotional development.

The researchers that published the study -- which is titled #StatusOfMind -- determined the results based on answers to questions about social media platforms by 1,500 young people (ages 14-24) across the UK. The study determined that social media has been described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol. That is why social media use is often linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression and poor sleep.

As part of the study, the young adults were asked to rank how each of the major social media platforms impacted 14 mental health and wellbeing issues. YouTube was ranked the best followed by Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. And the study revealed some of those young adults faced negative mental health issues like depression, loneliness, body image concerns and anxiety while using social apps. These are the 14 mental health issues that the young adults were asked about in the survey:

1. Awareness and understanding of other people's health experiences
2. Access to expert health information you know you can trust
3. Emotional support (empathy and compassion from family and friends)
4. Anxiety (feelings of worry, nervousness or unease)

5. Depression (feeling extremely low and unhappy)
6. Loneliness (feelings of being all on your own)
7. Sleep (quality and amount of sleep)
8. Self-expression (the expression of your feelings, thoughts or ideas)
9. Self-identity (ability to define who you are)
10. Body image (how you feel about how you look)
11. Real world relationships (maintaining relationships with other people)
12. Community building (feeling part of a community of like-minded people)
13. Bullying (threatening or abusive behavior towards you)
14. FoMO (Fear Of Missing Out – feeling you need to stay connected because you are worried things could be happening without you)

"It is interesting to see Instagram and Snapchat ranking as the worst for mental health and well-being - both platforms are very image-focused and it appears they may be driving feelings of inadequacy and anxiety in young people," said RSPH CEO Shirley Cramer via BBC. "As the evidence grows that there may be potential harms from heavy use of social media, and as we upgrade the status of mental health within society, it is important that we have checks and balances in place to make social media less of a 'wild West' when it comes to young people's mental health and well-being."

In an interview with the American Marketing Association, Rutgers University associate professor of psychology Mauricio Delgado pointed out that you don't even have to tap on "like" to feel a dopamine-like effect while using social media. "Often, if you have the earliest predictor of a reward—a sign of a social media alert, like your phone buzzing—you get a rush of dopamine from that condition stimulus. That might trigger you to go check out the outcome, to see what it is. That type of reinforcement is something that you now seek out."

The RSPH and YHM made a few recommendations to prevent negative emotions while using social media. The first suggestion is to show a popup when users spend too much time on social media. The second suggestion is for social media companies to monitor the posts of children that might be suffering from mental health problems. And the third suggestion is for social media companies to flag images that may have been digitally manipulated.

Fortunately, the RSPH and YHM study pointed out that there are many positive aspects to social media. For example, social media provides access to people that are experiencing health issues to others that are also experiencing health issues, which may improve young people's health literacy. And the study says that nearly 7 in 10 teens receive support on social media during tough times, thus helping prevent mental health issues. As teens develop, self-expression and self-identity become important aspects of life and social media facilitates that. Plus social media is essential when it comes to making, maintaining and building upon relationships.

"Everyday people from all over the world use Instagram to share their own mental health journey and get support from the community. For those struggling with mental health issues, we want them to be able to access support on Instagram when and where they need it," added Instagram's head of policy Michelle Napchan in an interview with BBC. "That's why we work in partnership with experts to give people the tools and information they need while using the app, including how to report content, get support for a friend they are worried about or directly contact an expert to ask for advice on an issue they may be struggling with."

Instagram has a strict policy when it comes to online bullying. In Instagram's Help section, there is a way to report accounts or comments that are bullying or harassing another person. And there is a way to report accounts that are impersonating another person. And Instagram recommends blocking a person that might be bullying you or others.

What are your thoughts about this study? Do you agree that social apps are responsible for causing stress and anxiety for teenagers? Please leave a comment with your thoughts!
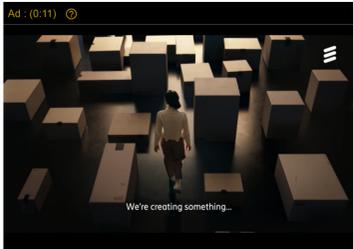
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