Post-secondary student support.

Social media and student well-being: Supporting mental health in a digital world

Introduction

This resource is designed to support Good2Talk service providers in understanding how social media affects the mental health and well-being of post-secondary students. Grounded in current research, it highlights both the positive and challenging aspects of social media use, with particular attention to how it relates to social anxiety. By exploring these intersections, the resource aims to equip service providers with practical strategies to foster safer, non-judgmental spaces where students can feel comfortable reflecting on their online experiences.

Social media use among post-secondary students

Social media use is nearly universal among young people in Canada. According to a 2022 survey, 99% of youth living in Canada were using the internet, and 91% were actively using social media platforms.[1] Social media refers to online platforms where users can choose how to present themselves and connect with others, either in real time or asynchronously, sharing content that others find valuable and engaging.[2] These platforms include both websites and apps, although not all apps are social media. Apps are software programs designed for mobile devices and can serve a variety of purposes, from messaging to social networking to learning.

Common social media platforms among students include Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter), Reddit, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and YouTube. While these platforms are designed as a way to stay in touch with friends and family, many students also turn to them for emotional support, entertainment, and practical information. Students may use social media during breaks, to follow campus events or student groups, to share creative work, or to stay informed about global and cultural conversations.[3,4] In fact, data from 2023 shows that young people aged 15 to 24 are significantly more likely than older people in Canada to rely on social media as a primary source of news and information.[5]

The way students use social media varies but can be classified broadly as active use and passive use. Active use involves direct engagement with others—such as messaging, posting, or commenting—while passive use involves simply scrolling or viewing content without directly interacting.[6] Both styles of use can shape a student's emotional experience online. In recent years, there has also been a strong shift toward short-form, visually driven content, particularly on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Snapchat Stories. These formats tend to favour quick consumption and often feature trends, challenges, or personal storytelling. For students, this style of content can feel more engaging and relatable, but it can also contribute to pressure to "perform," participate in trends, or appear a certain way online. The condensed nature of this content can lead to oversimplification of complex topics, reliance on catch-terms, and limited perspective, which may affect how students interpret information, especially around mental health, identity, or well-being.

This project is funded by the Province of Ontario. The views expressed herein are those of the Knowledge Institute and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.

Many students also choose to engage with social media in private or pseudonymous ways (using a different name). For example, they might use anonymous platforms like Reddit, maintain private Instagram accounts, or simply browse content without engaging. This approach allows students to explore or express themselves with less fear of being judged by peers or family members.[7]

Why students use social media

Students use social media for reasons that go beyond simple entertainment. For many, it serves as an important, timely and accessible tool for connection, information, self-expression, and coping during ups and downs of post-secondary life.

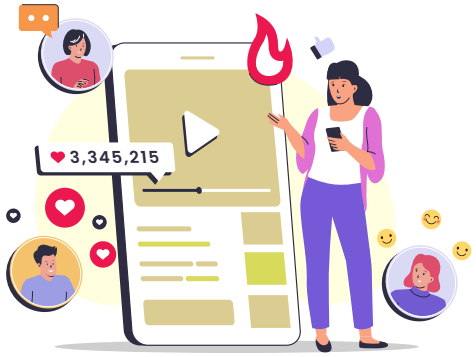
- **Connection and belonging:** Many students use social media to stay connected with friends, family, and peer communities, especially if they are away from home. Social media platforms can help students feel a sense of belonging by keeping them involved in group chats, student communities, cultural networks, and online spaces where they can stay close to their loved ones, share experiences, and support one another even from a distance.[8,9]
- **Information and inspiration:** Students often turn to social media for timely news, academic tips, lifestyle content, and mental and physical health advice. Whether following educational creators, learning productivity hacks, or discovering self-care ideas, students can use social media as informal sources of information and inspiration. While this content can be helpful, it is important to note that the accuracy and quality of information can vary widely, which may sometimes impact how students understand or manage their well-being.[10]
- **Self-expression and identity exploration:** Social media offers a space for students to express themselves more freely. Students may feel more comfortable sharing parts of themselves online—such as their thoughts, creativity, or aspects or their identity like gender, sexuality, culture, or mental health. These platforms can feel safer or more accessible than in-person settings, especially for those navigating personal discovery during this formative stage of life.[11,12]
- **Coping and distraction:** In times of stress or loneliness, social media can act as a temporary distraction or mood enhancer that can offer a brief escape for students from academic pressure or difficult emotions. This may be in ways such as scrolling through entertaining content, watching lighthearted videos, engaging with uplifting creators, or using mindfulness-based mobile apps.[13] While these moments of distraction can be helpful in moderation, they may sometimes mask underlying challenges that could benefit from deeper support.[13]



The dual impact of social media on student well-being

Potential benefits

- Social media can foster peer support and a sense of belonging by helping students stay connected to friends, family, and campus communities.[8,9]
- Students may use social media to express themselves creatively and advocate for their identities, interests, and causes they care about.[12]
- Anonymity can make it easier for students to seek help or share personal experiences without fear of judgment.[12]
- Social media platforms can provide a timely and accessible way for students to stay informed about campus events, academic resources, and global issues.[8,9]
- Students can access educational content and learning support in formats that feel approachable and engaging.[14]



Potential harms

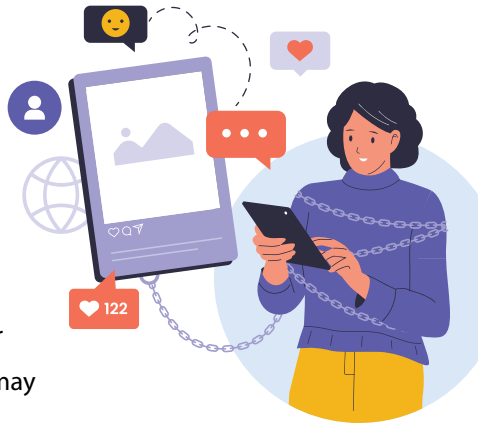
- Social media can fuel comparison, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), and perfectionism.[6]
- Students may experience cyberbullying, online harassment, and trolling (posting disruptive content online to upset others or stir up conflict) that contributes to distress.[1,15]
- Grooming and scamming: Social media can be a place where sex traffickers approach and recruit their victims.[16]
- Doomscrolling (excessive consuming negative or distressing news) and compulsive use can increase exposure to negative content and disrupt emotional well-being.[17]
- Excessive use may lead to sleep disruption, attention issues, and lower academic performance.[18]
- Time online can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.[18,19,20]
- Relying on social media as a main source of information may expose students to misinformation, shape how they interpret topics like health, identity, or world events, and reduce access to information from verified, nuanced sources.[21]

Social anxiety and social media

Social anxiety is a common mental health challenge among post-secondary students. It involves a persistent fear of being judged, embarrassed, or rejected in social or performance situations.[6] This can show up in academic settings as avoidance of group work, hesitation to speak in class, or discomfort with social or campus events, even when participation is required.

For some students, social media can feel like a safer, more manageable way to connect. Unlike face-to-face interactions, social media allows for asynchronous communication—through posts, messages, or comments—which gives students more time to think about how they want to present themselves. This flexibility can reduce the pressure of spontaneous conversation and help students feel more in control of their social interactions.[22]

On the flip side, social media can also trigger or intensify social anxiety. Students may worry about how their posts are perceived, overanalyzing wording or worrying about how others might react. They may feel rejected if they don't receive likes or replies. Comparing themselves to the curated images or achievements of others can also lead to feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt.[6]



Service providers may notice signs of social anxiety when students prefer digital over in-person communication, avoid in-person interactions or group gathering occasions, express worry about how they come across online, or describe difficulty messaging peers or professors. Some may avoid social media entirely out of fear of being judged, while others may remain active but feel distressed by their interactions.[23]

Supporting students: role of service providers

- **Trauma- and anxiety-informed approach:** When discussing social media and mental health, it is important to approach each conversation with sensitivity.[24,25] Students may have anxiety or past experiences that influence how comfortable they feel talking about their online lives. Avoid making assumptions—what feels harmless or routine to one student may feel overwhelming or distressing to another. By creating a calm, non-judgmental space, service providers can help students feel safe enough to open up about their relationship with social media.[24,25]
- **Supportive strategies and suggestions:** If a student expresses concern about how social media is affecting their mental health, start by validating their feelings and acknowledging that it is okay to seek help.[26] Avoid minimizing their experiences or offering overly simple solutions like "just log off from social media," which can feel dismissive. Instead, invite students to reflect on how social media impacts them personally. You might suggest setting boundaries, such as limiting screen time, muting or unfollowing stressful accounts, or scheduling screen-free breaks.[27] Recommend digital well-being tools like app timers or notification controls and consider sharing campus resources like virtual peer groups. Encourage students to reframe negative social comparisons by reminding them that what they see online is often curated and not the full picture.
- **Provide students with additional resources:** Be prepared to share information about mental health supports available on campus and in the broader community, including culturally relevant, low-barrier, and accessible options.[28] This might include campus counselling, peer support, virtual mental health platforms, or 24/7 helplines like Good2Talk. When students are struggling, connecting them to these services can help reduce the stress of figuring things out on their own. If their social media use is significantly affecting their daily life or academic performance, consider whether a referral to additional support may be needed.
- **Build a support plan with students collaboratively:** Support is most effective when students are involved in shaping it.[29] When possible, ask what kind of help feels right for them. Some may want professional counselling, while others may prefer to start with small, manageable steps like using digital wellness tools or talking to peers. Work together to identify next steps that align with their comfort level.[29] Empowering students to guide the process helps them feel more in control and less alone.

Additional resources

- Check out a list of resources provided by Kids Help Phone to learn more about setting boundaries around when and how you use social media.
- Our Good2Talk resource, Technology and Screen Use, was developed for post-secondary students, and it explores how screens can affect mental and physical health and provides tips on how to use screens in a healthier way.
- Check out Technology use: early years to transition years and Young people in the digital era: Understanding risks and promoting well-being from the Knowledge Institute for insights on how digital technology affects youth development, mental health, and well-being at different stages.
- This tipsheet by CMHA Ontario's BounceBack program offers practical tips on how to engage in social media mindfully, aiming to help users benefit from its advantages while minimizing exposure to potential harms.
- The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)'s E-Mental health website is a hub for various evidence-informed resources, implementation toolkit, E-modules, and many more! Some of the key resources include:
  - Mental Health, Technology, and You
  - Mental Health Apps: How to Make an Informed Choice
- Media Smarts, Canada's centre for digital media literacy, has a wide range of resources on navigating digital media, including tools for parents, young people, and teachers to build critical digital skills and promote online well-being.
- For more online safety resources for children and young people, check out Better Internet for Kids, an initiative by the European Union.

References

1. Statistics Canada. (2024a, February 27). Young people and exposure to harmful online content in 2022.
2. Aichner, T., Grünfelder, M., Maurer, O., & Jegeni, D. (2020). Twenty-five years of social media: A review of social media applications and definitions from 1994 to 2019. *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking, 24*(4), 215–222.
3. Bengtsson, S., & Johansson, S. (2022). The meanings of social media use in everyday life: Filling empty slots, everyday transformations, and mood management. *Social Media + Society, 8*(4).
4. Hui, E., Singh, S., Lin, P. K. F., & Dillon, D. (2024). Social media influence on emerging adults' prosocial behavior: A systematic review. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 46*(4), 239–265.
5. Statistics Canada. (2024b, February 27). Online hate and aggression among young people in Canada.
6. O'Day, E. B., & Heimberg, R. G. (2021). Social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness: A systematic review. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports, 3*, 100070.
7. Jaidka, K., Zhou, A., Lelkes, Y., Egelhofer, J., & Lecheler, S. (2021). Beyond anonymity: Network affordances, under deindividuation, improve social media discussion quality. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 27*(1).
8. Bal, E., & Bicen, H. (2017). The purpose of students' social media use and determining their perspectives on education. *Procedia Computer Science*, 120, 177–181.
9. Ciampa, M., Thrasher, E. H., & Revels, M. A. (2016). Social media use in academics: Undergraduate perceptions and practices. *I-manager's Journal of Educational Technology, 12*(4), 10–19.
10. Khatri, D. (2021). Use of social media information sources: a systematic literature review. *Online Information Review, 45*(6), 1039–1063.
11. Bailey, E. R., Matz, S. C., Youyou, W., & Iyengar, S. S. (2020). Authentic self-expression on social media is associated with greater subjective well-being. *Nature Communications, 11*(1).

12. Hollenbaugh, E. E. (2021). Self-presentation in social media: Review and research opportunities. *Review of Communication Research, 9*, 80–98.
13. Wolfers, L. N., & Utz, S. (2022). Social media use, stress, and coping. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 45*, 101305.
14. Astleitner, H., & Schlick, S. (2024). The social media use of college students: Exploring identity development, learning support, and parallel use. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 26*(1), 231-254.
15. Lam, T. N., Jensen, D. B., Hovey, J. D., & Roley-Roberts, M. E. (2022). College students and cyberbullying: How social media use affects social anxiety and social comparison. *Heliyon, 8*(12), e12556.
16. The Canadian Centre To End Human Trafficking. (2020, January 7). How it happens - The Canadian Centre to end Human Trafficking. The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking.
17. Taskin, S., Kurtulus, H. Y., Satici, S. A., & Deniz, M. E. (2024). Doomscrolling and mental well-being in social media users: A serial mediation through mindfulness and secondary traumatic stress. *Journal of Community Psychology, 52*(3), 512–524.
18. Kolhar, M., Kazi, R. N. A., & Alameen, A. (2021). Effect of social media use on learning, social interactions, and sleep duration among university students. *Saudi Journal of Biological Sciences, 28*(4), 2216–2222.
19. Karim, F., Oyewande, A., Abdalla, L. F., Ehsanullah, R. C., & Khan, S. (2020). Social media Use and its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic review. *Cureus, 12*(6):e8627.
20. Lopes, L. S., Valentini, J. P., Monteiro, T. H., De Freitas Costacurta, M. C., Soares, L. O. N., Telfar-Barnard, L., & Nunes, P. V. (2022). Problematic social media use and its relationship with depression or anxiety: A systematic review. *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking, 25*(11), 691–702.
21. Denniss, E., & Lindberg, R. (2025). Social media and the spread of misinformation: Infectious and a threat to public health. *Health Promotion International, 40*(2).
22. Carruthers, S. E., Warnock-Parkes, E. L., & Clark, D. M. (2019). Accessing social media: Help or hindrance for people with social anxiety? *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology, 10*(2).
23. Archbell, K. A., & Coplan, R. J. (2021). Too anxious to talk: social anxiety, academic communication, and students' experiences in higher education. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 30*(4), 273–286.
24. Citizen Potawatomi Nation House of Hope. (2025, February 26). Trauma-informed approach to social media. *Potawatomi.org*.
25. Scott, C. F., Marcu, G., Anderson, R. E., Newman, M. W., & Schoenebeck, S. (2023). Trauma-informed social media: Towards solutions for reducing and healing online harm. CHI '23: Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 1–20.
26. Mental Health America. (2025, April 14). Validating young people's feelings.
27. New Dimensions Day Treatment Centers. (2023, August 10). Setting healthy boundaries with social media. New Dimensions Day Treatment Centers.
28. School Mental Health Ontario. (2023, October 25). Support student mental health: How to get started.
29. Langer, D. A., & Jensen-Doss, A. (2016). Shared decision-making in youth mental health care: Using the evidence to plan treatments collaboratively. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 47*(5), 821–831.

In partnership with Kids Help Phone, ConnexOntario, 211 Ontario
and the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions.