

Social Media and the Effect of Content on Adolescent Self-Esteem

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Submitted: 2026, Jun 12; Accepted: 2026, Jul 10; Published: 2026, Jul 21

Citation: Orama, L. (2026). Social Media and the Effect of Content on Adolescent Self-Esteem. *Adv Neur Sci*, 9(3), 01-14.

Abstract

Social media is an integral part of today's society, from being used for academic purposes or just to connect with your peers. Social media has had a long controversy on whether it is detrimental to people's mental health, but specifically regarding adult females. This study is conducted with high school students to find out how social media affects adolescents self-esteem and mental health.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Social Media, Mental Health, Insecurity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the usage of social media has notably increased and has turned into the dominant form of communication. As social media usage has increased, the rapid rise of online communication and platforms has also increased. Despite social media having potential for being a positive way to connect with your peers, it also brings in the concern of the impact the usage of social media has on adolescent mental health and self-esteem [1]. A study conducted by Primack et. al 2017 found a substantial association between excessive social media usage and heightened depression, anxiety levels, and trouble sleeping [2]. The association between heightened levels of anxiety and depression and excessive use of social media provides a clear foundation to continue researching about self-esteem. Singh explains that excessive social media use can also be a catalyst to other problems, such as trouble sleeping, a person who does not get the sufficient amount of sleep regarding their age range tends to lack the emotional resilience to tell the difference between reality and a digital persona. The term self-esteem is one that needs to be defined in regards to this research topic. The term self-esteem will be used as "the definition of self-esteem refers to the feelings of respect, love, and trust a person feels towards oneself" [3]. Understanding the way adolescents see their self-esteem is crucial to understanding them and their way of thinking, and overall how it affects them daily when it comes to the content they are viewing. It is also crucial to understand the way the term self-esteem will be used in this study because it will prove specifically which ways social media affects adolescents self-esteem.

The rise of social media platforms has increased drastically and

as Blackburn and Hogg explain their 2024 study regarding body image dissatisfaction "Five to six years of the average human lifespan are now spent on social media sites and visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok" [4]. These statistics are alarming to the current demographic of adolescents since years that they were on social media throughout the period of time where puberty occurs which is an important window of time for identity formation and gaining self confidence. However, it is important to understand the gap in this research topic overall. Many of the studies that have been conducted all revolve around the detrimental effects that social media has on adults rather than the effect it has on adolescents. A following example of the gap that is found in research is that most of it is specifically about certain platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat, when on the other hand, the research that will be conducted in this study has an overall scope on social media as a whole rather than a focused lens on one specific app as the other research studies show. This study also focuses on how social media content rather than general usage affects adolescent self-esteem. The connection that the gap has between research studies and real life is crucial to avoid long term detrimental effects because it is important to fully understand the importance of adolescent mental health overall and understand how research sometimes likes to undermine the detrimental effects that social media has on adolescent self-esteem and mental health overall which is not going to further benefit the coming generations. These ideas show a further need for research when it applies to adolescent mental health and self-esteem regarding their use of social media which prompts the research question, to what extent does social media content affect adolescents self-esteem. If current research studies have found evidence that there

is a correlation between excessive social media usage and low self-esteem regarding the older generations, then my hypothesis of the results of this study will prove that social media does affect adolescents self-esteem disregarding the age and gender of the participants.

2. Literature Review

For my own research process, I realized I needed to review essential terminology including the definition of mental health and self-esteem. Additionally, to further my research process I realized I needed to understand the statistics of social media and how much it is used by adolescents. Min Zhao and her research team explain that “Social Cognitive Theory suggests that self-esteem is not only a socio-cognitive and socio-emotional factor, but it also serves as a bridge between social environments [5]. This gave me a wider perspective on my research question and made me realize that there is a different perspective to the definition of self-esteem rather than the basic definition that self-esteem only refers to opinions someone has on themselves.

3. Social Media Usage

There have been many studies that make the conclusion that social media has a detrimental effect on daily life towards adolescents. Because many adolescents and young adults have access to and use the internet and social media, excessive social media use could pose a severe risk for these young people. Researchers generally agree that social media use has many negative outcomes, including depressive symptoms, decreased happiness or life satisfaction and sleeplessness. These findings suggest that there is a consistent pattern that links negative mental health and self-esteem to overuse of social media, however most of these studies focus on the time of the general usage of social media and time being on these apps rather than the specific content that is being consumed, which overall limits their ability to fully understand the true meaning of self-esteem. In agreement, according to a Saudi Arabian Study “Social media use has grown exponentially and at a tremendous rate over the past few decades, exceeding more than half of the world population with 58.4%, there are currently more than 4.62 billion people globally who are considered active users of social media with higher penetration in industrialized countries and increasing use in developing countries of which, 99% have access via mobile at some point [6]. This number of users on social media are growing as social media advances with future technology. If more adolescents continue to gain more access to social media than there already is in the world today, there could be an increased possibility of detrimental effects to these adolescents self-esteem and mental health, and while global statistics mostly highlight the exposure that adolescents have to social media, they do not go into detail to explain the actual psychological effects it can have on adolescents on aspects such as their self-esteem.

4. Adolescence

Shika Chawla and her research team explain that “Adolescence, which signifies the passage from infancy to maturity, is a crucial period in human development. Significant changes in biology,

psychology, and society define it. Because the time period in a person's life where their self-esteem is still developing is during their adolescence, these individuals are significantly more sensitive to social media content and external feedback, which makes adolescents significantly more vulnerable to overall influences on social media where most feedback is public. Late adolescence, which usually lasts from the ages of 17 to 21, is a particularly delicate time when people start to define who they are, gain independence, and negotiate challenging social and emotional situations. During this time, teenagers frequently deal with growing academic demands, uncertain career paths, changing peer connections, and new responsibilities. In the face of these developmental obstacles, psychological traits like appreciation, hope, and self-worth are crucial in determining how well teenagers adapt and flourish” [7]. As social media technology is expanding, adolescents are also increasing the need to turn to social media for self-expression and overall communication, these apps become a centralized part of their social surroundings and is a key influence to how they perceive themselves and others they see online and interact with. A following important concept is that during this stage adolescents heavily engage in comparison regarding their peers as they form their own identities. Social media overall amplifies this by exposing these adolescents to idealized versions and representations of the influencers and social media users they see online, which could contribute to lower self-esteem. The type of content that these adolescents are exposed to are also playing a role in shaping their self-esteem. On social media much of the content is based on appearance, and focused on content that perceives the influencer lifestyle as perfect and presents unrealistic standards which can play a significant detrimental role in the development of adolescent self-esteem. Therefore, understanding that adolescence is a crucial time period, and is considered the main development stage is crucial when analyzing the extent that social media content affects self-esteem.

5. Internalized Self-esteem

The concept of self-esteem in adolescents is tightly connected to body image and outside influences, such as social media content, which also makes adolescents prone to comparison regarding social media exposure. Navjot Kaur and his research group explain “Considering that many students are dissatisfied with body image, some interventions can be included in school health programmes, which must address body image concerns. Body image dissatisfaction was previously thought to be prevalent in Western countries; however, it also affects Indian adolescents especially girls. So, interventions must be designed to improve awareness on ideal body weight and protect youngsters from negative body image. Yager Z et al. (2013) did a systematic review on class room-based body image programmes. Out of many programmes seven were effective in improving body image satisfaction. Another study conducted by Mcvey GL et al. (2004) evaluated a school-based programme to improve body image satisfaction, self-esteem and eating attitudes, on 258 girls. The result concluded that body image satisfaction and self-esteem were improved after the use of six-session school-based intervention. So, this study

has been planned to evaluate the use of interventional packages on body image perception and self-esteem among adolescents” [8]. These overall findings indicate that self-esteem is not a fixed factor, but it can be extremely influenced by outside factors including social media content and the idealized influencer content most adolescents are viewing on these apps. This is specifically relevant to the context of social media usage because adolescents are constantly being exposed to idealized and unrealistic images and standards regarding appearance related content which can detrimentally contribute to lowered self-esteem. This could lead adolescents to adopt these highly unrealistic standards that they see on social media content and could incorporate them into their own evaluations of what they believe they should be like or act like which could ultimately affect their self-esteem. Nonetheless, a majority of the research focuses on specific interventions such as researching the way a specific social media app affects self-esteem instead of focusing on researching how social media content overall influences self-esteem and how it can change in real world settings.

6. Methodology

Throughout this research process prior to beginning this study, I noticed that while reading the academic journals, many of them used correlational research as their methodology. Based on the academic journals read prior, I came to the conclusion that the research method that aligned with my research question the most and overall allowed me to measure the correlation between two variables would be the correlational research method. Correlational research is a method which determines the relationship between two or more variables. During my research process I knew that this methodology would be the best one that would work for the research topic my study was focused on. I chose this method because the most efficient way to collect and gather the data for this topic would be through a survey sent out to all of the participants that got their parental consent forms signed. This method allowed me to collect all of the data directly from the participants' survey answers to see the correlation between self-esteem and their exposure to social media content. This chosen method connects directly to the main focus of the study because it is finding a direct relationship between two variables which aligns with the specific definition of the research method. Prior academic journals that have used correlational research as their chosen methodology, have used surveys or questionnaires to gather their research and find the direct correlation, which will allow me to test my hypothesis.

To begin implementing this method, I first needed to plan out how the data will be collected. I decided to create a google survey (Appendices A) that asked the participants questions related to self-esteem and social media use, the questions were scale based which gave them the options of strongly agree to strongly disagree for most of the questions. One of the main focuses to follow ethical researching guidelines I followed was handing out parental consent forms. When the process of handing out parental consent forms began, my beginning plan was to hand out the forms to my peers, but after I handed them out in this manner, not many forms were being

given back to me, so I therefore decided to give parental consent forms out to my teachers and teachers that I had prior to the current school year and these teachers would handout the forms to anyone who expressed an interest in being part of the research study. This process worked much more efficiently and allowed me to gather my consent forms in a timely manner to send out my questionnaire. Once all responses were collected, the data was analyzed to find the direct correlation between the use and exposure of social media and lowered levels of self-esteem.

This method is replicable because other researchers with the same or a similar research question as the one presented in this research topic could also create a google survey or some form of questionnaire which can be sent out to their chosen participants to collect their data. This method is used for many studies that are trying to analyze the direct outcome and correlation between their chosen variables, for example, in this case regarding my research question, to what extent does social media content affect adolescents self-esteem, I am continuing to analyze the results of the data to find the direct correlation, which would be given in the questionnaire to give the final conclusion to my hypothesis. The method I have chosen will lead to an answer to my hypothesis because this method is finding a direct correlation about social media and how it affects adolescents self-esteem. Therefore after this method is used there will be a clear understanding as to whether or not social media has an affect on adolescents self-esteem.

7. Data Analysis

In order to ensure that my data was collected revolving around all of the participants' data and all of their responses, I used a correlational research method. This method determines the relationship between two different variables.

7.1. Participant Demographics

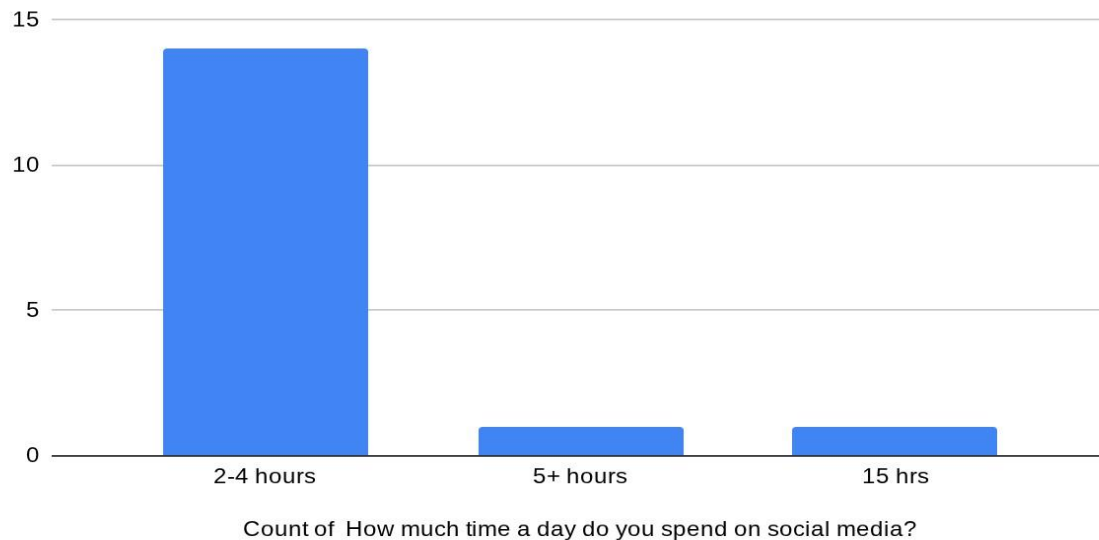
At the beginning of the data collection process, information was collected from 32 participants where they answered a series of 10 questions, which began with two base questions that asked for their gender and their grade level. The following questions were based on their usage of social media, specifically the amount of time spent on these platforms, and the specific apps being used. I continued this process by starting to ask more questions specifically about their self-esteem. The base question was an overall self-esteem scale shown below. This question disregards the topic of social media but gives a basis of what the participants overall level of self-esteem is prior to asking the final questions.

Overall Self-esteem Scale

- I ☐ am confident and satisfied with myself
- I ☐ feel as though I have good traits and qualities
- I ☐ only feel confident sometimes or around certain people
- I ☐ feel as though I could be more confident then I do
- I ☐ am not comfortable with myself or confident
- Other: _____

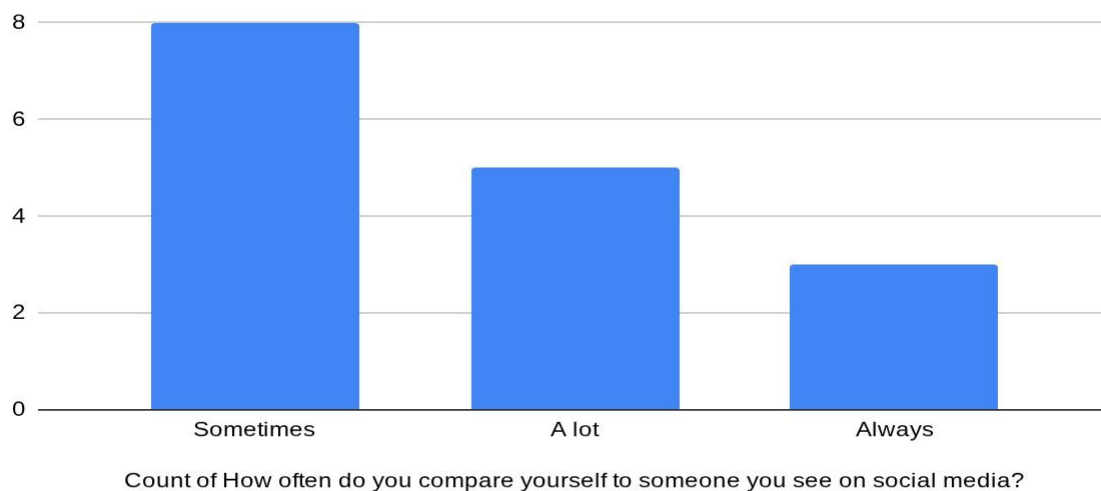
The following questions were based on the participants' self-esteem regarding their usage of social media and the amount of time spent on social media.

Count of How much time a day do you spend on social media?



Bar Graph 1

Count of How often do you compare yourself to someone you see on social media?



Bar Graph 2

The bar graphs shown above show the correlation between low usage of social media and low intake of social media content and how often the participants compare themselves to someone they see on social media. Bar graph one is refined to the participants who spend the least amount of time on social media, as shown

in the graph the participants who spent the least amount of time on social media apps and taking in the content ranges from two hours to four hours on an average for each day. Bar graph two shows the participants with the lowest time spent on social media (which ranges from two to four hours every day) and shows the

correlation to how often they compare themselves to others they see on social media. The correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the count of how often these participants compare themselves to others they see on social media shows a

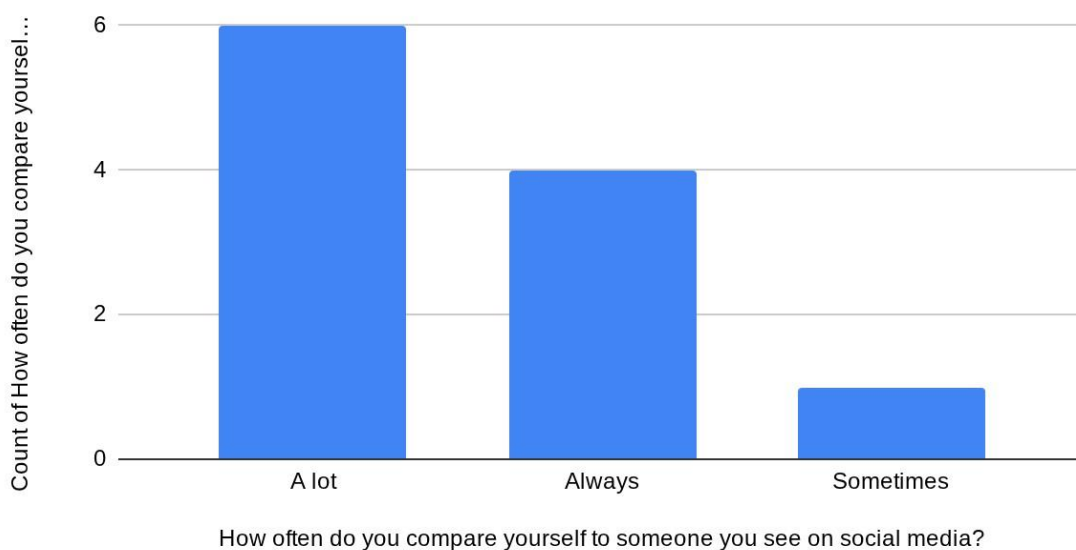
clear beneficial relationship between a lower amount of social media usage and higher self-esteem. The participants show a clear correlation that the least amount of time you spend on social media, the higher your self-esteem is.

How much time a day do you spend on social media?



Bar Graph 3

Count of How often do you compare yourself to someone you see on social media?



Bar Graph 4

The bar graphs shown above show the correlation between high usage of social media and high intake of social media content and how often the participants compare themselves to someone they see on social media. Bar graph one is refined to the participants who spend the most amount of time on social media, as shown in the graph the participants who spent the most amount of time on social media apps and taking in the content ranges from 5 hours to 15 hours on an average for each day. Bar graph two shows the participants with the highest time spent on social media (which ranges from five to 15 hours every day) and shows the correlation to how often they compare themselves to others they see on social media. The clear correlation between the participants who are on social media for the longest time in the day, show that the longer amount of time spent on social media also has a detrimental increase on how often these participants compare themselves to people they see on social media. Overall, the correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the count of how often these participants compare themselves to others they see on social media shows a clear detrimental relationship between a high amount of social media usage and lower self-esteem.

7.3. Correlational Analysis

Overall, the comparison of the bar graphs uncovers a significant trend. The participants who shared that they spent more time on social media each day, also reported a significantly higher frequency of comparing themselves to others, compared to the participants who spent less time on social media which therefore had a correlation of higher self-esteem and being less likely to compare themselves to others they see online.

8. Conclusion

Findings and New Understanding

Overall this study found that the effects of social media content on adolescent self-esteem is detrimental. This study investigated how the content that adolescents are exposed to on social media is detrimental to their self-esteem. These results are significant because since there is a clear correlation with lowered self-esteem and social media content, then as social media advances in our future, more children will be reliant on the content they are exposed to increase their confidence levels. My new understanding is that disregarding the age and the gender of the participants prove that social media does have a detrimental affect to their self-esteem and overall mental health. At the start of the research process to conduct this study, all of the academic sources that I had read were all conducted with participants over the age of 21 and most of the studies were only conducted with females. This then led me to include all genders and only the adolescent age which ranged from 14 to 18 year olds to see how social media content affected adolescent self-esteem. My hypothesis was that social media does have a detrimental effect on self-esteem, disregarding the age of the participants. After concluding the results of this study, they showed that social media does have a detrimental effect on adolescent self-esteem.

Limitations

Throughout this study there were many limitations that came with this research topic. The first main limitation that was encountered throughout the research study was the amount of participants that were included in this study. At the beginning of the research topic, when the parental consent forms were being sent out, I received a total of 49 parental consent forms back. After the google survey was sent out, only 31 people filled out the survey which gave an inconsistent amount of surveys to the ratio of parental consent forms filled out. This was a limitation because it made the research longer to complete. The following limitation was having the possibility of untruthful survey answers. Although it was made clear in the parental consent form (Appendices A) that all of the answers given in the form were all going to be confidential, there still was a concern that the participants could steer their answers to ones which they believed would fit the topic of the research study, and one that could lean towards something the participant could feel more comfortable sharing. A following limitation that I encountered throughout this research process was the limited number of participants in this study. After handing out the parental consent forms I received 49 parental consent forms but only 31 of those filled out my survey. The amount of participants was a limitation because I did not have the ability to test out the hypothesis on a larger group of participants, which would have been extra beneficial to see the correlation between social media and self-esteem on a larger group of participants and an overall larger demographic since the majority of the participants were high school juniors which ranges from 16 to 17 year olds.

Future Research and Implications

Although this research was implemented in an orderly manner, this study had a limited number of participants and the demographic was not as large as expected, this may limit the generalizability of these findings. One of the main future research tips I would give to a researcher is to analyze screentime and the correlation it has between content quality and observing the miniscule details to the type of content these adolescents are viewing every day. Analyzing the specific content that these adolescents are viewing everyday and comparing their screentime to the type of content they are watching can give researchers a clear understanding of which aspect has a stronger impact on the participants mental health and self-esteem.

Additionally, future researchers can conduct their own research studies to compare the specific effects of different social media platforms and apps to analyze if varying algorithms and content can deliver a different effect to adolescents self-esteem. This gives researchers the ability to clearly see the true aspect of social media that is detrimentally affecting adolescent self-esteem. The findings of this research study also include key important real world implications for social media platforms, educators, and parents. One main implication is that schools can benefit from enacting media programs that can teach students to safely watch the content they see on social media and reduce the amount of harmful content these adolescents are consuming. Educators and teachers can also

use this research to evaluate their usage of social media platforms in classes and help avoid long term detrimental effects that their students may get because of the content they are exposed to. The main and final implication of this research study is that parents can give their children social media parental controls to further prevent their children from viewing content that may have a detrimental effect on their children's mental health. If parents are aware of this major issue of social media affecting their children's self-esteem because of the content they are exposed to, this will be alarming to their well being of their children, and open up their minds to make a full change in their children's social media habits and usage to avoid long term detrimental effects.

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Appendices A. Consent Form

Consent will be asked via google form

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study about the effects that social media has regarding adolescents self-esteem. Your child was selected as a possible participant for this study. Please read this form and ask any questions that may arise before allowing your child to participate in this study. For this study, the researcher will collect data through a questionnaire distributed to your child. The purpose of this study is to observe how exposure to social media has an affect on their self-esteem. Ultimately, this study will be used in a research presentation for the PHHS AP Capstone Research class in April of 2026, using the data collected to contribute to its graded components such as the research paper and oral defense. The paper may be published at the end of the academic year. If you decide to allow your child to participate in this study, she/he will be asked to: Give the following identifiable information, email address and age, and answer all questions asked with full honesty. The study that your child will respond to will be a 5-10 minute multiple choice survey with an optional open ended question at the end. The study could have potential psychological risks. There are no expected benefits. The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked google form which no one other than the researcher will be able to access. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify your child. There will be no form of payment for participation in this study. You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free you may contact Mr.Kadar, PHHS AP Research teacher at wkadar@pthsd.net.

Consent

● Your signature below indicates that you have decided to allow your child to participate as a research subject for this study and that you have read and understood the information provided above.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____ Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendices B. Questionnaire: will be given via google form

You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding the effects social media has on adolescents self-esteem.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that social media has on adolescents' mental health. The questionnaire consists of a series of questions revolving around your use of social media and personal questions. The research will be presented for the PHHS AP Capstone Research class in April of 2026 with the data being collected as the research findings. The academic paper may be published online by the end of 2026. If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked a series of questions that will take 5-10 minutes to complete. Please read the questions and answer with full honesty.

1. Gender Male

☐

Female

☐

Other: _____

☐

2. Grade Level

9th grade

10th grade

11th grade

12th grade

☐

3. How much time a day do you spend on social media?

☐

0- 30 minutes

☐

30- 60 minutes

☐

1-2 hours

☐

2-4 hours

☐

-
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ 4. What social media platforms do you use most?
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ 5. Overall Self-esteem Scale
- I ☐ am confident and satisfied with myself
- I ☐ feel as though I have good traits and qualities
- I ☐ only feel confident sometimes or around certain people
- I ☐ feel as though I could be more confident than I do
- I ☐ am not comfortable with myself or confident
- Other: _____
6. Social Media Comparison
- I never find myself comparing my looks or body to someone I see on social media
- I ☐ rarely compare my looks or body to someone I see on social media
- I ☐ try my best to not compare my looks or body to others I see on social media but it does happen
- I ☐ tend to usually compare my looks or body to others I see on social media
- I ☐ always find myself comparing my looks or body to others I see on social media Other: _____
7. What makes you feel validated on your appearance and body revolving around social media?
- The amount of likes I get on a social media post
- The amount of comments I get on a social media post
- The amount of reposts I get on a social media post Other: _____
- ☐ 8. What do you feel when you see someone you perceive attractive on social media?
- I ☐ feel insecure with myself and it lowers my confidence
- I ☐ only feel a little insecure but my confidence stays the same
- I ☐ do not feel insecure or less confident Other: _____
- ☐ 9. How often do you compare yourself to someone you see on social media?
- ☐ Always
- A ☐ lot
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Usually never
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other: _____

10. ☐ How often do you get influenced by social media?

☐ Always

A ☐ lot

☐ Sometimes

☐ Usually never

☐ Never

Other: ____

Appendices B. Questionnaire

Social Media Influence on Teens

You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding the effects social media has on adolescents self esteem.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that social media has on adolescents' mental health. The questionnaire consists of a series of questions revolving around your use of social media and personal questions. The research will be presented for the PHHS AP Capstone Research class in April of 2026 with the data being collected as the research findings. The academic paper may be published online by the end of 2026. If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked a series of questions that will take 5-10 minutes to complete. Please read the questions and answer with full honesty.

This form is automatically collecting emails from all respondents. [Change settings](#)

Gender *

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other: _____

Grade

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

How much time a day do you spend on social media?

- ☐ 0-30 minutes
- ☐ 30-60 minutes
- ☐ 1-2 hours
- ☐ 2-4 hours
- ☐ Other: _____

What social media platforms do you use most?

- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ Other: _____

Overall Self Esteem Scale

- ☐ I am confident and satisfied with myself
- ☐ I feel as though I have good traits and qualities
- ☐ I only feel confident sometimes or around certain people
- ☐ I feel as though I could be more confident than I do
- ☐ I am not comfortable with myself or confident
- ☐ Other: _____

...

Social Media Comparison

- ☐ I never find myself comparing my looks or body to someone I see on social media
- ☐ I rarely compare my looks or body to someone I see on social media
- ☐ I try my best to not compare my looks or body to others I see on social media but it does happen
- ☐ I tend to usually compare my looks or body to others I see on social media
- ☐ I always find myself comparing my looks or body to others I see on social media
- ☐ Other:

...

What makes you feel validated on your appearance and body revolving around social media?

- ☐ The amount of likes I get on a social media post
- ☐ The amount of comments I get on a social media post
- ☐ The amount of reposts I get on a social media post
- ☐ Other:

What do you feel when you see someone you perceive attractive on social media?

- ☐ I feel insecure with myself and it lowers my confidence
- ☐ I only feel a little insecure but my confidence stays the same
- ☐ I do not feel insecure or less confident
- ☐ Other:

How often do you compare yourself to someone you see on social media?

- ☐ Always
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Usually never
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other:

How often do you get influenced by social media?

- ☐ Always
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Usually never
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other:

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