

Social Media

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Elder Bednar has admonished us to “Beware of digital displays and data in many forms of computer-mediated interaction that can displace the full range of physical capacity and experience.”

One of the dangers of overuse of social media is that it can lead to a manipulation of the neuro transmitter, dopamine. Dopamine is naturally occurring that originates in the brain. It sends messages between nerve cells and plays a role in how we feel pleasure. It's a big part of our unique human ability to think and plan. It helps us strive and focus. Manipulation of dopamine levels in the brain can lead to emotional dissonance. In such cases, the person requires more and more dopamine to achieve the same effect, sometimes referred to as the dopamine “loop”. Social media apps exploit dopamine by providing positive stimuli at random intervals. Users checking their phones for notifications and updates at periodic intervals are sometimes rewarded with stimuli that cause dopamine to be released. In other words, getting a “like”, which can be intrinsically rewarding, evokes feelings of happiness and satisfaction in the virtual world that social media platforms mimic. However, these feelings are only temporary and once the initial short-lived moment wears off, individuals look for more. In this way, they enter the dopamine loop. This has led to many social problems over the past decade, such as depression, anxiety, mood disorder, sleep disturbance, and suicide. As importantly, they can lead to spiritual confusion as the effects of dopamine can mask or even imitate spiritual whisperings. In effect, the still, small voice of the spirit is often drowned out by the much louder cry of a dopamine-dependent brain.

“[Through overuse of social media], important opportunities are missed for developing and improving interpersonal skills, for laughing and crying together, and for creating a rich and enduring bond of emotional intimacy.” It is worth remembering that humans’ neural architecture evolved under conditions of close, mostly continuous face-to-face contact with others. This includes non-visual, non-auditory contact such as touch and smell which cannot be accomplished through social media.

Negative Social Media Effects on Youth

The prefrontal cortex of the brain does not fully develop until almost 30. As social media impacts this area of the brain, youth have a difficult time interpreting what they are seeing day in and day out. In 2008, a major shift occurred that affects all of us as analytics were introduced to social media, allowing social media providers the opportunity to send targeted marketing messages based on a person’s search history. This has introduced a new element to social media as it reinforces patterns and behaviors, good or bad, unique to each individual, particularly the young. It is not surprising, then, that, in adolescents aged 12-17, studies show that the rate reported symptoms of major depression in a given year increased by 52% from 2005 to 2017, or that a 2017 study of 8th to 12th graders found that high levels of depressive symptoms increased by 33% between 2010 and 2015, while the suicide rate for girls in this age group increased by 65%. These effects are also felt by young adults, aged 18-30. Studies show that, among this group, mental health concerns such as anxiety have increased from 2009 to 2017 by 63% and reported psychological distress has increased by 71% from 2008 to 2017. Even more concerning, suicide rates and rates of reported suicidal ideations increased.

¹ [Things as They Really Are](#), Ensign, June 2010.

² Bolton, S., & Hattie, J. (2017). Cognitive and Brain Development: Executive Function
<https://archivesofpsychology.org/index.php/aop/article/view/30>

Negative Social Media Effects on Adults

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once quoted William Waltz Desert, who said: “I can endure my own despair but not another’s hope.”

The number of adults using social media has increased from around 250 million in 2009 to about 2.5 billion users worldwide in 2021. In that time span several Church leaders have spoken on the dangers of comparison brought on by social media. The Apostle Paul said “...but they measuring themselves..., and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”

In a recent study, participants were asked whether they compared themselves to images that they see in the media. An incredible 87.73% of women and 63.37% of men answered in the affirmative. Further search has shown that the effects of these comparisons are: (i) increased depression, (ii) poor body image, (iii) feelings other people are better, look better or have better lives, (iii) low self-worth, (iv) sadness and jealousy, (v) social isolation, (vi) poor sleeping patterns, (vii) low energy levels and, in some extreme cases, (viii) eating disorders.

What Should We Do Then With Social Media?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contains the full gospel of Jesus Christ. He has asked us to gather Israel and to prepare the earth for His return. Our Prophet has asked the following question to all of us: “Would you like to be a big part of the greatest challenge, the greatest cause, and the greatest work on the earth today?” said President Nelson. “Would you like to gather Israel during these precious latter days? Would you, who are the elect, be willing to help find the elect who have not heard the message of the restored gospel?”

To accomplish these grand goals, with respect to social media use, our Church leaders have given us the following counsel: (i) use social media to do good; (ii) deliver messages on social media that are consistently uplifting and carry a tone consistent with our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ; (iii) our social media use should be balanced with our other important commitments; (iv) our posts should be on point and focused on the message we are trying to share; and (v) engaging with social media does not mean that we need to engage with all parts of social media. Be careful to interact only with those parts of social media that are consistent with our goal to share and uplift.

Guidance to Families

According to the Church’s website: “parents have the opportunity and responsibility to counsel with their children to determine not only which social channels are appropriate to use in their own homes but also how to use the tools righteously and what safeguards the family will follow” giving these specific three points of guidance: “[i] Teaching children to “righteously exercise moral agency and become agents who act in accordance with the doctrine of Christ rather than objects that are merely acted upon”; [ii] Helping them “learn that the only filter that successfully can overcome and avoid evil resides in the heart and mind of a faithful disciple of Christ. Only the companionship of the Holy Ghost can fortify sufficiently against ‘the fiery darts of the wicked’ (Ephesians 6:16)” and [iii] Helping them “discover by inspiration the many ways these tools can be used to move forward the work of salvation.”

³. [Elder Gary E. Stevenson on Social Media](#) - BYU Women's Conference 2017

⁴. [2 Corinthians 10:12](#)