

**Children and Youth and the Negative Effects of Social Media**

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Social media can be used as a tool for children and youth to build connections and gain a sense of belonging, providing a space where they can express themselves freely, tap into their creative selves, and explore web design, coding, and photography. It provides an endless amount of information that can be used for educational purposes. At the same time, all of these are positive uses of online platforms; there are numerous adverse effects that social media contributes to the lives of children and youth.

Murphy Kelly (2022) reports that on January 4, 2015, while his family was taking down their Christmas tree and decorations, CJ retreated into his room. He sent a text message to his best friend – “God’s speed” – and posted an update on his Facebook page: “Who turned out the light?” CJ held a 22-calibre rifle in one hand, his smartphone in the other and fatally shot himself. He was 17. Police found a suicide note written on the envelope of a college acceptance letter. His parents said he never showed outward signs of depression or suicidal ideation. However, throughout high school, he developed what his parents felt was an addiction to social media. By his senior year, “he could not stop looking at his phone,” she said. He often stayed up until 3 a.m. on Instagram messaging with others, sometimes swapping nude photos, his mother said. He became sleep-deprived and obsessed with his body image. Reviewing research on the adverse effects of social media on children and youth can provide insight into how the amount of time children and youth spend on social media platforms impacts their mental health and social-emotional well-being, and offer awareness and resources for parents, caregivers, educators, and counsellors.

### Overview of the Topic

During adolescent development, brain regions associated with the desire for attention, feedback, and reinforcement from peers become more sensitive. Meanwhile, the brain regions responsible for self-control have not yet fully matured. The need to prioritize peers is a regular part of adolescent development, and youth are turning to social media for some of that longed-for peer contact

(Weir, 2023). The American Psychological Association (2024) reports that children and youth spend an average of 4.8 hours online each day, with 87% of their time dedicated to social media platforms, including Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Also, 60% of high social media frequency users reported having low parental monitoring, 41% of them reported having poor or feeble mental health, and 22% of the highest frequency users expressed thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Children and youth are seeing harmful and illegal content such as pornography, suicide, self-harm, eating disorder content, abusive content, anonymous trolling and hate content (de Souza). 2025) Parents and caregivers are busy with work and their day-to-day responsibilities, which has led to a lack in online supervision, leaving children and youth vulnerable to adverse impacts from interactions on social media platforms. Moreover, with children and youth spending a significant amount of their time online, they are becoming increasingly isolated from their families and peers. When they view or receive online content that makes them feel bad, sad, or unsafe, they may not always feel comfortable asking for help or sharing it with a trusted friend or adult. (Gregory et al., 2023).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this capstone is to determine the negative psychological, emotional, and developmental effects of social media use on children and youth. Research was directed to learn how social media use contributes to increased rates of anxiety and depression, and low self-esteem. What role does self-comparison on social media play in shaping their self-image and emotional well-being? Research was conducted to investigate the impact of social media use on peer relationships, exposure to cyberbullying, and social isolation among children and youth, as well as its effects on academic outcomes. Additionally, the study examined whether social media use influences sleep patterns and daily functioning.

With social media use consistently on the rise among children and adolescents, and upgraded technologies targeted towards children and youth, as well as new platforms to join, meet new people,

create content, and communicate it, it is important to get a broad understanding of the dangers and negative impact that social media can have on the development and lives of young people. Parents, caregivers, educators, youth workers, and counsellors must be fully aware of how social media affects children and youth and be aware of the dangers and signs that indicate young people may be consuming harmful content or being cyberbullied or harassed online.

### **Contribution to the Field**

This capstone aims to help counsellors understand, assess, and respond more effectively to the digital lives of children and youth. It bridges research and practice by supporting counsellors in recognizing the psychological, behavioural, and emotional symptoms associated with social media overuse and exposure. During an initial session with a child or adolescent client, counsellors can ask targeted questions about social media use to gain a clearer understanding of how much time they spend online, their online relationships, and their digital identity.

This capstone aims to equip counsellors with age-sensitive insights, learning how social media affects brain development, identity formation, and emotional regulation in children and youth, allowing counsellors to tailor counselling interventions for each client. The research from this capstone can assist counsellors in developing digital literacy programs, providing psychoeducation, and offering coping strategies for caregivers, as well as children and youth. When working with children and youth, counsellors can help establish healthy boundaries, challenge negative beliefs stemming from social media, and promote offline resilience. This capstone can help counsellors bring awareness to the harms and dangers of social media by assessing the risk of digital harms, highlighting how gender, race, sexuality, and ability intersect with harmful online experiences, and advocating for safe digital environments in schools and communities.

**Positionality Statement**

I am a 37-year-old Portuguese Canadian, heterosexual wife and mother. I started my career as a youth worker, working with street-entrenched and homeless youth in Vancouver's downtown East Side 17 years ago. I have been a youth worker in the Coquitlam school district for the last 15 years. I have had a firsthand look at the increase in social media use among children and youth, and how it has become not just a platform for connection, but also a consuming and overbearing aspect of a child's and youth's life. I have witnessed how social media enables children and youth to remain constantly connected, and how negative interactions and experiences can significantly impact their progress throughout the day.

As a new mother to a beautiful 8-month-old baby girl, I worry about how social media platforms' rapid growth and appeal to children and youth will be by the time my child is old enough to use and join social platforms. It was essential for me to understand the various dangers and risks associated with social media platforms and children and youth, as well as to be aware of the signs that a child or adolescent may be struggling privately due to the content they are sending, viewing, and sharing on their social media.

As a youth worker and future counsellor, understanding the adverse effects that social media has on children and youth's brain development, social-emotional relationships, mental health, sleep quality, and overall life satisfaction will enable me to better understand how to work with children and youth and address the negative experiences they are having online.

Having the insights from this research will allow me to provide children and youth with the potential risks of their online activity. Moreover, it will provide psychoeducation for them to be able to recognize when someone may be taking advantage of them, as well as give them resources to reach out to for support, so that they are not isolating and trying to deal with negative experiences on their own.

**Outline of the Project Chapters**

This capstone paper examines the adverse effects that social media can have on the lives of children and youth. The second chapter of my capstone will highlight research conducted within the last 5-10 years that emphasizes the rise of social media use among children and youth, as well as its adverse impacts on their mental health and emotional well-being. The research serves as a valuable resource to inform my work and provide support, keeping me up to date on the latest themes, challenges, and learning on social media as a future counsellor working with children, youth, parents, and families. In Chapter 3, this capstone can provide parents with tools and resources to teach their children and youth about the risks of social media, encourage safe online usage, and help them ask for assistance when needed, thereby building awareness of internet safety.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Adolescents***

Adolescents are individuals undergoing the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood, typically ranging in age from 10 to 19. This period is marked by significant biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes, including puberty, identity formation, increased independence, and the development of abstract thinking and complex social relationships (American Psychological Association, 2023; Berk & Meyers, 2023).

#### ***Anxiety***

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes such as increased heart rate, restlessness, or sweating. It often involves anticipation of a future threat and can range from normal, situational responses to stress to excessive, persistent worry that interferes with daily functioning (American Psychological Association, 2023).

#### ***Children***

Children are individuals in the developmental stage between infancy and adolescence, typically ranging from ages 2 to 12, and characterized by rapid growth in emotional, cognitive, social, and physical



development. During this period, children begin to form identity, regulate emotions, build peer relationships, and develop foundational learning skills (American Psychological Association, 2023; Berk & Meyers, 2023).

According to Erikson (1950), childhood is a critical developmental period during which individuals progress through psychosocial stages such as autonomy vs. shame and doubt (toddlerhood), initiative vs. guilt (early childhood), and industry vs. inferiority (middle childhood), forming the foundation for identity and emotional well-being. Erikson viewed childhood as a crucial period for developing self-confidence, initiative, and resilience through supportive social interactions.

### ***Cyberbullying***

Refers to the use of digital means to direct aggressive and hostile behaviour towards an individual with the intention of upsetting or harming them. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including threats, harassment, social exclusion, the sharing of personal information online without consent, or other behaviours intended to cause fear, harm, embarrassment, or exclusion (Kingbury & Arim, 2023).

### ***Depression***

Depression is a common and serious mood disorder characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, and a range of physical and cognitive symptoms that impair daily functioning. It affects how a person thinks, feels, and behaves and can interfere with work, school, and relationships (American Psychological Association, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health, 2022).

### ***Instagram***

As per the Instagram website, INSTAGRAM is a free photo and video sharing app available on iPhone and Android. As per Instagram, "People can upload photos or videos to our service and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends." They can also view, comment on, and like

posts shared by their friends on Instagram. Anyone 13 and older can create an account by registering an email address and selecting a username.

### ***Mental Health***

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community. It encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which affects how people think, feel, and behave, as well as how they manage stress, interact with others, and make decisions (World Health Organization, 2022; American Psychological Association, 2023).

### ***Social Media***

Social media refers to a range of digital platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and each other in real-time. These platforms support various forms of communication, including text, images, video, and live interaction, and are widely used for social networking, entertainment, information sharing, and expressing identity (Kietzmann et al., 2011; American Psychological Association, 2023).

### ***Snapchat***

According to Snapchat's website, SNAPCHAT is a multimedia messaging app and social media service where users send and receive photos and videos, called "snaps," that are designed to disappear after a short period.

### ***Social-Emotional***

Refers to the skills, competencies, and processes involved in understanding and managing one's own emotions, forming positive relationships, showing empathy, and effectively navigating social environments. It encompasses emotional awareness, self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (American Psychological Association, 2023).

***TikTok***

According to TikTok's website, TIKTOK is a social media platform where users create, share, and discover short-form videos. It is known for its personalized feeds, engaging content, and ability to spread trends rapidly. Users can express themselves through various activities, such as dancing, singing, comedy, or lip-syncing, often set to music or sound effects.



## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Currently, using social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat are among the most common activities of children and adolescents. Among young people aged 8 to 18 years old, social media use has increased from 10% in 2005 to 76% in 2015. (You et al., 2021). Social media presents children and youth with a space that allows for opportunities for self-expression and building connections. It enables people to share their art, music, ideas, and thoughts with a broader network than they would be able to reach within their local communities, and it has provided an opportunity to engage in education and collaborate with peers. However, social media is also a space where children and youth can isolate themselves and engage in inappropriate behaviours for hours on end, which can cause a significant disruption to their everyday lives, as well as have lasting adverse effects. Recent studies have shown that spending long hours on social media can lead to numerous negative factors in one's life. The World Health Organization recommends that children under 13 years should not use social media platforms at all and that youth aged 13-18 should limit their social media use to under 2 hours per day. (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Social media use among children and youth increased significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic, with some spending up to 5 hours a day on these platforms. (Kim et al., 2023).

Children and youth are noted to be in a critical and impressionable developmental stage because their brains, bodies, and social-emotional systems are rapidly developing and extremely sensitive to environmental influences. Adolescence is a period of development during which the child transitions from childhood to adulthood. This phase is marked by establishing a sense of identity, core values, and one's relationship to the outside world, while also placing increased value on peer relationships. It is a period distinguished by risk-taking, impulsivity, self-exploration, and increased sexual curiosity. (Korenis & Billick, 2013). During childhood and adolescence, the brain undergoes significant growth and reorganization, especially in areas related to emotion regulation, decision-making, impulse control,

and social understanding. The part of the brain responsible for judgment and impulse control is called the prefrontal cortex and is not fully developed until a person reaches their mid-20s. (Lewis, 1997) This means that children and youth are more impulsive and reactive, making it difficult for them to consider the long-term consequences of their actions. (Peprah et al., 2024) Since children's and youths' brains are still developing, the neuroplasticity allows them to grow, adapt, and change in response to learning new things; however, this opens them up to being more vulnerable to negative influences such as trauma, toxic stress, or exposure to harmful media, and repeated exposure to these messages can shape long-term behaviours and beliefs. (Peprah et al., 2024) During childhood and adolescence, individuals begin to explore their identity, beliefs, and relationships while also developing habits related to coping mechanisms, conflict resolution, self-esteem, and resilience (Peprah et al., 2024).

With the rise of social media use among children and adolescents, there has also been a noticeable increase in negative social-emotional responses, such as the impact on interpersonal relationships, sleep quality, nutrition, social comparison, jealousy, cyberbullying, risky sexual behaviour, isolation, emotional outbursts, and violence, as well as mental health issues, such as body dysphoria, eating disorders, risky sexual behaviour, addiction, social media dependency, social anxiety, depression, non-suicidal ideation, self-harm, and suicide. (Jungselius, 2024).

### **Social-Emotional**

Social media has revolutionized the way people interact with one another. Before the advent of social media, children and youth would build connections through face-to-face interactions, such as playing outside, playing board games, and spending time together. Now that so much of their time is spent on tablets, computers, and cell phones, face-to-face interactions have become minimal. As a result, children's and youth's social skills, such as nonverbal cues, empathy, and conflict resolution, are harder to develop since these skills are not easily transferred from online interactions. By negating face-

to-face interactions, children and youth are not given opportunities to engage in helping behaviours, which are essential for teaching empathy and prosocial behaviour. (Hayes et al., 2022).

Adolescence can be a confusing time for many as they navigate their identity and self-worth. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat create a space for idealistic yet false narratives of what one's life is like. Social comparison can lead to feelings of exclusion, jealousy, and peer-related stress. With their prefrontal cortex still developing, they cannot distinguish between what is reality and what has been shaped to create a certain appearance. Feelings of inadequacy can lead to later feelings of anxiety and cause them to isolate themselves from their peers. On the other hand, some adolescents may choose to present themselves as they perceive their online friends as a form of peer pressure to "fit in," which can leave them feeling confused, dissatisfied, and lonely because they are not accurately portraying who they truly are. (Wunderlich & Zillich, 2025).

The online disinhibition effect refers to the phenomenon where the anonymity and detachment of online environments can encourage behaviours that children and adolescents might avoid in face-to-face interactions. (Barlett & Scott, 2023). Being able to hide your identity or having the idea that you are "protected" by the screen can offer some children and youth a false sense of confidence, allowing them to speak freely with the mentality that what they say and do has no consequences due to the lack of in-person interaction. This phenomenon can lead to increased instances of verbal harassment, exclusion, and cyberbullying. These online behaviours can harm peer relationships and social environments, often leading to a loss of social connectivity and the feeling of social isolation. Similarly, the online disinhibition effect can lead to risky online sexual behaviour. Sexting refers to sending or forwarding nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit photos on a cell phone or online. Females are more likely to have sent naked pictures of themselves, and males are more likely to receive them, with more than 61% of those who have sent naked pictures of themselves having been pressured by someone else to do so at least once. Nearly 1 in 5 teenagers who receive sext messages pass them along to someone else. (Siegle, 2010).

Children and youth use online platforms to play games, socialize with their peers, express their views, share their creativity, gather information, discover the latest popular trends, shop, seek validation, and expand their social circle. Unfortunately, a lot of the time children and youth are using these social media platforms alone, without any supervision overseeing what kind of content they are viewing, which ads come up to grab their attention and pique their interests, who they are talking to, what messages are being sent to them, what messages they are sending to others, and what they are sharing about themselves through chats, videos, and selfies. Social media use is a sedentary and individual behaviour, and such habits can persist throughout one's life from childhood to adulthood, causing issues with isolation, anxiety, depression, and morbidity. (Sampasa-Kanyinga, et al. 2019). Heavy social media use is also associated with a wide range of health-compromising behaviours, including substance abuse, unhealthy eating behaviours, short sleep duration, negative body image, and mental health problems, as well as isolation by reducing the amount of time spent with family and peers. (Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023).

Given that the child and adolescent brain is not fully developed and is impressionable, the fact that so much of their time is spent alone and unsupervised leaves much space for negative and traumatic occurrences to take place during this time. Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis theory, stated that "any adverse experiences during a person's formative years may cause them to exhibit undesirable and socially unacceptable behaviour later in life." (Mohammadi, 2024). Due to the nature of social media being an activity that is usually done when alone, a child or adolescent may feel embarrassed or scared to confide in their parents or caregivers when inappropriate behaviour is shared or viewed online, further isolating the child or youth and not fully knowing the impact that both the traumatizing content and the fear and inability to seek guidance or ask for help may be having on their developing brain and the lasting effects that it may cause.

### **Mental Health Risks**

Social media use among children and adolescents has been strongly linked to a variety of mental health concerns. Many quantitative studies suggest that social media use is associated with adolescents' mental health difficulties, including increased depression, anxiety, self-harm behaviours, lower socio-emotional well-being, low self-esteem, and negative body image. (Papageorgiou et al. 2023) While these platforms can offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, extensive research indicates that excessive or unregulated social media use can harm emotional well-being. (Gillespie et al., 2024).

### **Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying refers to the use of digital means to direct aggressive and hostile behaviour towards an individual to upset or harm. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including threats, harassment, social exclusion, the sharing of personal information online without consent, or other behaviours intended to cause fear, harm, embarrassment, or exclusion. (Kingbury & Arim, 2023)

Research has shown that there are nine categories for cyberbullying: Happy slapping, which refers to recording someone being attacked or humiliated and then sharing it online to shame the victim. Masquerading refers to hacking into someone's account or creating a fake profile to post harmful content in their name. Flaming, which refers to online fights using aggressive, vulgar language, typically in public forums or group chats; "trickery," which refers to gaining someone's trust to coax them into revealing personal information and then sharing that information online; and harassment, which refers to repeatedly sending offensive, rude, or insulting messages directly to a victim. It can include name-calling, threats, or ongoing abuse via messages or comments. Cyberstalking refers to repeated intense harassment and threats that may consist of monitoring, tracking, or attempting to instill fear into the victim; denigration refers to spreading false or damaging information about someone online to ruin their reputation or relationships; outing refers to sharing someone's private, sensitive, or embarrassing information or images publicly online without their consent; and exclusion refers to intentionally

excluding someone from an online group, game, or social activity, making them feel isolated or rejected. (Mladenović et al., 2021).

Children and youth who experience cyberbullying may feel like they are isolated and constantly being targeted, as there are many platforms where the bullying can take place at the same time, and with such high importance placed on social media and their online presence, constant cyberbullying could lead to using their devices less regularly, or if they were to seek help from an adult, they could have their devices confiscated and not be able to maintain their online persona. Studies have shown that because of this feeling of isolation, cyberbullying increases the probability of more severe self-harming behaviours. (Nikolaou, 2022).

### **Anxiety & Depression**

The most common disorders in children and adolescents are generalized anxiety disorder and depression. Both anxiety and depression have adverse consequences on children's and adolescents' development, including lower educational attainment, school dropout, impaired social relationships, and risk of substance abuse, mental health problems, and suicide. (Keles et al. 2019).

Today's children and youth are tasked with keeping up with the latest trends, challenges, their friends, and ever-changing viral sensations, making it inevitable that they become overwhelmed by the amount of content they absorb every day. Having to keep up with all the latest that social media has to offer can cause children to become anxious and depressed if they feel like they are not able to relate to their peers, if they are experiencing cyberbullying, and if they feel isolated and embarrassed. Using multiple social media platforms simultaneously is known as media multitasking, which refers to the act of accessing and interacting with multiple social media platforms. This new trend has grown significantly among internet users and is becoming the new normal for how people use social media. Media multitasking has been associated with higher depression and social anxiety rates. Moreover, multitasking

negatively impacts productivity, task completion, performance, and attention, which might contribute to feelings of guilt and worthlessness. (Prasad et al. 2023).

### **Emotional Harm**

Emotional intelligence develops during childhood and is shaped by biological and sociocultural factors, such as genes, infant-caregiver interactions, emotional discourses with parents and peers, and reinforcement and modelling processes. Emotional intelligence is defined as a set of mental abilities that enable a person to accurately recognize and effectively regulate both intra- and interpersonal emotional states and to use emotions to plan, motivate, and achieve goals. Emotional intelligence is comprised of four key skills: emotional perception, which refers to the recognition and expression of unique emotional states; emotional integration, which is the use of emotions to facilitate thinking; emotional understanding, which implies the comprehension of the process and consequence of one's own and others' emotions; and emotional management, or the skill of regulating emotions in the self and others to attain specific goals. (Nabi & Wolfers, 2022).

Limiting face-to-face interactions hinders children and youths' ability to read nonverbal cues, interpret body language, detect changes in someone's tone, and pick up on others' emotions, which is essential for teaching empathy. With many online interactions being superficial and the instant gratification of likes, comments, and emojis, it can limit one's ability to relate to their experience emotionally.

Using social media to avoid "hard feelings" by mindless scrolling creates an opportunity for children and youth to not work through what they are feeling and can lead to later emotional outbursts, which could lead to further isolating them from friends and peers, or withdrawal as the emotions become "too much," and they begin to self-harm. Studies have shown that between 5% and 10% of children and adolescents engage in "digital self-harm." Digital self-harm is defined as the anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself. (Meldrum et al., 2022).

Constant exposure to emotional content can lead to desensitization and emotional burnout. With social media serving as a tool for building community and a space to share one's secrets, thoughts, and experiences, children and youth are constantly absorbing messages that can be emotionally overwhelming and lead to a sense of numbness when it comes to their own emotions. (Myruski et al. 2024).

### **Low Self-esteem and Negative body image**

Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are image- and video-based social platforms that place a significant emphasis on how one presents oneself to their online community. For children and youth who use these platforms, there is always a daunting pressure to appear "their best" to ensure they receive likes, comments, and more followers. Many times, children and youth will use filters to alter their appearance to "tweak" features that they may not find attractive or flattering. Appearance-based social media activities and social comparisons refer to the increasingly high use of social media filters that alter facial features and retouch body parts, which may contribute to poor mental health outcomes. (Papageorgiou et al. 2022).

A study done in Canada surveyed 130,000 young girls to find a correlation between time spent online and body dissatisfaction. The study found that the girls between the ages of 11 and 15 who spent more than 20 hours a week showed higher rates of body dissatisfaction, with the authors citing that more time online leads to higher exposure to the sociocultural influences that confirm the importance of the beautiful physical appearance as a central component of a female's identity. (Verrastro et al. 2023).

Body dissatisfaction refers to the negative self-evaluation of one's appearance, which is experienced across one's lifespan but is usually highlighted in adolescence. Social media pushes a narrative for Western societal ideals of beauty and physical attractiveness. For young girls, #thinspo refers to something or someone that motivates them to maintain a very low body weight, is widely

tagged and searched for when posting and scrolling online. For their male peers, muscularity is highlighted to convey what “the ideal attractive male should look like” (Vuong et al., 2021).

With these young brains still developing, they may not have the ability to understand that all “the perfect” bodies and facial features they see online have been edited to appear “perfect” for the viewers. Comparing oneself to an image that has been airbrushed and edited to look a certain way not only creates an unrealistic beauty standard, but it can also create envy, jealousy, self-hatred, and constant self-criticism, which can cause these children and youth to fall into dangerous habits such as disordered eating, drug addiction, steroid use, and overexercising. (Coffey et al., 2025).

### **Risky Sexual Behaviour**

Childhood and adolescence are times when many children and youth start to learn about and become curious about their bodies and sexuality. This time can be very confusing, and without proper guidance, it can leave many children and youth quite vulnerable to outside influences. (Papageorgiou et al., 2023).

Social media platforms are filled with content that shows influencers in images where they are highlighting nudity and oversexualization. Constant viewing of these images can cause young users to view nudity and sexuality as only what they see online, through what is produced by their algorithms. Overly sexualized images of females are highly viewed by young girls on social media, creating an idea that females need to objectify themselves to receive an ideal amount of likes and comments, creating this thought process that their bodies are objects viewed for their appearance. This can lead to self-objectification, which has been associated with depressive symptoms and disordered eating in girls aged 18 and under. (Papageorgiou et al., 2023).

Sexting, the phenomenon commonly defined as the sending, receiving, and forwarding of nude, semi-nude, or sexually explicit images within digital forms of communication (Lee & Darcy, 2021), has become increasingly popular amongst children and youth. Social platforms such as Snapchat give the

illusion that the image that is sent will be deleted after a certain amount of time; however, there are ways for the images to be saved through screenshots and taking pictures of the images with another device, and once a photo is sent over social media, the photo becomes public domain. (Ashley et al., 2010).

There are two types of sexting: Consensual sexting, which is the practice of sending, receiving, or exchanging videos, photos, or messages of sexual content in a consenting manner and with the mutual agreement to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of all parties involved in the sexual content. As well as non-consensual sexting, which is creating, producing, distributing, or exchanging images or videos of a sexual nature without the consent of the person appearing in the sexual content. (Barroso et al. 2023) Sexting, whether consensual or not, can lead to further harm to children and youth, which can significantly impact their mental health in negative ways.

Image-based sexual harassment (IBSH) is a concept that encompasses unwanted sexual behaviours in the online sphere, such as unwanted pressure or requests for sexual images (e.g., requesting nude images) and receiving unwanted sexual images. (Martinez et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of sextortion consists of extorting, threatening, blackmailing, or coercing the victim to disseminate their erotic-sexual content to force them to send more sexual content (Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021). The scientific literature has highlighted that adolescents perceive the sending, forwarding, exchange, and/or dissemination of sexual images as an “amusing” practice. The primary motivations for carrying out IBSH and abuse practices are to obtain sexual images and then share them with their peers and receive social recognition from the peer group. Society highlights boys’ motivations, who indicate peer pressure to increase popularity and/or their “masculinity” value (Ringrose et al., 2022).

Revenge porn consists of the dissemination of sexual images or videos of an ex-partner without their consent to take revenge on and harm them (Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021).

Social media platforms offer a level of anonymity, which poses a considerable risk factor for children and youth who spend hours chatting with strangers they have met online. Cyber grooming is the act of establishing an emotional connection with a child or adolescent with the objective of sexual abuse. (Weingraber et al., 2021). Platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook allow anyone to request to be “friends.” This feature, which can be an excellent tool for creating connections and building genuine friendships, can also lead to predators preying on vulnerable children and youth to send photos, videos, or even set up meetings in person that can be extremely dangerous.

### **Poor Sleep and Physical Health**

Beyond mental and social development, excessive use of social media has been linked to various adverse outcomes in the physical health and sleep quality of children and adolescents. These effects are particularly concerning given the importance of physical activity, rest, and biological rhythms during key stages of growth and development. (Yu et al., 2024).

Chronotype, which refers to an individual's biological trait of circadian timing of psychological and behavioural functions, regulates sleep timing from childhood to late adolescence. (Merikanto et al., 2021). Given that childhood and adolescence are such a crucial time for brain development, sleep deprivation can significantly impact all areas of life, weakening learning and performance and lowering the quality of life and well-being. (Kortesoja et al., 2023).

Sleep is crucial for both physical and mental health, particularly during adolescence, a developmental period. Cross-sectional studies of adolescence indicate that higher levels of social media use are associated with poorer sleep outcomes, including reduced sleep quality, shorter sleep duration, later sleep timing, longer onset latency, and increased daytime sleepiness. (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Children and adolescents report a multitude of sedentary behaviours, some of which are necessary and/or should not be discouraged (e.g., homework, hobbies). However, much of their sedentary time involves non-educational screen media activity (e.g., television watching, computer

gaming, social media engagement). The amount of leisure time spent by children and adolescents online has doubled in the past decade. Children spend up to 50% of their time after school on screens, including cell phones, tablets, computers, gaming consoles, and televisions; over 94% of children aged 11 years use a cell phone, and approximately 85% engage in social media platforms. (Morningstar et al., 2023).

### **Poor Academic Outcomes**

The integration of social media into the daily routines of children and adolescents has raised concerns about its impact on academic achievement and school engagement. Although some argue that social media can be educational or support peer collaboration, the broader body of evidence suggests that excessive or unregulated use may hinder academic performance by reducing attention spans, leading to procrastination, disrupting sleep, and increasing distractions during study time. (Anjum et al., 2024).

Media multitasking has been linked to negative academic performance and other school-related variables. Some studies, for instance, report that heavy media multitaskers are less efficient academic learners and may have lower grit—the ability to maintain perseverance in otherwise aversive tasks, which appears to be important for academic success (Cardoso-Leite et al., 2021). Cain et al. studied 12–to 16-year-olds and reported that heavy media multitasking was associated with lower academic performance on standardized tests (math and English), as well as lower performance on computerized executive function tests, and higher impulsivity, along with a more limited growth mindset. (Cardoso-Leite et al., 2021).

Internet addiction is a growing problem amongst children and youth that affects numerous areas of one's life, including academics. Having to constantly check your social media platforms, play games, and check for updates can be distracting and take precedence over children's and youths' ability to focus and spend time doing schoolwork. The distraction and procrastination caused by internet addiction can

lead to poorer outcomes in schoolwork and test performance. The negative impacts of internet addiction are that it may ruin lives by causing neurological complications, psychological disturbances, and social problems and affect academic achievement, sleep duration, leisure activities, time spent gaming, and money spent on gaming. (El Fiky et al. 2022).

### **The influence of TikTok**

TikTok, one of the most popular social media platforms among youth, has transformed how trends spread and how young people engage with digital content. Known for its short-form videos and algorithm-driven content delivery, TikTok plays a significant role in shaping the behaviours, values, and social norms of children and adolescents. (McCashin & Murphy, 2022). Its immersive design and viral nature amplify both positive and negative trends, making it a key area of concern in recent research on youth development and digital influence. Over recent years, TikTok has exhibited a surge in content regarding mental illness, body positivity, neurodiversity, and gender identity. Notably, many accounts describing the journeys of users with conditions such as eating disorders (ED), Tourette's Syndrome, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, dissociative identity disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and borderline personality disorder received millions of views. A large portion of users are exposed to videos related to mental health, and such content has the potential to spark off social contagion of symptoms of mental distress or even self-diagnosed mental disorders among individuals who are particularly vulnerable to psychopathology. This issue is increasingly observed in youth seeking psychiatric care. (Conte et al., 2025).

### **Viral Challenges and Risky Behaviour**

Challenges and risk-taking behaviour are inherently part of youth culture, serving to explore self-knowledge related to their bodies, emotions, and identity construction (Astorri et al., 2022). Challenges often motivate many TikTok users to create videos of their attempts to replicate specific trending tasks.

TikTok challenges are a way to connect users from all over the world by identifying the challenges with a hashtag. While some challenges are lighthearted and made to be fun, some challenges can be quite dangerous and cause serious injury, and some challenges have even caused death. To name a few of the dangerous challenges, there is the Benadryl challenge, which encouraged users to ingest large amounts of diphenhydramine to get high and record their responses, and the Blackout challenge, which encouraged users to choke themselves until the point of losing consciousness while uploading the results on TikTok. (Bonifazi et al., 2024). The Tide Pod challenge has users ingest laundry detergent contained in the dissolvable plastic, causing severe burns to the mouth, esophagus, and respiratory tract, and the Neknomination challenge consists of filming oneself drinking an excessive amount of alcohol and then nominating a friend to participate in the challenge to beat them. The participant is usually associated with increasingly dangerous behaviours such as driving and swimming while intoxicated by alcohol. (Astorri et al., 2022).

Some of these challenges revolve around ED-related topics. Examples include the “#A4waistchallenge,” where people demonstrate that the size of their waistline is less than the width of an A4 sheet of paper placed vertically, and the “#headphonechallenge,” which involves measuring waists using headphone wires in a socio-cultural context already characterized by an increasingly blurred line between pro-ED content and mainstream espousals of thinness. TikTok challenges facilitate and increase the exposure of a growing number of users to all kinds of ED-related problematic content.

(Pruccoli et al., 2022)

### **Chapter Three- Summary, Limitations, and Theoretical Considerations, and Application**

#### **Summary of Research Findings**

The findings reviewed in this study reveal consistent patterns in how social media negatively impacts children and youth across emotional, psychological, social, and developmental domains. Although social media platforms offer opportunities for creativity, identity expression, and peer connection, excessive or unregulated use is associated with a range of adverse outcomes. The following summarizes the key themes identified in the literature.

Numerous studies have identified a strong association between frequent social media use and increased levels of anxiety and depression among adolescents. According to Yu et al. (2024), excessive engagement with social networking platforms contributes to emotional distress, particularly due to constant exposure to idealized lifestyles, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FOMO). The American Psychological Association (2024) similarly reported that adolescents spending five or more hours per day on social media are significantly more likely to experience poor mental health outcomes.

Social media often facilitates upward social comparison, which negatively influences self-perception. Coffey et al. (2025) examined how adolescents construct an “editable self” by altering their digital appearance and identity to gain peer approval. This constant self-monitoring and need for validation have been linked to reduced self-esteem and increased body dissatisfaction. Similarly, Wunderlich and Zillich (2025) observed that German adolescents regularly curate their online personas to present idealized versions of themselves, heightening the risk of identity instability and emotional vulnerability.

Cyberbullying remains a prominent concern in youth social media use. Ashley et al. (2010) documented the prevalence of behaviours such as sexting, texting-based aggression, and online harassment, which can lead to long-term emotional harm, academic disengagement, and, in extreme

cases, self-harming behaviour or suicidal ideation. The anonymity and persistence of online interactions intensify the psychological impact of bullying.

Research has shown a clear link between social media use—particularly before bedtime—and sleep disturbances. Yu et al. (2024) found that screen exposure at night interferes with melatonin production and delays sleep onset, leading to reduced sleep quality and quantity. This, in turn, negatively affects mood regulation, concentration, and academic performance among youth. The American Psychological Association (2002) emphasizes that emotional development during childhood relies heavily on face-to-face interactions and relational experiences. Overreliance on virtual communication can disrupt the development of emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal problem-solving skills, especially in younger children who are still forming foundational emotional and social competencies.

Youth are increasingly exposed to violent, sexualized, or otherwise age-inappropriate content on social media platforms. Murphy Kelly (2022) reported on lawsuits from families of adolescents who were negatively influenced by unregulated content, with some resulting in tragic outcomes such as suicide. This highlights the need for stronger content moderation and digital literacy education. As adolescents navigate the vital developmental task of identity formation, social media presents both opportunities and risks. Coffey et al. (2025) argue that the pressure to sustain an idealized digital identity leads to a fragmented and externally driven sense of self. This dynamic can hinder authentic identity development and result in long-term emotional distress when online approval becomes central to self-worth.



### **Limitations of the Literature**

While existing research provides valuable insights into the negative effects of social media on children and youth, several limitations and gaps hinder a comprehensive understanding of this complex issue. These limitations highlight the need for more nuanced, longitudinal, and inclusive research to develop effective counselling and intervention strategies.

### **Lack of Longitudinal Studies**

Many current studies utilize cross-sectional designs, which capture data at a single point in time. While useful for identifying correlations between social media use and mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression, these designs do not establish causality or reveal long-term developmental effects. Without longitudinal research, it remains unclear how prolonged social media exposure influences psychological and emotional development across critical life stages.

### **Overgeneralization Across Age Groups**

Many studies group children and youth into broad categories, often treating ages 5 to 19 as a homogenous population. However, the developmental needs and vulnerabilities of early childhood differ substantially from those of adolescence. This lack of age-specific analysis limits the ability to tailor interventions that are developmentally appropriate for different subgroups.

### **Limited Exploration of Protective and Moderating Factors**

The literature primarily emphasizes the risks and harms associated with social media use. At the same time, comparatively few studies explore protective factors such as family support, media literacy, emotional resilience, or school-based interventions. This creates an unbalanced perspective that may overlook opportunities for prevention and early intervention.

### **Cultural and Socioeconomic Bias**

A significant portion of existing research is based in Western, urban, and higher-income settings. As a result, findings may not be generalizable to children and youth from non-Western cultures, rural communities, or marginalized populations. Cultural norms, access to technology, and socioeconomic status can all influence how social media is used and experienced, yet these variables are underrepresented in the current literature.

### **Inconsistent Platform-Specific Research**

Many studies refer broadly to “social media use” without distinguishing between the unique features and impacts of different platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, or YouTube. Each platform varies in terms of user interaction, content algorithms, and risks (e.g., exposure to beauty filters or viral challenges), yet current research often fails to account for these differences.

### **Underrepresentation of Children Under 12**

Much of the literature focuses on adolescents, leaving younger children who are increasingly exposed to digital media understudied. There is a growing need for research on how children under the age of 12 experience and are affected by social media, particularly regarding emotional regulation, social development, and early identity formation.

### **Ethical and Methodological Constraints**

Research involving minors is often limited by ethical considerations, such as the requirement for parental consent and concerns related to privacy and digital data collection. Furthermore, many studies depend on self-reported data from youth participants, which may be affected by social desirability bias or inaccurate recall, thereby reducing the reliability and validity of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

These limitations call attention to the importance of future research that is developmentally sensitive, culturally inclusive, platform-specific, and methodologically precise. A more comprehensive understanding of social media’s impact on children and youth will allow counsellors, educators, and caregivers to develop more effective supports and interventions grounded in empirical evidence.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is best used for anxiety, depression, low self-worth, and negative thought patterns. CBT helps clients identify and reframe distorted thinking, challenge cognitive distortions from online interactions such as comparison or rejection, and develop healthier coping strategies. CBT has proven to be an effective treatment for youth with anxiety and related disorders.

(Levy et al., 2022). CBT sessions can be conducted individually or in a group setting, allowing youth to share their experiences and feel less isolated.

Sessions will focus on goal setting, check-ins, psychoeducation, identifying automatic thoughts, cognitive restructuring, practicing coping skills, homework, wrap-up, and empowering closure. (Murphy et al., 2024).

Narrative therapy can be helpful when dealing with cyberbullying, identity confusion, and externalizing problems. For children and young people, social media can significantly shape their identity. Narrative therapy helps children and youth "re-author" the stories told about them online or by themselves, separating themselves from the problem. Externalizing the problem is a technique used in narrative therapy that enables the child or youth to separate themselves from the problem and assign it its own identity. Narrative therapy helps individuals restructure unproductive thoughts and build a meaningful life narrative and self-identity, where the illness is a component of their experience but does not define their entire identity. (Hawke et al., 2025).

Sessions will be structured to help build rapport between the client and counsellor. Start with a check-in and light conversation, and then begin by naming the problem; here the client will start to externalize the problem, explore the effects of the problem, deconstruct the problem by exploring where the messages came from, such as their peers, aggressors, or "friends online," acknowledge when they were able to resist the negative messages, and then close out the session by highlighting strengths and truths discovered throughout their narrative. (Zaccari et al., 2023).

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) can be helpful for children and youth struggling with emotional dysregulation, relationship conflict, and shame. Social media often intensifies emotional responses. EFT helps identify, explore, and regulate these emotions, particularly those related to peer dynamics. The counsellor can use emotion coaching to explore and validate feelings triggered by social media. EFT is a brief, evidence-based, humanistic-experiential therapy that identifies the experience of emotions as

central to change and integrates principles from Gestalt, client-centred, and experiential psychotherapies.

EFT may offer an alternative therapeutic approach that emphasizes important relationships in the youth's life and concentrates on the youth's lived experience through empathic responding. (Foroughe et al., 2024).

Art or play therapy can be helpful for younger children between the ages of 5 and 12, as well as for kids who are non-verbal. Art or play therapy allows children who may struggle to articulate complex social dynamics to express themselves. Play and art provide a safe medium to express distress, particularly when related to social exclusion or cyberbullying. A study by Wu et al. (2020) states that creative activity has also been used in psychotherapy and counselling not only because it serves as another language but also because of its inherent ability to help people of all ages explore emotions and beliefs, reduce stress, resolve problems and conflicts, and enhance their sense of well-being.

## **Conclusion**

The reviewed studies have demonstrated the negative impact social media has on children and youth, especially regarding the social-emotional effects from a lack of face-to-face interactions, not learning how to help one another and show empathy for each other, and the mental health aspects of cyberbullying, non-consensual sexting, online harassment, isolation, anxiety, depression, disruption of sleep, lack of physical activity and increase in sedentary activities, as well as lack of motivation and decrease in positive academic outcomes.

With social media platforms playing such a vital role in the lives of children and youth, it is important for accurate awareness to be made public and opportunities for families, caregivers, educators, children, and youth to receive thorough psychoeducation resources to build awareness of the dangers and adverse effects that social media platforms contribute to children's and youth's day-to-day lives.

**Application****Proposal for Future Research****Title:****A Longitudinal Study of Social Media's Emotional and Developmental Impacts on Children Ages 8–12****Introduction and Rationale:**

Social media is increasingly shaping the psychological, emotional, and social development of children. While much of the current literature focuses on adolescents, there is a significant gap in understanding how children under the age of 12 are affected by early, frequent, and often unsupervised engagement with digital platforms. As screen use becomes normative in childhood, it is essential to examine its developmental impacts from a younger age, using longitudinal and developmentally appropriate methods.

This research proposal aims to address critical gaps in the literature by focusing on a younger population, distinguishing platform-specific use, and identifying both risk and protective factors that shape children's experiences with social media.

**Research Objectives:**

1. To examine the long-term emotional and social impacts of social media use in children ages 8–12.
2. To identify platform-specific risks (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) and their associations with anxiety, self-esteem, and peer relationships.
3. To explore the role of protective factors such as parental monitoring, emotional regulation, and digital literacy.
4. To contribute to evidence-based recommendations for school counsellors, mental health professionals, and caregivers.

**Research Questions:**

1. What is the relationship between daily social media use and the development of anxiety or low self-esteem in children ages 8–12 over two years?
2. How does content engagement (e.g., viewing vs. posting) impact emotional well-being and social behaviour?
3. What protective factors moderate the negative psychological effects of social media use in children?
4. Are specific platforms associated with higher emotional distress or social comparison than others in younger users?

**Methodology:**

**Design:** Longitudinal mixed methods study over two years.

**Participants:**

- 150 children ages 8–12 from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Recruitment through schools and community organizations.

**Data Collection Methods:**

- Quantitative surveys assessing anxiety, self-esteem, sleep patterns, and social behaviour (administered at baseline, 12 months, and 24 months).
- Digital media diaries (children log their social media use weekly).
- Semi-structured interviews with parents and children.
- The teacher and school counsellor report on behavioural and emotional functioning.

**Analysis:**

- Statistical analysis (regression, correlation) to track changes and relationships over time.
- Thematic coding of interviews to identify emerging patterns and contextual influences.

**Ethical Considerations:**

- Informed parental consent and child assent will be obtained.

- All data will be anonymized and securely stored.
- The study will adhere to ethical guidelines for research with minors, including sensitivity to digital privacy and mental health support referrals if needed.

**Significance and Contribution to Counselling:**

This research has the potential to enhance our understanding of how early social media use influences emotional and social development in children. The findings will inform developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive counselling interventions, support school-based digital wellness initiatives, and guide parental practices. It will also contribute to policy discussions on screen time, content regulation, and online child safety.

**Conclusion**

This capstone explored the growing body of research on the negative psychological, emotional, developmental, and academic effects of social media use among children and youth. As digital platforms become increasingly embedded in the daily lives of young people, concerns around mental health, social-emotional development, online safety, and identity formation are becoming more urgent and complex. The findings from this project confirm that while social media can serve as a valuable tool for creativity and connection, it is also a significant source of stress, comparison, and harm, particularly when use is excessive, unsupervised, or poorly understood by caregivers and professionals.

Children and adolescents are in sensitive developmental stages that make them especially vulnerable to the pressures and pitfalls of digital life. The literature revealed troubling associations between social media use and increased anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful or sexualized content. It also highlighted the role social media plays in shaping identity, influencing peer relationships, and reducing opportunities for face-to-face emotional skill-building. These negative outcomes are particularly pronounced among youth who use

multiple platforms, lack parental guidance, or engage in social comparison and self-monitoring behaviours.

Despite these findings, current research remains limited in several important ways, including a lack of longitudinal studies, inconsistent platform-specific analysis, and limited representation of younger children, marginalized populations, and non-Western contexts. To address these gaps, a future longitudinal study focusing on children ages 8–12 is proposed. Such research will help illuminate how early exposure to social media impacts identity development, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience, while also identifying the protective factors that support healthier online experiences. The implications for the counselling field are profound. Counsellors must be equipped with both the knowledge and practical tools to assess and intervene in the digital lives of children and youth. This includes recognizing symptoms linked to problematic social media use, addressing underlying emotional needs, promoting digital literacy, and working collaboratively with families, educators, and communities. By grounding therapeutic approaches in current research and developmentally informed practices, mental health professionals can better support young people in building balanced, safe, and emotionally healthy relationships with social media.

Ultimately, this capstone enhances our understanding of the risks and realities of growing up online. It emphasizes the need for ongoing attention to youth well-being in the digital age and advocates for a counselling approach that recognizes both the power and the peril of social media in shaping the lives of the next generation.



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