

## The Digital Transformation: The Impact of Social Media on Young People's Mental Health

The world has gone online. Social media has changed the way we live and engage.

According to the 2022 Benchmark Report, an estimated 330 million people could potentially suffer from Internet addiction in 2022. This figure accounts for 4.88 billion Internet users, 4.44 billion mobile internet users, 4.55 billion active social media users, and 2.8 billion Facebook users. The report suggests the fact that certain teenagers allocate as much as nine hours daily to their social media engagement.<sup>4</sup>

The increasing influence and dependence on digital tools is a prominent feature of modern societies, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. This impact is most noticeable among young people, commonly referred to as digital natives.

In today's world, young people often hesitate to make phone calls due to concerns about "revealing too much information." Instead, they prefer texting over speaking. Similarly, even adults opt for keyboards over engaging in verbal conversations, citing efficiency as the primary reason.<sup>5</sup>

Adolescents and young people, due to their limited self-regulation abilities and susceptibility to peer pressure, may struggle to avoid the potential negative consequences of excessive social media use, placing them at a higher risk of developing mental disorders.

Despite the Internet's profound and irreversible transformation of our way of life, its impact on our psychological well-being remains understudied. In the past year, CONNECT International conducted a literature review titled "Social Media and the Mental Health of Young People." The aim of this review was to establish a theoretical framework for understanding the connections between social media use and the mental health of young people. The review encompassed a variety of theoretical models drawn from disciplines including psychiatry, psychology, communication, and sociology. Below, we outline some of the key findings from this study.

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<sup>4</sup> Geyser, W. (2022). The State of Influencer Marketing 2022: Benchmark Report. Influencer Marketing Hub. <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report>

<sup>5</sup> Turkle, S. (2011), Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other. New York: Basic Books.

<b>Experimentation</b>	Individual experimentation is common in online life, but it can be challenging to resist new group demands. Friends often expect their peers to remain constantly available. If a smartphone is always within reach, the allure of exploration diminishes.
<b>FOMO</b>	Increased sharing on social media has led to heightened concerns about missing out on information. This has given rise to FOMO, or the Fear of Missing Out. It's worth noting that individuals with multiple addictions are more susceptible to developing Internet addiction.
<b>Identity exploration</b>	"What should I do with my life? What kind of relationships am I looking for?" These are important questions we ask ourselves, and the internet can offer some answers. Adolescents seek new groups and companions where they can find a sense of belonging. On the internet, they have access to an almost limitless array of individuals and groups with diverse personalities, backgrounds, values, and interests.
<b>Venting frustrations</b>	The teenage years can be a tumultuous and frustrating period in one's life. Adolescents need an outlet for various frustrations, including those of a sexual and aggressive nature. The anonymous and user-friendly nature of cyberspace often provides an ideal platform for venting.
<b>Expressing hidden wishes, needs, and fears</b>	Teens experiment with different imaginative identities that reflect their concealed desires, needs, and fears in online fantasy worlds and games. Online personas can sometimes serve as an additional outlet for the frustrations and conflicts of their real lives, although they may not necessarily lead to personal insight or change. One significant difference between online and offline conversations is that online interactions tend to be less affected by the awkwardness of face-to-face, in-the-moment peer interactions, encouraging more openness.
<b>Solipsistic introjection</b>	Online friends become characters in one's internal world, shaped partly by how the individual presents themselves through text communication and also influenced by one's internal representation system, which is based on personal expectations, wishes, and needs.

<b>Dissociative imagination</b>	People may consciously or unconsciously feel that the imaginary characters they've "created" exist in a different space, that their online persona and online interactions exist in a make-believe dimension, separate from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. They may split or dissociate online fiction from offline reality.
<b>Other Mental health issues</b>	According to the academic literature, even young people who do not officially have diagnosed mental health problems may experience internet addiction and associated mental health issues. Common factors, such as low self-esteem, low motivation, fear of rejection, and the need for validation from others, are prevalent in individuals with depression. These factors can lead to frequent internet use, and the interactive aspects of the internet can contribute to internet addiction in individuals with these characteristics. There is ongoing debate in the literature about whether internet addiction or depression is the primary issue in such cases.

The table provided above offers a summary of some of the essential elements presented in the Study. For more detailed information, we encourage you to read the full Study. While there is existing data on the topic, it is crucial to underscore the necessity for further research in this field, particularly in light of the emergence of new technologies. Although this Study is primarily centred around social media, it's important to recognise that other facets of the online realm also exert an influence on mental health.

## The Way Forward

As an organisation dedicated to bringing humanity to digital life, CONNECT International recognises the importance of mental well-being in online spaces, particularly concerning children and adolescents. We welcome this year's Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on a comprehensive approach to mental health<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (2023). A comprehensive approach to mental health. European Commission. [https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/comprehensive-approach-mental-health\\_en](https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/comprehensive-approach-mental-health_en)

In our ongoing efforts to champion mental health, we strongly urge authorities at all levels, from local to national, regional, and European, to consider the following recommendations regarding mental health in digital environments and with digital tools:

- **Support additional research in the field:** Promote further research on the impact of digital tools on the mental health of children and adolescents, with a particular focus on emerging technologies. This research should encompass all digital factors that could affect mental health.
- **Continuously build the capacity of health providers:** Furnish mental health professionals with essential insights into the effects of emerging technologies on mental health, including details on the most widely used tools among young people.
- **Enhance the online presence of mental health providers:** Assist mental health providers in expanding their online presence. This will enable them to reach out to young people, reducing the stigma associated with seeking help, both online and offline.
- **Consider mental health implications in the field of digital regulations:** Evaluate the mental health implications of current and forthcoming Digital Agenda regulations, with a primary focus on Artificial Intelligence and virtual worlds. Explore the potential necessity for additional regulations aimed at safeguarding the mental health of citizens, especially children and adolescents, in the digital age.
- **Offer information and support to families and communities:** Raise awareness about mental well-being on social media and in general in the context of digitalization. Deliver practical and meaningful guidelines for families to help ensure the safety of children and young people and promote their mental well-being in the online environment.
- **Support European values-driven initiatives:** Extend support to those who advocate for core European values in online spaces. Encourage active citizen engagement in meaningful discussions and actions that directly contribute to the construction of an inclusive and supportive Europe while upholding the European way of life.

CONNECT International remains committed to bringing humanity to digital life and stands ready to engage in initiatives aimed at promoting the mental health of all citizens, with a specific focus on children and youth within the online sphere.