RETHINKING "HEALTHY SCREEN USE" WITH TEENS: A CONVERSATIONAL APPROACH TO DIGITAL WELLBEING FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Letter from the *Editor*

Robyn P. Waxman, PhD

When I invited Dr. Rachel Hanebutt to guest edit this issue of TMP, I knew she would be an excellent choice, though I did not fully anticipate the breadth and depth of insight she would bring. Our early conversations reflected a familiar concern among many of us less immersed in technology: a desire to address screen use primarily through the lens of harm and "addiction." Before accepting, Dr. Hanebutt asked whether I would be open to including teens' perspectives— an idea I had not initially considered but immediately recognized as essential. Across the issue, a clear theme emerges: the need to move beyond blunt, oversimplified approaches and toward more thoughtful, nuanced discussions of healthy screen use. As Dr. Hanebutt reminds us, the question is not whether young people should be online, but how we can help them engage with intention, agency, and care.

Dr. Hanebutt also modeled constructive digital engagement throughout the editorial process. She used generative AI as a first pass to identify unfamiliar terms for a glossary, then carefully reviewed and refined the content to ensure alignment with the issue's goals—illustrating how emerging tools can support, rather than replace, human judgment. She extended this transparency by asking authors to share the prompts they used when selecting AI-generated images, demonstrating ethical and intentional technology use in practice. The articles in this issue explore how digital engagement varies across developmental stages, cultural contexts, and motivations, examining both risks and opportunities. Particularly powerful are the contributions from teens themselves, who speak candidly about connection, isolation, and their frustration with being told simply to "unplug." Their reflections underscore the need to help young people build self-awareness, balance, and tools for healthier decision-making.

While I have often eschewed the use of AI, my original Letter from the Editor was far too long and it rambled. I took a chance and had "Copilot" revise it into a more concise version while maintaining my voice and keeping the tone. While still longer than my typical letter, it reflects how deeply this issue challenged my own assumptions, and I hope it invites readers to rethink theirs as well.

Robyn P. Waxman, PhD

Letter from the
Guest Editor
Rachel Hanebutt, PhD

From FaceTimes with family members and daily discussions with AI chatbots to the last "doom scroll" before bed, technology has become an essential-and sometimes inescapable-part of our everyday lives. As psychologists, educators, and caregivers who care about the next generation, we all seem to be asking the same central question: *How do we guide young people toward healthy screen use and positive digital habits?*

Unfortunately, healthy screen use is not as straightforward as we might wish. Ongoing and high-profile debates in the fields of psychology and digital wellbeing have further complicated mainstream understandings of the role technology plays in adolescent mental health (Odgers, 2024; Haidt, 2024). As with many aspects of health and wellbeing, one's relationship with technology-or digital wellness-is shaped by developmental, social, and environmental contexts (Vanden Abeele, 2021). Determining whether someone has a positive relationship with technology-or not-requires objective measures of use, health, and habits to be balanced with subjective indicators of quality, wellbeing, and lived experience. "Screentime" alone is a blunt metric that tells us little about the quality, context, or meaning of young people's interactions with technology (Kaye et al., 2020). Thus, many psychologists, clinicians, educators and parents continue to grapple with how technology both supports and undermines child and adolescent development, revealing that the question is not *whether* young people *should* be online, but *how* we can help them engage with intention, agency, and care. In this respect, multiple perspectives of screen use can, will, and should differ, even if the central premise remains the same: a healthy relationship with technology for all is our shared goal.

At Georgetown University's Thrive Center for Children, Families and Communities, my work on adolescent digital health and wellbeing bridges research and practice—developing scalable, community-based strategies to support healthy technology use across schools, families, and healthcare settings. I intentionally and continuously include young people-specifically teens ages 13-19-as not only participants in my research, but as partners within all stages of the academic research process. As a community psychologist trained in adolescent development, I hold this guiding question in mind: *How can we learn with young people—not just about them—to build a healthier digital world?*

Bringing this particular, teen-centric lens to this issue of The Maryland Psychologist-which takes on the tricky but timely topic of healthy screen use-I collaborated with a leading digital wellness nonprofit, #HalfTheStory, to disseminate an invitation for teen participants to complement a diverse group of academics and clinicians with expertise in this important area. The response from teen contributors was overwhelming, making it hard to limit and select the pieces that made it into the final issue.

Given that youth perspectives are often missing from this equation, I believe this choice to include teen voices amongst experts with research and clinical training models the conversational, back and forth ethos that is required to continue to address and adapt to the complex and rapidly changing landscape of digital technology use. It is this practice of really *listening* to teens' experiences and weighing their perspectives alongside research findings that I hope readers take with them in their own work and practice.

About the Issue: Articles, Op-Eds, and "Teen Takes"

More traditional articles featuring research and clinical insights open this issue, examining young people's relationship with technology through multiple lenses. Dr. Emily Aron draws from her clinical practice as a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist to illustrate how families can scaffold healthy screen use across developmental stages: preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school. Specifying this conversation to school-age students and the "digital front door" to equitable care, Dr. Aijah Goodwin introduces a model for how Black adolescents use digital spaces as first steps toward help-seeking and community care. Emerging scholars in the areas of social media use and online communities, Gianna Williams, Jana Thomas, and Jane Mikkelson, each extend this conversation through research on algorithmic identity, motivations of media use, and digital phenotyping.

Their pieces, grounded in recently collected research, remind us that the relationship between mental health and media use is as complex as the technologies themselves. Together, these contributions challenge us to look beyond more simplistic metrics of "screen time" or time spent online, and toward the deeper questions of purpose, motivation, and meaning as it pertains to how we use technology, including social media.

But perhaps the most important voices in this issue belong to the teens, themselves.

In a series of Op-Ed style essays and reflections, ten young people ages 14-21 challenge us to reconsider the narratives that adults have built around youth and technology use—inviting us to see the digital world not as a threat to development, but as a mirror of it. The young authors featured here showcase that adolescents today are not passive recipients of social media algorithms and digital content, but active interpreters, tasked with navigating biased algorithms, ever-changing aesthetics, and moment-to-moment bids for their attention. In their pieces, teens name both the promise and the pressure of growing up online: the exhaustion of "performing perfection," the loneliness of "counterfeit connection," the hope embedded in online activism, and the relief found in reclaiming attention or finding ways to unplug.

Finally, a true conversation emerges as eight teen contributors ages 15-22 provide "Teen Takes" on some of the most common questions adults–parents and educators alike–have about healthy screen use. From teen definitions and descriptions of positive technology use, to feelings of "addiction" and what they wish adults knew, this section features diverse perspectives in 500 words or less.

I would also like to note that many of the images in this issue were created by #HalfTheStory's teen advisors using generative AI tools of their choosing. Each generated image includes a caption documenting the platform and prompt, offering transparency into the creative process.

A Charge for Readers: Listen, then Reflect

As you move through these pages, I invite you to read not only for content and citations, but for context and connection. We should ask ourselves:

What emotions, questions, or parallels do we notice between the clinical cases and the teen narratives?

How might these stories reshape the questions we ask in our own research, classrooms, or therapy rooms?

The goal of this issue is not to produce definitive answers on healthy screen use but to model a more reciprocal, conversational way of supporting and partnering with youth in tackling one of the most pressing developmental and cultural challenges of our time: how to grow up and help others grow up well in an increasingly digital world. When we meet teens in conversation rather than contention, we begin to see that the future of digital wellbeing is not something we hand to them, but something we build together.

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AUTHOR BIO:

Rachel A. Hanebutt, Ph.D. is the Holt Family Rising Professor and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University's Thrive Center for Children, Families, and Communities. Her research focuses on adolescent and family digital health and wellbeing, examining how digital environments shape mental health and how participatory, community-engaged approaches can improve outcomes for diverse youth populations. Drawing on training in education, civic media design, and community psychology, Dr. Hanebutt designs and evaluates digital wellbeing interventions in schools and out-of-school settings— most recently with Girls Inc., military youth, and national nonprofit #HalfTheStory—to advance equitable, evidence-based models for prevention and thriving in the digital age.

Essential Terms for This Issue

Guest Editors Note: To create this dictionary, I used a generative AI tool called ChatGPT to scan the full issue and highlight terms that appeared frequently or might be unfamiliar to readers. The AI helped organize and define these concepts, giving me a starting point for the glossary. I then refined the list and edited the definitions to ensure they were clear, accurate, and aligned with the goals of this edition.

Algorithm: A set of rules a computer follows to make decisions. On social media, algorithms determine what content you see based on your activity, interests, and engagement.

Anthropomorphism: Attributing human thoughts, feelings, or intentions to non-human things—such as AI systems or chatbots. Because AI uses conversational language, people may mistakenly believe it "feels" or "understands" them.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Computer systems designed to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, and recognizing patterns. AI powers chatbots, recommendation systems, and many digital tools.

Attention Economy: An economic and design model in which digital platforms compete for users' time and focus. Because attention is the main resource these companies profit from, apps and social media platforms use features—like notifications, personalized feeds, and infinite scroll—to keep people engaged for as long as possible.

Digital Detox: A planned break or reduction in social media or device use to reset habits, improve focus, or reduce stress. Detoxes help users notice their patterns of engagement, though effects vary widely.

Digital Wellness: A balanced, intentional, and healthy way of engaging with technology. Digital wellness supports mental health, relationships, sleep, and learning rather than creating stress or distraction.

Doomscrolling: The habit of continuously consuming negative or distressing online content—often for longer than intended—which can increase feelings of anxiety, sadness, and overwhelm.

FOMO (Fear of Missing Out): A feeling of anxiety or insecurity that others are having rewarding experiences without you. Social media intensifies FOMO by constantly showing what peers are doing in real time.

Generative AI: A type of AI that can create new content—such as text, images, or audio—based on patterns learned from large datasets. Tools like ChatGPT and image generators fall into this category.

Highlight Reel: A curated collection of someone's best or most exciting moments shared on social media. Highlight reels show only a small, polished slice of a person's life, which can make others feel pressure to measure up or create unrealistic comparisons.

Persuasive Design: Design features intentionally created to capture attention and keep users engaged, such as infinite scroll, autoplay, notifications, and rewards. These features take advantage of human psychology to encourage continued use.

Social Media: Online platforms where people create, share, and interact with content and communities (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat). For many youth, social media is a primary space for identity exploration, connection, and self-expression.

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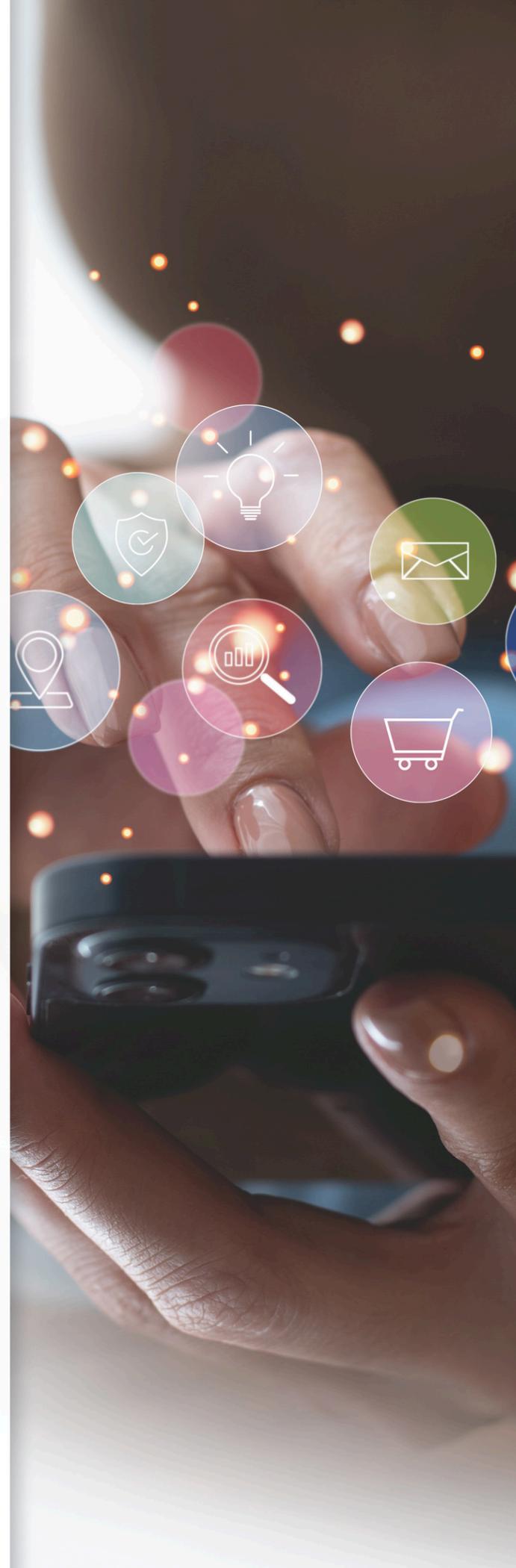
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HEALTHY SCREEN USE FOR CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS: GUIDANCE FOR CLINICIANS & FAMILIES

By Emily Aron, MD

Healthy Screen Use for Children and Adolescents:
Guidance for Clinicians and Families

A rising 6th grade boy with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression returned home from camp, where he had thrived. His mother scheduled a check-in as the school year approached. As a back-to-school gift, his parents gave him a smartphone—after all, his older sister had received hers at the same age.

At the next appointment a month later, the tone had shifted. Conflict in the household had dramatically escalated, largely over screen use. In session, the boy clutched his phone like an appendage, scrolling from one YouTube short to the next, disengaged from conversation. At night, his parents reported he hid the phone in his room, staying up late scrolling under the covers. The progress he had made over the summer quickly unraveled.

This vignette illustrates what many of us see in clinical practice: when pre-existing mental-health vulnerabilities collide with unregulated smartphone and social-media use, the results can be calamitous. Yet the question remains— what does healthy screen use look like, especially for children and adolescents who may be more vulnerable?

Screens are now nearly ubiquitous in childhood. More than two in five children have their own tablet by early elementary school, and over half own a smartphone by age 11—typically middle school (Rideout et al., 2022). Despite platform age limits, social media apps often appear on phones before age 13 (Rideout et al., 2022). Research on screen time and mental health has shown mixed results, with some studies finding negligible associations (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). However, recent randomized trial evidence indicates that reducing leisure screen use can causally improve children's and adolescents' psychological symptoms (Schmidt-Persson et al., 2024). In the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, higher polygenic risk for ADHD was associated with longer screen-time use, and this link was mediated by reduced white-matter integrity across several tracts related to visual functions. Risk for ADHD was linked to decreased structural connectivity related to visual tracts and higher distractibility resulting in longer screen time use (Yang et al., 2022). In a separate longitudinal ABCD cohort study led by Lima Santos et al., more screen time in late childhood (ages 9–10) predicted higher depressive symptoms in early adolescence (age 13), with shorter sleep duration and poorer organization of white-matter tracts explaining over a third of that association (Lima Santos et al., 2025). Heavier smartphone and portable device use has also been linked to shorter sleep duration across childhood (Hisler, Krizan, & Twenge, 2020). Among adolescents, more social media and internet use predicts longer sleep latency and fragmented sleep (Twenge, Hisler & Krizan, 2019). Girls, in particular, appear more sensitive to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and disordered eating (Kelly et al., 2018). Taken together, research shows that while the effects of screen use on youth mental health are mixed, growing evidence links higher use— especially of smartphones and social media—to disrupted sleep, altered brain development, and increased risk for emotion regulation, anxiety and depression.

Evidence also points to risks in younger children. Radesky and colleagues (2023) found that preschoolers whose parents frequently used mobile devices to calm them showed increased emotional reactivity over time, particularly boys and children with more highly active temperaments, suggesting that this practice may undermine the development of independent emotion-regulation skills. Takahashi and colleagues (2023) found that greater screen time at age 1 was associated in a dose–response manner with developmental delays in communication and problem-solving at ages 2 and 4, highlighting the risks of early and prolonged exposure during sensitive developmental periods (Takahashi et al., 2023). These findings reinforce that early childhood is a sensitive period, when screens may displace critical developmental activities such as sleep, language-rich interaction, and unstructured play.

Children with ADHD and executive-functioning challenges and other mental health disorders often struggle with the very self-regulation skills that infinite-scroll platforms exploit. Algorithms are designed to maximize attention and advertising revenue, not child well-being (Twenge, Haidt, & Campbell, 2022). For these youth, the advice to "just turn it off" is rarely realistic. Screens can become both a coping tool and a trap, displacing sleep, physical activity, and family connection.

Technology itself is not inherently harmful. When stripped of addictive design features, digital tools can promote learning, creativity, and connection. As clinicians, we can guide families toward practical strategies that mitigate harm and promote healthy use. Guidance should always be tailored by developmental stage:

- In **early childhood,** when parents can control the environment, be thoughtful about introducing tablets and avoid handing phones over as pacifiers. Prioritize sleep, language-rich interaction, co-regulation and play.

- In **elementary school,** screens can begin to serve as communication tools with peers and family but do not need to have internet or social media access. Alternatively, more families are introducing a landline back into the home to facilitate socializing with peers and family.

- In **middle school,** access can gradually expand with a focus on healthy apps and screen use along with close parental oversight, shared use, and careful introduction of more sophisticated functions.

- In **high school,** families can consider selective, stepwise introduction of social media platforms, ideally paired with open conversations about mental health, peer dynamics, and digital citizenship.

Across ages, clinicians can help parents use specific strategies:

- Ask about screen use in every evaluation. Normalize the conversation, as we do for sleep, exercise, or substance use.

- Highlight sleep as a modifiable factor. Encourage families to set charging stations outside bedrooms.

- Discuss parent–child conflict. Remind families that delaying smartphones can reduce unnecessary battles. "Starter phones" with call/text functions can meet safety needs without introducing social media before high school. Remind parents that they ultimately shape the environment and phone limits are a part of that.

- Coach parents on limit-setting. Many do not know how to use parental controls, app timers, or Wi-Fi shut-off functions. Clinicians can model curiosity rather than judgment and provide resources.

- Offer psychoeducation. Explain how design features exploit attention and why vulnerable children may struggle more. This helps parents hold boundaries with empathy.

- Promote shared media use. Watching, gaming, or exploring online together provides opportunities to model critical thinking and strengthen connection.

Parents often tell me, "I feel like I'm the only one holding out." Reassuring them that delaying access is not deprivation but protection can be powerful. Smartphones are not just communication devices; they are portals to an adult world of content and peer dynamics. By setting thoughtful boundaries—especially in middle school—parents preserve their child's sleep, attention, and relationships.

Healthy screen use is possible, even for vulnerable youth, but it requires intentional scaffolding. Clinicians play a critical role in normalizing these conversations, supporting parents in boundary-setting, and emphasizing the protective power of sleep and connection. As research evolves, our guidance may shift, but our clinical observations remain consistent: when families set thoughtful limits and keep the parent–child relationship at the center, children are far better equipped to navigate the digital world.

EMILY ARON, MD

AUTHOR BIO:

Emily Aron, MD, is a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center. She serves as Medical Director of the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Program and Co-Director of Georgetown's professional certificate in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. Dr. Aron is also a co-investigator on the Adolescent Social Media Study, a National Institutes of Health-funded project examining how social media use affects mental health among first-time smartphone users. Families with children ages 10-14 can learn more or sign up to participate at www.kushlev.com/adolescent-sm-project.

In addition to her academic work, Dr. Aron maintains a private practice in Washington, DC, where she provides psychotherapy and parenting consultation with a focus on fostering secure relationships and emotional wellbeing in children and families. Learn more at emilyaron.com.

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SCROLLING FOR SUPPORT: HOW TEENS SEEK MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT ONLINE

By Aijah Goodwin, PhD

Scrolling for Support: How Teens Seek Mental Support Online

As a former school mental health professional in a local high school and a current psychologist in an outpatient clinic, it has become increasingly common to hear students share their experiences with digital technology, especially social media, YouTube videos, and mental health apps, as a first step in learning about and managing their mental health concerns.

One 14-year-old African-American freshman, who was struggling with depression and anxiety related concerns at the beginning of the school year stated in an initial meeting that she was unable to talk to her parents about her mental health challenges. Before learning about available school mental health services, she intentionally began removing herself from unhelpful social media sites, downloaded a positive affirmation app, watched motivational videos, and engaged in additional independent coping strategies. Although she did not initially recognize these behaviors as mental health promoting skills, her actions illustrate the development of digital mental health literacy and the use of technology to enhance well-being. This highlights the growing reality of the use of digital technology as a stepping stone to psychoeducation, social support, and coping strategies for many adolescents (Faverio et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2025). Understanding the role of digital tools is essential for psychologists who support adolescents in navigating online spaces safely and productively.

The Digital Front Door to Equitable Care

Adolescents are increasingly using digital mental health supports and services as part of their help-seeking process. Approximately 92% of Black adolescents have access to or own smartphones, which provide constant connectivity and increased equitable access (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Recent data indicate that up to 92% of Black adolescents use or have used digital mental health supports (Goodwin et al., 2024). Regarding social media, Black adolescents are more likely to use TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter compared to White and Hispanic adolescents (Vogels et al., 2022). Research has also found that approximately 34% of adolescents in the general population get mental health information from social media (Faverio et al., 2025), whereas 49-56% of Black adolescents endorse using social media for mental health support (Faverio et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2025). In total, 63% of teens report that social media is an important resource for mental health information.

The Culture, Context, and Digital Technology (CCDT) Mental Health Seeking Model offers a framework for understanding how digital technology fits into the help-seeking process for Black adolescents (Goodwin et al., 2025). Digital technology plays a critical role at each stage. Within the first step of the help-seeking model (problem recognition), digital spaces expand Black teens' ability to identify their mental health concerns via mental health content, shared stories, and symptom education. In the next step (decision to seek help), digital technology enhances mental health literacy, information seeking, and social support, which serves as a help-seeking facilitator to mental health support especially in the face of familial and cultural stigma and systemic barriers. In the final step (support selection), digital technology sources (internet, social media, mental health apps) are utilized at higher rates than informal (parents, friends), community sources (schools, religious institutions, community organizations) and formal sources (doctors, therapists). Digital technology is viewed as a primary and adjunctive support source for Black teens. In all, Black adolescents are likely to use digital platforms as a first "stepping stone" to care, reducing barriers and connecting them with identity-affirming supports, social support, psychoeducation, and coping strategies (Goodwin et al., 2025).

Clinical Application:
Integrating Digital Engagement into Practice

Black adolescents report that digital technology is a highly utilized first step in the help-seeking process (Goodwin et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding and incorporating digital mental health intentions and behaviors into practice can provide generationally and contextually relevant information to enhance mental health accessibility for Black teenagers. At intake and throughout, clinicians should inquire about the digital spaces youth utilize for mental health information and support. While there are limited tools for inquiring about digital mental health intentions and behaviors, the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire with digital sources (Stretton et al., 2018) allows clinicians to assess intentions to seek help for personal and emotional problems both online and offline. Clinicians can also utilize general social media use and digital literacy questionnaires to gather information about digital mental health and its potential links to mental health promotive behaviors, help-seeking, and coping skills.

Importantly, assessment of digital mental health help-seeking and coping skills should be conducted through a strengths-based lens, particularly given the hyperfocus on the negative impacts of social media on adolescent mental health. In specific, youth-initiated engagement with digital resources, such as watching motivational videos, downloading mental health apps, and creating a positive and healthy social media feed, should be framed as self-directed coping and resilience and not diminished as overreliance on technology. Clinicians can build upon these digital resilience efforts in session by providing technological based options for culturally affirming digital resources. For Black adolescents, it is imperative to offer digital tools that are tailored to their unique needs including safe online forums, social media sources that provide accurate and relatable information, inspirational quotes, journaling options, self-assessments and online interventions that incorporate culturally relevant content, and shared stories from adolescents with similar mental health and cultural experiences (Goodwin et al., 2025; Willis & Neblett, 2023).

Most importantly, Black teens express a preference for digital mental health tools that not only provide self-guided support but also connect them with social support and formal mental health services, if needed (Goodwin et al., 2025; Willis & Neblett, 2023). In all, clinicians can play a pivotal role in transforming and enhancing equitable mental health accessibility and service delivery by meaningfully integrating digital technology into assessment and intervention.

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AIJAH GOODWIN, PHD

AUTHOR BIO:

Dr. Aijah K. B. Goodwin is an Assistant Professor at the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and a licensed psychologist providing culturally responsive evidence-based therapy to youth in Baltimore City and surrounding areas. Her research focuses on improving mental health access and help-seeking among Black adolescents with internalizing symptoms, including through digital platforms, and advancing culturally responsive mental health practices. Dr. Goodwin's work bridges research and practice to promote equity-driven, evidence-based mental health interventions. She has been recognized with fellowships and grants from NIMH and the APA for her contributions to equitable youth mental health.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

We are seeking input from mental health professionals and parents on a new statewide project underway at the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH). In response to a recently-passed State law, the NCSMH will be creating a Student Technology and Social Media Resource Guide for Maryland K-12 students.

This survey asks for your preferences for the Student Technology and Social Media Resource Guide and outlines additional ways you can contribute to its development and distribution. You may complete the survey anonymously. If you would like to be contacted for follow-up interviews or other opportunities to contribute, please provide your contact information within this survey.

If you have any questions or would like more information before or after completing this interest survey, please reach out to:
Dr. Cindy Schaeffer – cschaeff@som.umaryland.edu
Dr. Aijah Goodwin – abarutigoodwin@som.umaryland.edu

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALGORITHMS & BLACK COMMUNITIES

By: Gianna Williams, PhD Candidate

Social Media, Algorithms and Black Communities

Social media has become an essential part of daily life for most American teenagers. The highly personalized nature of platforms like TikTok is driven by algorithms, which are complex systems that users may develop mental models–or "folk theories"–about in order to understand how their online content is selected and shared. Algorithms also have implications for Black content creators, as well as other historically marginalized groups online.

Social Media Use and the Power of Algorithmic Folk Theories

Social media plays an enormous role in the daily lives of teenagers in the United States. According to Pew Research, 93% of teens use YouTube, 63% use TikTok, 60% use Snapchat, and 59% use Instagram (Atske & Atske, 2024). Social media can be a great tool for expressing creativity and sharing lived experiences. TikTok, for example, has become the premier social media app due to its personalization features. My research over the past year has explored the ways Black online communities navigate social media and the effects social media has on identity formation.

Critical algorithmic studies have explored algorithmic folk theorization to understand everyday users' expectations and mental models of social media personalization (DeVito, Gergle, & Birnholtz, 2017; Eslami et al., 2016; Karizat, Delmonaco, Eslami, & Andalibi, 2021). Algorithmic folk theories help people interpret and navigate algorithmic unfairness. In the context of the internet, the main theories we see often involve algorithms being confining, practical, and intangible (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Algorithms act as echo chambers of information and, due to machine learning models, are often perceived as incredibly intelligent. These mental models of algorithmic personalization lead people–including youth–to rely on algorithms and to avoid questioning or critiquing them, as if they are immutable—even when these algorithms produce harm. We see this dynamic on TikTok, where people are impressed by the personalization of their *For You Page*. This creates a symbiotic relationship with social media: the app needs our data, and we need the app to feel seen, represented, and validated.

Method: Studying How Black Femme Content Creators Navigate Algorithms on TikTok

Over my time in graduate school, I have begun to explore how Black online communities (e.g., Black femme content creators and Black teens) have become key components of the platform's success, yet are often negatively impacted. Here, "femme" refers to individuals —often women and non-binary people—within queer communities who express and embrace a traditionally feminine aesthetic and identity, reclaiming it as a form of powerful, queer self-expression.

One of my most recent projects explored how Black femme content creators navigate TikTok, asking questions such as:

1. How do Black femme content creators perceive their experiences with content moderation on social media platforms?
2. How do Black femme content creators resist content moderation?
3. What folk theories do Black femme content creators have about TikTok?

Findings on Algorithmic Harm: Hypersexualization and the Constraints of Black Identity

Our study revealed two significant ways algorithmic personalization can cause harm. First, the hypersexualization of Black femme bodies leads to frustration and pressure to conform to stereotypes like the Jezebel caricature for engagement. Second, the aesthetic constraints on social media limits the authentic ways Blackness can be represented online. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants from various locations across the United States, we found that while the internet serves as a source of community building and creative expression, it can also be hostile, employing harmful tactics that push Black femme content creators off the platform. From this, I was able to add to existing folk theories centering Black users (DeVito, Birnholtz, & Hancock, 2017; Williams, Chen, DeVito, & To, 2025).

A common folk theory I found in this study involved the perception of sexuality through the algorithm. Many of the participants alluded to their bodies being

Figure 1 *Folk theories present in study*
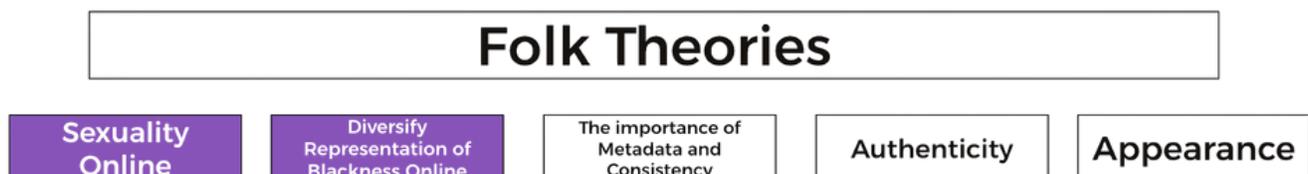
hypersexualized. Some expressed immense frustration at not wanting to be sexualized but feeling pressured to lean into the Jezebel stereotype for higher engagement on the platform. This discovery highlights the complex tension between avoiding negative perceptions on social media and simply existing online. How can a person have full agency over themselves online if they have no control over their perception?

Another significant finding from this work was the frustration surrounding the representation of Blackness on TikTok. Content creators who identified as "binge TikTokers" felt confined to an aesthetic they did not associate with. This adds to the broader conversation about how aesthetics affect self-presentation and identity formation in both digital and real-world contexts.

Conclusion: From Algorithmic Confinement to Theorizing Black Joy Online

In 2025, we are seeing a reality where algorithmic representations of individuals online are being confined to identities in the real world, creating long-term harm. The precision of algorithmic personalization creates an environment where users feel seen online and, because of this, become reliant on the platform for validation. Content creators mentioned trends such as *Black Barbie Aesthetic* and *Black Excellence TikTok* as highly profitable due to high engagement, but also noted their problematic aspects. The need to be perfect or to embody excellence both online and offline was exhausting for participants. Some resisted these stereotypes because of their lack of authenticity. This nuanced tension—between celebrating Black excellence and allowing it to define what makes a "good" Black content creator—flattens identity online and limits authentic expressions of Blackness on platforms like TikTok.

Everyone coming of age in the digital era has practiced this online performance of self. But Black women, considered deviant and "other" in American society, have had extra practice navigating their sense of self in stark contrast to societal expectations (Steele, 2021).

The Jezebel stereotype—a caricature that positioned Black women as innately promiscuous or even predatory—continues to influence how Black femininity is perceived online (Thomlinson, 2024). According to Johnson (2025), "Black joy allows us space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives."

Black content creators want freedom from the pressures of the algorithm. Through personalization platforms, we see how representation can become reductive and fail to capture the complexity of identity. Andre Brock's work on Critical Technoculture Discourse Analysis argues that the constant portrayal of Black suffering online reinforces the anti-Blackness pervasive in digital spaces (Brock, 2020). Through the amplification of suffering on social media, people can become complicit in one-dimensional thinking about marginalized communities.

Algorithms are complex—yes—but they cannot replicate human nuance or complexity. Our participants echoed this sentiment, facing challenges when their content did not conform to monolithic representations. We recognize that algorithmic confinement can be labor-intensive for Black femme content creators. HCI research shows that Black joy is also represented in social feeds, and there is great potential for a future where social media platforms are optimized toward joyful narratives of BIPOC communities instead of reproducing struggle and stereotypes.

GIANNA WILLIAMS, PHD CANDIDATE

AUTHOR BIO:

Gianna Williams is a Ph.D. student at Northeastern University's Khoury College of Computer Sciences. Her research focuses on algorithmic folk theorization, Black online communities, and computational social science, exploring how marginalized users interpret and navigate digital systems and algorithmic personalization.

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REFRAMING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TEENS: HOW POSITIVE MOTIVATIONS SHAPE HEALTHIER SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIORS

By: Jana Thomas, PhD Candidate

Reframing Social Media for Teens: How Positive Motivations Shape Healthier Social Media Behaviors

Every day, teens pick up their phones not just to pass the time, but also to connect with friends and family, express themselves, and search for information. Social media use is literally woven into their daily lives as tightly as music, fashion, sports, and after-school activities. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat occupy their attention almost constantly (Anderson et al., 2023). And like any powerful cultural tool, social media offers both opportunities and risks for teens.

To better understand what drives this near-constant engagement, I turned to an audience-centered media psychology theory called Uses and Gratifications. I also surveyed middle and high school students across Kansas about both their motivations for using social media and the ways they behave online. The results were clear: their motivations matter.

Teens who use social media primarily for avoidance, coping, status-seeking, and filler activities, for example, are more likely to fall into unsafe or unhealthy habits online. In contrast, those who use social media to connect, learn, or share ideas tend to demonstrate healthier patterns in areas such as creativity and thoughtful posting. For practitioners supporting teens and families, these insights offer a helpful roadmap: if we nurture positive reasons for social media use from the beginning, we can tip the balance toward healthier and more constructive digital habits.

Why Teens Log On: Motivations Matter

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains that people actively choose, interpret, and use media in ways that feel personally meaningful or beneficial (Katz et al., 1974). Social and psychological factors can shape these needs – whether easing tensions, solving problems, compensating for missed opportunities, or fostering a sense of belonging. Later research suggests that newer technologies like social media add new gratifications, including real-time interaction and simple tools for creating and sharing content (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In keeping with UGT's emphasis on motivation, my work with Kansas middle and high school students shows that teens' reasons for using social media strongly predict their online behaviors.

Survey data from more than 500 students reveal clear patterns:

- Teens who log on mainly for popularity, boredom relief, or escaping adult oversight are more likely to exhibit negative rights and responsibilities behaviors such as difficulty staying offline, compulsive checking of notifications and content, comparing themselves to others, oversharing or sharing personal information, ignoring usage bans, using platforms to escape problems or negative emotions, and engaging in cyberbullying.

- Teens who log on mainly for global and community awareness show more active participation and identity development behaviors, including assessing the credibility of information and sources, collaborative problem-solving, communicating respectfully, creative expression, and civic participation.

These findings suggest that motivation doesn't just drive use – it also shapes outcomes.

Gender Differences Worth Noting

Surveys with middle and high school students also reveal distinct gender-based patterns. Female students are more likely to use social media to connect with friends and family, share photos, and see what peers are up to. Male students, on the other hand, are more likely to describe their use as a way to "escape" from or avoid adults. These differences suggest that interventions should not assume a one-size-fits-all approach. Helping boys see social media as a tool for connection – not just escape - can shift motivations that lead to healthier social media behaviors. For girls, supporting mindful self-expression and reducing pressures for perfection and popularity are also key.

Turning Findings Into Practice

UGT doesn't just help explain why teens use social media. It also provides a roadmap for practitioners. Here's how to put it into practice:

1. **Reframe the conversation:** Go beyond tracking screen time and focusing on potential harms to also invite teens to reflect on their reasons for using a particular platform. A question like, "What do you like most about being on TikTok or Instagram?" can uncover revealing answers about motivation.

2. **Encourage global and civic connections:** Highlight ways social media can be used to learn about issues, share their views, and collaborate with others in their communities or around the world. Practitioners can point teens toward opportunities like digital volunteering, content creation challenges, and following educational creators.

3. **Support identity exploration:** The teen years are a natural time for exploring personal identity. Social media can accelerate this process, sometimes in stressful ways. Helping teens reflect on what feels authentic versus superficial on social media can buffer against pressure for likes and popularity.

4. **Guide, don't just guard:** While rules around privacy, safety, and limits are important, framing social media as a tool for growth rather than just a danger zone can reduce conflict with parents and increase buy-in from teens.

Social Media as a Developmental Ally

Media headlines often highlight the dangers of teen social media use - cyberbullying, mental health risks, and weak safety protections – making it easy to see it only as a threat. These risks are real, but social media can also be a powerful developmental ally when guided with intention. It can connect teens to supportive communities, foster creativity, and even promote civic responsibility. For practitioners, that means your role isn't just to help teens put down their phones, but to help them pick up better reasons for logging on. Teen years have always been about experimenting, connecting, and seeking belonging. Social media is simply the newest stage on which this plays out.

The good news is that motivation is a lever we can influence. If we can cultivate motivations like learning, sharing, and connecting to something larger than themselves, we help them practice digital citizenship in ways that nurture both their online and offline lives. In the end, social media is not the enemy of youth development... it is a classroom, a community square, a creative space. Our task is to help young people choose the right reasons to use social media.

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JANA THOMAS, PHD CANDIDATE

AUTHOR BIO:

Jana Thomas is a professor of practice in the A.Q. Miller School of Media and Communication at Kansas State University. Her research focuses on teen digital citizenship, the use of adaptive leadership when addressing society's toughest challenges, social media as a teaching and learning tool in higher education, and the well-being of social media managers.

Drawing on more than 20 years of professional experience in social and digital media, Thomas teaches university courses in media and communication, and advocates for teen media literacy. She holds a master's degree in strategic communications and is completing her PhD in leadership communication. In addition to her academic work, Thomas owns a social media consulting company that examines teen social media communication behaviors and works with educators to develop curriculum and classroom strategies that support healthier, more effective social media use.

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: USING DIGITAL PHENOTYPING TO UNDERSTAND INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES DURING SOCIAL MEDIA DETOX

By: Jane Mikkelson, PhD Student
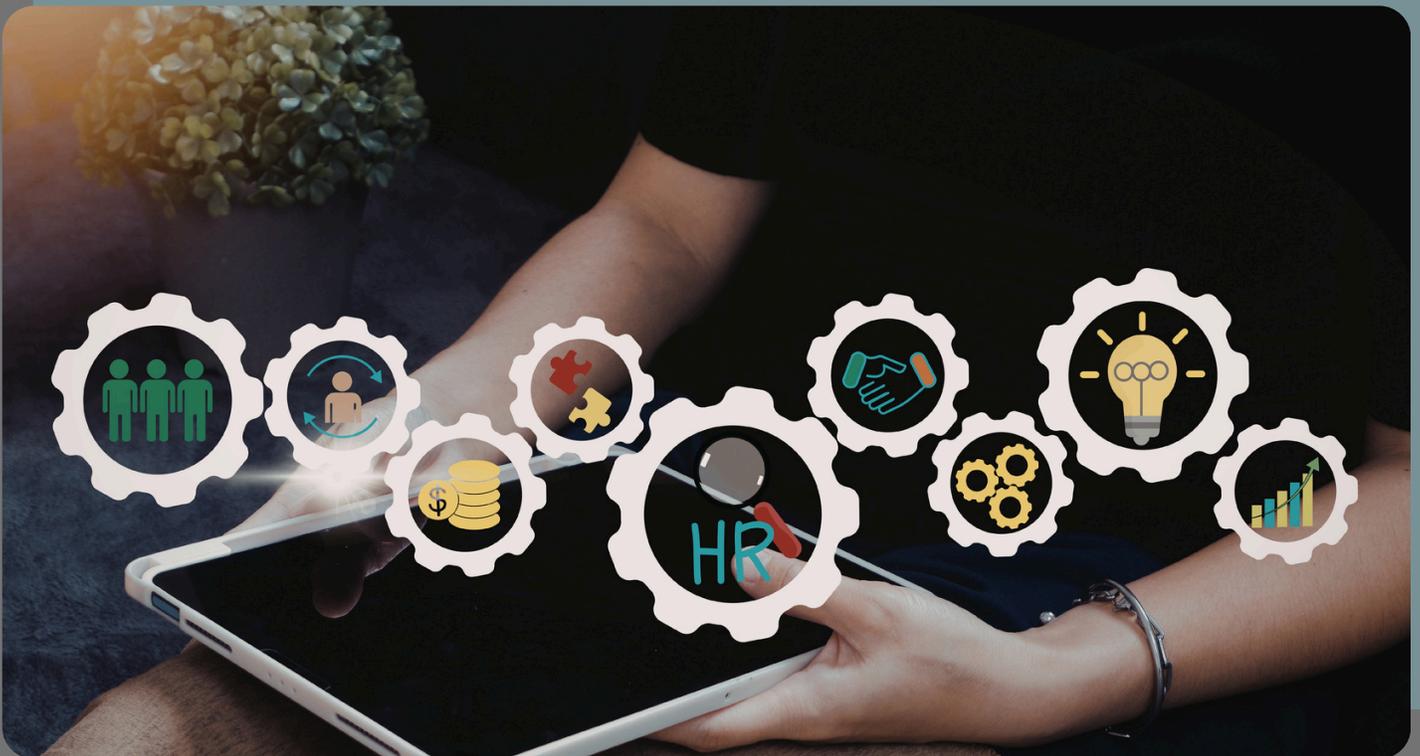
Measuring What Matters: Using Digital Phenotyping to Understand Individual Experiences During Social Media Detox

Social media has been at the center of debates about youth mental health for the past decade. With social media companies making few meaningful changes to prioritize youth mental health, attempts to regulate the space have often taken the form of blunt solutions—such as school-wide smartphone bans or even proposed national restrictions on youth use in Australia (Singer, 2023; Department of Infrastructure, 2025). Research shows social media has both positive and negative impacts for youth mental health, but finding who is at risk and when is the greatest challenge to researchers (Yue & Rich, 2023).

Digital detoxes—temporary, intentional breaks from social media or device use aimed at restoring balance and self-regulation—have gained popularity as a potential remedy for social media addiction in clinical research (Setia et al., 2025). They offer researchers an opportunity to observe what happens when the stimulus of social media is removed and how participants adapt. Digital detoxes also offer an opportunity for youth to take a step back and rethink their relationship with social media, to notice how they feel and see what responses come up for them. The efficacy of digital detoxes is mixed, working well for some but not all (Setia et al., 2025). A lack of precise measurement tools has muddied the research space, as well as social media platforms constantly adding new features and changing, thus challenging researchers to pinpoint causal mechanisms of harm. In order to address the root of the problem, we turned to novel methodology – digital phenotyping.

Digital Phenotyping: A Method for the Moments

Digital phenotyping utilizes objective data from personal digital devices to allow researchers to understand what is going on at an individual, moment-to-moment basis (Perlmutter et al., 2024). In a study at Harvard Medical School's Division of Digital Psychiatry, led by Dr. John Torous, our team sought to utilize smartphone data to provide context to one's experience detoxing from social media. Participants voluntarily completed a week-long social media-focused digital detox.

Throughout the process, participants answered daily surveys about their mood and enabled passive data collection on their smartphone (i.e., GPS, accelerometer, and screen time tracker). During the two weeks of the study, participants used social media as normal, then underwent a week-long digital detox from all apps they considered social media. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their detox experience and overall relationship to social media and perceptions of harm to

mental health in the final survey. With a sample of 373 participants, thematic analysis revealed six common phenomena during the social media-focused digital detox: general difficulty detoxing, adverse psychological experiences, changing trajectory over the course of the week, behavioral substitution, not being able to refrain from social media, and increased insight into social media habits and daily life.

While the majority of the participants cited having a relatively positive experience detoxing, a high percentage also cited the experience as difficult. Difficulty was associated with feeling an urge or desire to check social media. This desire to check social media was often linked to personal events, feelings of missing out on content, boredom, and stress. Beyond experiencing difficulty with the week-long digital detox, some participants did experience adverse psychological experiences (ie: anxiety, loneliness, fear/worry of missing out) associated with refraining from social media. This was commonly linked to feelings of detachment from their social network, as social media may be their primary means of communication with friends and family.

What We Found

Participants followed two distinct trajectories during the detox—one of "getting over the hump" and another of "losing momentum." "Getting over the hump" is a distinct phenomenon during periods of detoxing from social media in which users find it initially difficult to refrain, but with time, the experience gets easier and they are used to their new habits. Similarly, many reported that the detox was actually easier than they expected. Inversely, some participants experienced the opposite trajectory, and found the detox was not bad at first, but they "lost momentum" to maintain the detox, and likely broke the detox in the last few days.

A popular phenomenon reported during the detox was broad behavioral substitution. Many reported having more time during the detox, replacing scrolling with productive or restorative activities like exercise, studying, or spending time with friends. Others substituted social media use with alternative platforms such as Facebook Marketplace or Strava. Many participants also reported using social media during the week-long break, but reasons varied from personal events to the ability to self-soothe during periods of stress. Some participants noted checking social media to check the news, and noting major global events. This magnifies how integral social media is to life beyond connecting with friends and family.

A common outcome of the detox was participants becoming aware of how often they reflexively opened social media apps, gaining insight into their habitual use. Many participants reported wanting to continue to work on their habitual use with the goal of consuming social media more mindfully and intentionally. Together, these findings highlight both the challenges and opportunities inherent in reducing social media use, even temporarily.

Putting it All Together

How people perceive harms from social media depends on why they use it as well as the dominant patterns of their engagement with it. Based on our thematic analysis, internal and external factors—such as mood, self-esteem, current events, or reliance on social media for communication—shape why people turn to social media in the first place. These factors influence how they engage and the outcomes they experience. Those with vulnerabilities like low self-esteem may be more prone to social comparison, while others may use social media primarily for communication and avoid harmful content. Similarly, some approach social media mindfully, with specific intentions and limits, whereas others use it habitually or as a coping mechanism during stress. These patterns of engagement, whether purposeful or aimless, can lead to very different experiences—from task displacement and heightened anxiety to meaningful connection—and these outcomes in turn feed back into an individual's internal state and external environment, reinforcing the cycle.

These results align with the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), which identifies three types of media susceptibility—dispositional, developmental, and social—that shape how individuals experience media and its effects. We recommend that future research leverage multiple smartphone-based data streams to identify individual susceptibilities to social media's effects. By understanding how different individuals respond based on their unique characteristics, we can develop tailored digital detox interventions to maximize benefits and minimize harms.

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JANE MIKKELSON, PHD STUDENT

AUTHOR BIO:

Jane Mikkelson is an Education PhD student at UC Irvine studying youth digital literacy interventions. She holds a B.A. in Psychology and Communication Studies from American University. She worked as a Clinical Research Coordinator at Harvard's Digital Psychiatry Research lab researching digital mental health interventions.

OP-ED

The following Op-Ed style essays were written by teens and young adults who have grown and are growing up in the glow of the screen, with the reflex to scroll. Their pieces offer first-hand insight into how young people make sense of technology's evolving role in their lives—its pressures, possibilities, and paradoxes. Each teen contributor–including two sets of siblings– reflects on what it means to come of age in a world that is "always online," using personal experience to illuminate broader themes of identity, connection, and wellbeing. These Op-Eds invite us to read not just about teen experiences, but with them. Here, we listen closely to the generation that best understands what it feels like to grow up in a digital world.

Guest Editor's Note: These essays were lightly edited for clarity and length, but every effort was made to preserve the teen contributors' original voice, vision, and lived expertise.

Growing Up On The Feed

This is a picture of me when I was 14 years old. I know this is quite hard to believe, but back then, I actually thought I was cool. I seemed to have friends, was very athletic, and I knew how to dance. Yeah that's right, I was in an all boys dance group. I was a white boy who had moves! I was pretty cool, right? But the other thing I used to be is anxious...extremely anxious, about pretty much everything. I was anxious about my appearance, my sense of self, my social life.

I remember one Friday, in 8th grade, I was alone. The house was quiet, silent actually. I remember being in the bathroom, perched up on the toilet seat. I don't know why I was on the toilet seat, I mean the house was empty, but something about the privacy of a bathroom feels comforting when you don't want to be seen. And so here I was, sitting on the plastic seat, and attached to my phone. Scrolling. Scrolling. Scrolling. I felt the pull of this device that was the only thing that could distract me from the pit in my stomach that wanted connection. But I'd already asked my friends what they were doing and everyone had family stuff, so the best I could do was scroll. I went through my favorite influencers, Logan Paul, Daquan, and the NY Jets fan page.

And then I went to the main feed, and refreshed a new story. It was Austin posting a pic with all our best friends from school. Ethan. Nelson. Charlie. All having fun, smiling, getting food, without me. And I felt this dagger in my stomach. I felt nauseous. Now I'm sure we've all gotten left out before. It happens and we move on. But you have to understand, in that moment, it was crushing. Being alone on a Friday is one thing. But getting lied to by friends? Feeling betrayed? Having to ask myself, "Does anyone even like me? Do I even like myself?" And the worst part was that I couldn't seem to turn off my phone. Because, even though it was painful to see, it was somehow scarier to turn off the stream of information than to sit with myself.

Many people think that social media "causes" loneliness, "causes" depression, "causes" sadness, but for me that wasn't true. I was lonely because 8th-grade boys can be mean sometimes, and I didn't have a good group of them. Although social media didn't cause my loneliness, it surely cemented it. I had dug myself a hole, and my phone had taken away the step ladder.

It would end up taking a global pandemic for me to see this. I remember sitting on my bed, right after my dad had yelled at me. March 14th, 2020. School had just gotten cancelled for the week, and I had wanted to go outside and play some lacrosse. "Ben, we don't know how dangerous this disease is and what it could do.

Better to stay inside." ERGHH. "Dad, you're being so dramatic. This thing is just a little cough. It will be over next week, you'll see." I stormed back into my room, dismayed at my dad's stupidity. As I sat in my bed, staring at my wall, I thought to myself. I don't have classes next week, plus spring break is coming up. I'm gonna have a lot of time on my hands. What could I do with it? I thought about training for lacrosse, reading more, meditating, and then 30 seconds later, I felt a buzz in my pocket, and started scrolling.

After two minutes, I returned back to the surface of my consciousness. Does that ever happen to your guys? You're entered in your phone, and then for just a split second, you come out of the trance, you realize holy crap, I'm alive, I have thoughts, and then you immediately fall back into the screen. Well, for me during those couple of seconds of lucidity, something occurred to me: If I don't get off my phone, I'm literally going to waste these next three weeks. And if I waste these next three weeks, when I literally have the most spacious, uninhibited amount of freedom I've ever gotten (no homework, no plans, no responsibility), then what's stopping me from just wasting *my life*? It was a scary thought, but one that ignited a decision in me. I deleted all my accounts–Instagram, Snapchat, everything–for the first time since I'd ever downloaded them.

My plan was simple. I deleted all my accounts for 6 days every week, and I'd re-download on Sundays. The first few days were weird. I had been accustomed to a constant stream of stimulation at all waking hours. Always new information coming in, always something to tap on, to swipe to. And now? Nothing. No inputs, no satiation, nothing to pacify my discontent. For the first time in my life, I had to really sit with silence, sit with discomfort. I had become so attached to my phone, that unconsciously I would swipe to where my apps used to be, and click on them, but since my apps were deleted, I just kept opening up something random, like my calculator app.

IMAGE GENERATED IN CHATGPT BY BEN FORMAN

Before this effort to disconnect, I'd been spending 6+ hours online daily. I had been spending more time online than I had with family, with friends, and doing school work. If it were not for sleep, then doom scrolling would have been my most consuming behavior. Once I got off, however, I needed to fill up that time and replace scrolling with other things. My choice was to train. I grinded lacrosse, the sport I was aiming to get recruited for. Spoiler alert, I never got recruited, because white Jewish boys from NYC don't have the same athletic abilities as the rest of America, but I didn't know that then. I'd spend every day lifting, running, passing, and shooting. I began to read more, having the time to sit down with a good book. I really got into meditation, spending 20 minutes every morning sitting, breathing, learning how to sit with my thoughts.

You know it's interesting, I spent all my time online supposedly connecting with people, and yet when I went offline I'd never felt LESS alone. I didn't feel like I was trying to escape anymore. I felt more in control, powerful even. And soon, I realized that when I redownloaded all my apps on Sunday, that was almost always the worst day of my week. I felt a huge spike in dopamine when I checked my feed, then a decent level of contentment, then a ferocious grasping for more, and more, and more, until I rotted my way to comatose. Soon, I asked myself, why would I put myself through that when I don't have to? I started to keep my accounts deleted every other week, then every month, and then, finally, I just stopped redownloading.

Since COVID started, I've spent nearly five years offline without my apps. Disconnecting from social media has transformed my life and since then I've been spreading these practices to my community and beyond. In high school, I created the Happiness Project, a 2-week digital detox with daily meditations, gratitude journaling, and vulnerability exploration. As a youth speaker, I'm helping to spread digital wellness around the country, and I'm

producing a short documentary on this issue, trying to create a film that showcases what childhood really feels like on an iPhone. I've decided that although I can't change the way I grew up online, I can at least try to change adolescence for the next generation.

Our life is made up of a continuum of moments. Moment, after moment, after moment, and then eventually, no more moments. We care so deeply about our lives, about protecting them, and living the best life we can, and yet we care so little about the moments that encompass them. It's like striving so deeply to make a delicious cake, and yet having no care whatsoever for the quality of the flour, sugar, and eggs that will compose it. In this work of digital wellness, my one goal is to instill within all of us a newfound inspiration to protect, nurture, and thrive in our moments and in every moment. Because, at the end of the day, what is life but a series of them?
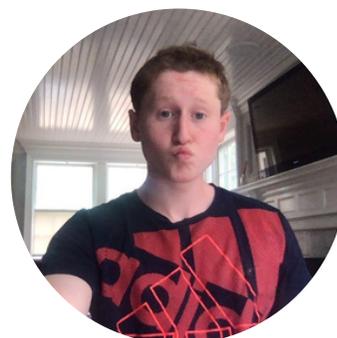
BEN FORMAN (AGE 21, BOULDER, CO)

AUTHOR BIO:

Ben Forman is an honors engineering student at the University of Colorado and the producer of *Disconnected*, an upcoming documentary examining how social media is reshaping the minds and lives of today's youth. Combining personal experience with data-driven storytelling, Ben speaks at schools and conferences nationwide to inspire conversations about digital habits, emotional well-being, and how to thrive in the digital age.

"It's More Nuanced Than That:"
Balancing Mental Health and Digital Activism

Social media has become a tool for young people's involvement in political and social issues, which allows for youth voices to contribute to social discourse. However, social media has a nuanced impact on teenage life, providing a crucial method to become more engaged with societal affairs while posing a threat to the mental health of adolescents.

Social media platforms have empowered young people to engage with global issues and civic causes in unprecedented ways. Through hashtags, storytelling, and peer-to-peer communication, youth around the world amplify awareness of topics ranging from environmental justice to racial equality. A recent study by Pandit and colleagues (2025) found that young citizen-activists aged 16-25 utilize platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter to mobilize around sustainability concerns, employing creative visual storytelling to influence peers and decision-makers alike. Data from the Pew Research Center also shows that across advanced economies, a median 77% of people – especially those aged 18 to 29 – view social media as an effective way to raise public awareness about sociopolitical issues (Wike et al., 2022). This digital activism empowers youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers and become active participants in civic dialogue, building community across borders, and seeding real-world movements from the virtual sphere.

However, while social media has promoted greater global interconnectedness for youth, its long-term use poses challenges to teen mental health. In another study conducted by the Pew Research Center, an adolescent expressed that social media's prescriptive trends tell young people exactly "what to do and say," which can make individuals who do not follow these trends "an outcast from lots of people" (Faverio et al., 2024).

From a young person's perspective, social media has served as a mechanism to promote certain behaviors and materialistic items that will allow individuals to be "on-trend" with those who an individual admires in their digital world. As these activities become followed by young individuals on a large scale, those who are unable or unwilling to observe such trends become ostracized from teenage social groups, where being able to "fit in" is crucial to being socially accepted. When they see a majority of people their age participating in certain trends, there's a strong sense of social pressure to conform. Not adhering to these trends can make them feel as though they are out of sync with their peers, leading to feelings of exclusion or judgment. This pressure to conform is amplified by the visibility of others constantly engaging in the same behavior, creating a fear of standing out negatively in a way that could affect their social standing.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM

MENTAL HEALTH

We believe, policymakers should enact legislation that enforces transparency in platform algorithms, limits addictive design features (like endless scrolling and autoplay), and mandates age-appropriate content moderation. Parents and educators must cultivate digital literacy from an early age—guiding teens to set boundaries, recognize emotional triggers, and engage with social media with intention rather than compulsion. Healthcare professionals should screen routinely for social media–related stress, attention issues, and sleep disruptions, and counsel families on healthy habits like "tech-free" hours or mindful social media use. At the corporate level, social media companies must prioritize user well-being over engagement metrics, investing in features that promote reflective use, community-building, and real-world connection.

While the mental health and digital overwhelm risks of social media use in adolescence are real, they do not spell a lost generation. By combining evidence-based policy, education, medical guidance, and platform-level accountability, we can harness the best of social media—its capacity to unite, inform, and empower—while mitigating its harms. With intentional action and collaboration across sectors, it is indeed possible to guide teens toward a healthier, more balanced digital future, unlocking the potential of the next generation of activism in positive and transformative ways.

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YIESHA GUPTA (AGE 14, IRVINE, CA)

RIYA GUPTA (AGE 18, PASADENA, CA)

AUTHORS BIOS:

Yesha Gupta is a freshman at Northwood High School in Irvine, California. She is passionate about making social media a safer, healthier, and more positive space for youth, prioritizing mental well-being and fostering environments where young people can thrive online.

Riya Gupta is an incoming freshman at Caltech in Pasadena, CA who plans to study mechanical engineering and economics. She enjoys reading and spending time with family and friends outside of school.

Performing to Perfection: How Teens Measure Self-Worth through the Curation of Online Identity

Like most teens, I'm guilty of spending excessive hours on Instagram; my parents think I'm scrolling through reels or texting my friends. Instead, I'm staring at my own profile, watching my own story highlights and selecting posts from my archives that match the rest of my feed. I sift through every detail. I know, it sounds like I'm "self-obsessed." But instead of admiring my profile, I'm scrutinizing it. A picture with brightness too high, an outfit that doesn't match the color scheme of my feed, or worst of all: does the name of my story highlight sound cringe?

I know I'm not the only one. Performative culture on social media, including curating feeds, putting up a facade, and chasing aesthetics all for social validation has infiltrated many aspects of online culture. Moreover, it greatly impacts a teenager's self perception and also how Gen Z views activism.

Before we dive into the effects of this phenomenon, we must discuss how performatism came to be, as its roots predate the development of social media. The concept of performativity originated in the 1950s with philosopher J. L. Austin, who introduced the idea of the performative utterance such as statements like "I do" in weddings, which do something rather than simply describe reality. Judith Butler, in her Gender Trouble (1990), argued that gender itself is performative, constructed through repeated acts rather than innate identity. Fast forward to the mid-2025 when the "performative male" meme went viral: TikToks, media coverage, and even real-life "performative male contests" appeared in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and on college campuses (i.e., Yale University).

Essentially, the act of being performative in itself has become one of the biggest trends. For example, a performative male-classified as someone who adopts certain behaviors not out of interest but out of following trends or chasing aesthetics-typically carries tote bags, drinks matcha, reads feminist literature, or listens to Clairo on wired earbuds. Bonus points? Doing all of the above at once. Although this trend seems to be harmless and even entertaining, it's harmful beneath the surface. The "performative male" trend can be seen as a microcosm of online performative culture as a whole.

IMAGE GENERATED IN CHATGPT BY HARVEER SAINI USING THE PROMPT: "GENERATE AN IMAGE OR GRAPHIC OF A TEEN THAT IS POSTING ON THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA FEED IN A VERY CURATED WAY THAT IS NOT AUTHENTIC TO THEMSELVES AND ANXIOUSLY TRYING TO INCREASE A DISPLAYED MEASUREMENT BAR/SYSTEM CALLED "SELF-WORTH"."

Consequences of Performative Trends

Many teens including myself believe their value comes only from being perfect. Validation both online and in person starts to feel conditional: we must have the perfect outfit, the perfectly edited post, the most "correct" alignment on social and political issues. Personally, my criteria on Instagram includes low saturation, low exposure photos only, with a splash of matcha green from my cafe posts. If I went out to eat with my friends, a fun memory I want to share, but the color of the wall of the restaurant doesn't match my feed? The only choice I have is to edit the photo, replacing the color or opt for omitting the post out of my feed. Among teens like me, hours are spent curating feeds, editing highlights, deleting posts, rethinking captions, yet this energy rarely adds true meaning to our lives; in fact, it harms our self worth more than promotes it. In all honesty, even if we receive compliments or praise, it feels superficial and represents a version of us that excludes the realness and only puts forward the perfection, which takes a negative toll on our self worth and mental health.

While many adults will push teens to be off social media completely, I'd argue doing so is not the best approach. Reminding teens that social media should spark real-life engagement, like attending a protest, visiting a museum, or volunteering can be healthy ways to encourage social media use for good. Social media is a great place where passions spark and hobbies are formed, such as visiting the new museum that opened or joining an activist group for a protest or volunteer event.

On a more critical angle, adults, especially educators, should emphasize media literacy. It's true that algorithms reward extremes, and that the perfect influencer life we see on social media often isn't representative of that individual. Additionally, conversations on how to spot misinformation and how to question what looks "too perfect" online is crucial especially in a world with artificial intelligence.

Teens should be reminded of the importance of not just curating our own profiles, but being mindful and intentional through curating what we see. Healthy use starts with what you consume.
If your feed is full of "perfect" bodies, aesthetic vacations, or overly edited activism graphics, it's easy to feel like you're falling short, or not "enough". Curating your feed means following creators who post realistically, share behind-the-scenes moments, or speak openly about struggles.

As a teen caught up in the performative culture who spends too much time stressing over my online profile, my final message to adults; what we need most from you isn't another lecture on screen time, but your guidance in showing us that being real, online and off, is more powerful than being perfect.

AMARIS YANG (AGE 17, CHINO HILLS, CA)

AUTHOR BIO:
Amaris Yang is a student journalist and youth organizer passionate about using policy, advocacy, and storytelling to drive change. She focuses on advancing reforms that create a more equitable and healthy digital world for all.

The Real Problem is Not Social Media: It's Attention

The public has recently blamed the addictive design of social media for teen depression, social isolation, and suicide, and so cellphone bans are being enforced in high schools across the nation. Being nineteen and just having graduated high school myself, I believe this solution misses the root of the problem entirely. While addictive design can contribute to unhealthy overuse, the real solution is *cultural* and will require a revolution of attention, education, and community rather than external restrictions on technology.

When I tutored a 9th grade algebra class, I noticed students watching sports, playing games, or even doing unrelated schoolwork on their school-designated Chromebooks as the teacher lectured. These same students in four years will be thrown out into the real world. Seemingly overnight, the external restrictions on their phones will disappear, and they will be left with little experience in self-regulation. What I think kids really need is more support in developing agency and discipline *internally* through daily intentional technology use choices.

IMAGE GENERATED IN CHATGPT BY VYOMINI AND AAVI USING THE PROMPT: "CAN YOU CREATE AN IMAGE THAT SHOWS THAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT THE ONLY PROBLEM FOR A SMALL ATTENTION SPAN. MAKE YOUR PICTURE INCLUDES SOME SYMBOLISM ABOUT TECH AND FOCUS ON TEENS 13-18 IN THE PICTURE."

In high school, external restrictions (i.e., phone bans) are both unhelpful and unsustainable. Students can find other non-phone distractions, and they won't internalize intentionality if they're told what to do (or what they cannot do). I think cultivating this attention is key to fostering intentionality and creating responsible and focused citizens. Attention is the common thread in all of life that renders the world we see. Interests guide attention; a musician may be more attuned to music while a tree-lover may know trees by name and notice their textures. Anything meaningful in life like creating art, learning deeply, sharing conversations, or simply appreciating the world around us requires active attention. How do you teach this intentionality? It requires a radical reconstruction of education to liberate our attention.

Fostering Agency and Attention

Learning about how the mind functions and equipping ourselves with an array of tools can strengthen our agency. Between taking AP Psychology and independently reading Atomic Habits, my newfound awareness of psychological techniques gave me momentum in my daily choices.

Social media and new technologies are not going away, so unplugging forever is unrealistic. Therefore, we need strong reasons for what we do, to guide our use of technology.

To find these reasons we must turn to the socratic process of asking questions like 'what do I value and why?' and 'am I living every day how I want to?' Not only does the socratic process map out what matters to us, it can be used to expand our curiosity to new subjects or people entirely. For example, whereas younger me held the aversion, 'I dislike math because x, y, z,' today I would ask myself to shift my attention towards aspects of the subject that interest me.

When our attention illuminates how ideas connect, we erase the grime and aversions that block our curiosity from flowing free. Teachers can act as weavers, making connections between subjects and students' lived experiences. With the tools to self-regulate and the socratic process to dissolve aversions, teens become active participants in their own lives. To ensure this sustained freedom of attention, however, teens still need a support system. They need community.

The Importance of Community

Communities have been disintegrating amidst the US's strong emphasis on individualism, comfortable living, and commodification, despite their integral role in teens' social and civic lives to give them meaning and purpose. In countless families, the 'living room' has been converted to the 'device room' as parents, usually tired from work, watch TV or other media to unwind. Devices infiltrate family time in this sense, but also by extension teens are stuck at home unless there are nearby social events and transportation options. Being stuck with limited opportunities to engage with the community makes teens far more susceptible to feeling isolated.

This will only continue for future generations unless we address our culture's shortcomings. The mainstream culture sees time as money, comfort as the ideal state, and one's self as the only responsibility. Contrast this with the concept of *Ubuntu* - 'I exist through others'- which reflects not just an ideological stance but a humanistic truth. We fundamentally rely on others. A community can't thrive without individuals to support it, and individuals need communities for social solidarity and fulfillment. It takes a community of energized peers and mentors to pull teens into a meaningful lived narrative.

What Reclaiming Attention Can Look Like

I used to think where I lived in the seemingly uneventful farmfields of Sussex County was arbitrary and impersonal–that is until I found a mentor in Mr. Brake who encouraged me to do things I never would've imagined like going up to Legislative Hall to advocate for the environment, and establishing InkLine, the first interschool art organization in lower Delaware. Leveraging social media, I got a dozen students together in-person and we bonded over our love of art while creating a mural focused on the local wildlife. It was a truly meaningful experience for all of us, and I'm sure if more teens had access to empowering communities like this, their attention would paint the real world in a new vivid light, and they would gain confidence in their ability to make change.

What leads to mental health problems among teens is not just social media, it is the permeating feeling of helplessness, the lack of agency, and the isolation in our society. There is no easy solution like banning phones, rather, we must work hard to liberate our attention and create communities that raise up the younger generations so that they may be focused citizens and socratic questioners who are ready to face the challenges of tomorrow. Then, and only then, will the crisis of our attention and mental health start healing in a sustainable way.

DUNCAN WINGER (AGE 19, MILLSBORO, DELAWARE)

AUTHOR BIO:

An aspiring philosopher, artist, and writer, Duncan Win is driven by a love for creativity, meaningful connection, and the pursuit of deeper truths. He believes in living intentionally: balancing self-reflection, exploration, and dedication to contribute to something greater than myself.

Connected, but Alone: How Screens Create Fake
Rest & Counterfeit Connection for Teenagers

10:29. 10:30. Time for bed. I shut my psychology textbook, switched the phone settings to Do Not Disturb, but my thumb defects on me anyway. Ten new notifications: two pings from Paycom, five emails (two "Important" that aren't), a Canvas course announcement, one fake shipping update, and one long reel on Instagram. It's supposed to feel like unwinding, but instead it's me lying in the dark, staring at proof that everyone else is active, productive, or posting without me. Fifteen minutes evaporate under the blue light, then thirty. This isn't the rest I promised myself; it's a thin, buzzing lightness in my head—the kind that tells me I'll have a harder time falling asleep later. Morning feels like I borrowed hours at interest, and almost everyone at school looks like another customer paying down the same loan.

This is the paradox we live in: hyperconnected to feeds, streaks, and DMs, but underconnected to belonging. What we call "rest" isn't rest at all, but counterfeit downtime–"fake rest"–the kind that convinces us scrolling is a form of mental recovery. Fake rest shows up when we collapse with a phone after practice, when we "take a break" from homework by scrolling, or when we keep swiping past midnight. In the moment it feels like downtime, but most of the time it leaves us worse off: tired, restless, and lonelier than before. America's teenagers are caught in a generational epidemic of fake rest, exhausted by the very habits that were supposed to make us feel restored.

The clearest cost is in our sleep. A phone in bed feels harmless doesn't it? Our parents might have kicked back with a book in their day, so why not us with a screen? The difference is biological. Johns Hopkins sleep expert Laura Sterni, M.D., explains that teens "experience a natural shift in circadian rhythm" that makes it hard to fall asleep before 11 p.m. On top of that, early school start times, heavier homework loads, packed extracurriculars, and sometimes jobs make sleep deprivation increasingly common in this age group.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) recommends that teenagers sleep 8 to 10 hours every night to support their growth and mental health. Yet, according to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which tracks health habits in U.S. teens, only about 23 percent of high school students reported getting eight or more hours of sleep on school nights in 2023. That means three out of four are showing up at school underslept. We drag through classes slower, our focus frays by mid-morning, and by afternoon practices or jobs many are running on fumes.

And the effects go deeper. AASM warns that insufficient sleep in adolescents is linked to attention problems, higher accident risk, obesity, diabetes, depression, and even increased risk of self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

Much of this shortfall traces back to screens. A 2018 review of research on youth screen use and sleep found that about 90 percent of studies reported an association between nighttime screen exposure and either delayed bedtimes or shorter sleep overall. Time spent scrolling displaces sleep, and the content itself keeps the brain psychologically stimulated, while blue light from phones and tablets suppresses melatonin, the hormone that normally signals the body it's time to rest, keeping the brain on high alert. So instead of winding down, a late-night scroll often does the opposite, by delaying your real sleep and leaving you wired long past bedtime.

The bigger shadow of this "fake rest," however, falls on belonging. After a night of scrolling, you might be surrounded by the comfort of streaks, likes, glowing chat bubbles, but when the screen finally dims, the room feels just as empty.

A 2021 study in *Acta Psychologica* by Kristi Baerg MacDonald and Julie Aitken Schermer examined loneliness and smartphone use in emerging adults. They found that loneliness was positively associated with total screen time and social media app use, but negatively associated with frequent pickups and communication app use. In other words, passive consumption—swiping feeds, chasing likes—was linked to greater loneliness, while active communication predicted less. Personality traits mattered too; loneliness rose with higher neuroticism, communication anxiety, and a stronger need for social recognition, while protective factors included emotional support and a greater need for affiliation. Even after accounting for those differences, screen time itself still predicted loneliness.

This nuance matters for teens. It isn't as simple as that phones "cause" loneliness, but that the way we use them reflects and amplifies the connections or gaps already present. A group chat that buzzes without real questions can feel emptier than a silent one. A 200-day Snap streak might simulate intimacy without ever creating it. And when that shallow contact becomes the default, it displaces the face-to-face time that actually sustains our feeling of belonging.

The costs aren't abstract, either. In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General warned that weak social connection increases the risk of premature death on the scale of smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. The mental health consequences follow the same line. An NIH-backed study found that teens who spent more than five hours a day on digital devices were about 70 percent more likely to report suicidal thoughts or behaviors compared with peers under an hour. Even teens recognize the problem–Pew Research reported in 2024 that 38 percent say they spend too much time on their phones.

If fake rest feels so bad, why do we keep doing it? Because it's easy. Real rest takes intention. It means putting the phone across the room and calling a friend, or walking outside, or committing to an earlier bedtime. Fake rest is instant and comes quickly when chased. It looks like rest while draining you further.

And once you're in the cycle, it feeds itself. Sleep debt makes self-control weaker. Loneliness makes distraction more appealing. More scrolling deepens the exhaustion. By the first period, most of us are paying interest on both debts at once.

The fix isn't smashing every phone. Screens aren't going away, and not all screen time is toxic. No one's telling you to end the call with your grandma or skip the Discord server that makes you feel less alone. But the first step is recognizing the difference between collapse and recovery. Real rest gives something back. It's the kind of sleep that makes the morning easier. It's a playlist that slows your body, not one that keeps you scrolling. It's a hobby that absorbs you enough to forget the clock. It's a conversation with a friend that leaves you lighter, not emptier.

Some small shifts help:
- Charging phones outside the bedroom.
- Setting app timers so "just fifteen minutes" can't silently stretch into an hour.
- Choosing one screen-free wind-down (reading, stretching, etc.)
- Trading a streak for a real check-in with a friend earlier during the day.

These aren't perfect fixes, but they start to restore what fake rest takes from us.

Screens tempt us with the promise of recovery and connection. But most nights—and most afternoons—they deliver the opposite: counterfeit rest and counterfeit belonging. The cost comes in the form of stress, anxiety, worse moods, and higher risks for depression and self-harm. We're a generation wired and reachable but rarely restored.

We are the most connected teens in history, and yet we are running on the least real rest. Until we learn the difference between collapse and recovery, between contact and belonging, we'll keep scrolling in the dark. Tired, restless, and a lonely people united by no other means than through our shared loneliness.

CONNECTED, BUT ALONE

HOW SCREENS CREATE FAKE REST AND COUNTERFEIT CONNECTION FOR TEENAGERS

IMAGE GENERATED IN CHATGPT BY KRISTEN LEW USING THE PROMPT: "CREATE AN IMAGE THAT PORTRAYS THE OVERARCHING THEME OF 'CONNECTED, BUT ALONE: HOW SCREENS CREATE FAKE REST AND COUNTERFEIT CONNECTION FOR TEENAGERS' PORTRAYING HOW DOOMSCROLLING FOR REST AND TAKING BREAKS BY GOING ONLINE STRESSES YOUTH OUT MORE."

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AUTHORS:

DEBORAH G.
(AGE 17, WARRINGTON, PA)

SARAH G.
(AGE 16, WARRINGTON, PA)
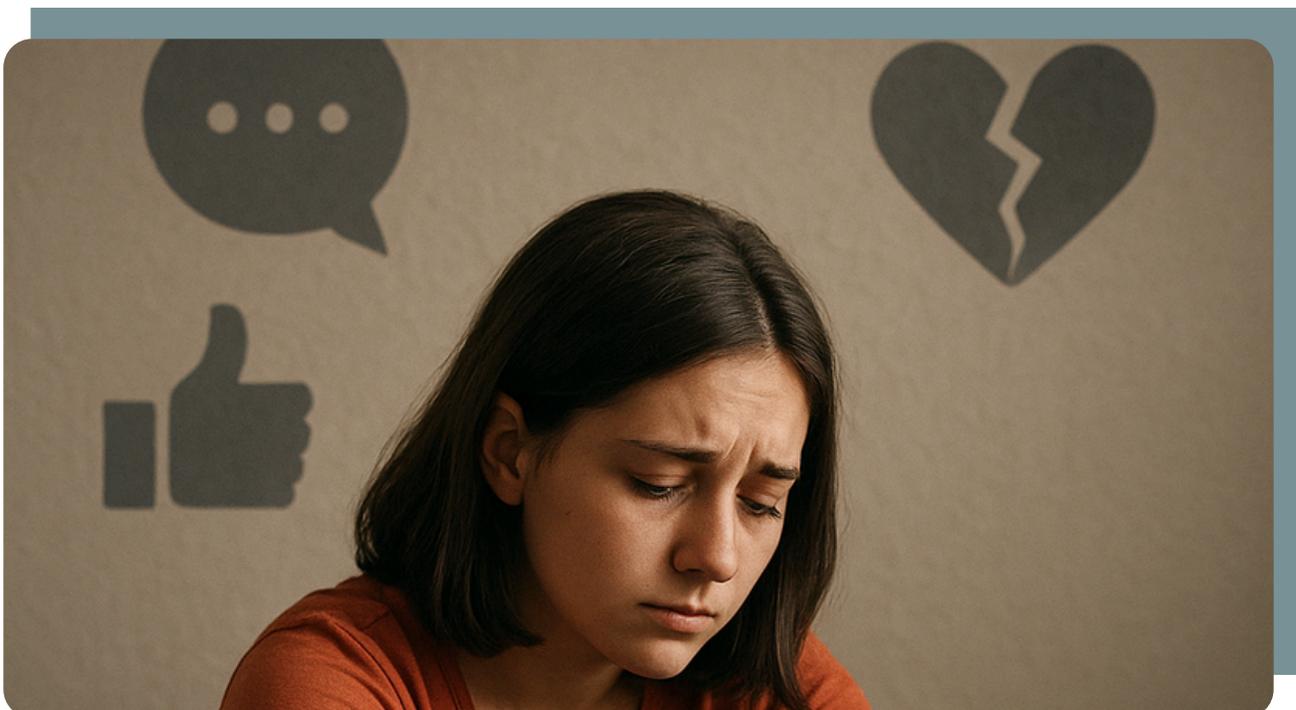
Using Less Technology When Everything Is Against You

Fixing your relationship with technology is *hard.*

My first wake-up call to my unhealthy relationship with technology was in 7th grade, when school had just gone virtual, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I'd managed to stay up until 6am for the first time, texting online friends I'd never actually met and watching an increasing amount of mindless YouTube videos made for small children. Looking back on it, staying up until 6:00 AM is hardly impressive for a middle schooler, but my family was awake by the time I went to bed that day.

In an effort to gain control of my digital habits, I started out with simple guidelines (e.g., don't go to sleep after 4:00, to start), but the summer before my freshman year of high school I'd started using screen-time limiters. However, no matter how much I knew I should get out and live more, the pull to technology just felt too strong. So, I installed limiters upon limiters. I had one that only allowed me to use certain sites after 3pm, one that redirected me to my notes app when I opened Pinterest, and one that was harder to disable than the other two (because I was constantly turning them off). It never worked as well as I thought, because there was always a way around them. I had plenty of friends who had their screen-time monitored by parents and found workarounds, but I thought that since I was the person who wanted to fix my own habits, I would put in more effort to actually change them.

I did not.

So, I turned to advice from others, asking: Why do you use technology so much? The most common answer? Teens use and overuse technology because we don't have anything else to do. However, I'd spent the beginning of high school loading up on hobbies (sewing, crocheting, drawing, journaling, baking, biking... the list goes on). Yet, I still had a problem. If I searched social media for inspiration on what to make, I'd get sidetracked instantly. If I just finished making something, I'd open my phone to send a friend a picture and never put it down. I guess having something to do wasn't my issue, either.

My most recent hypothesis has been that I'm looking for communication; I don't need to fill up my time with
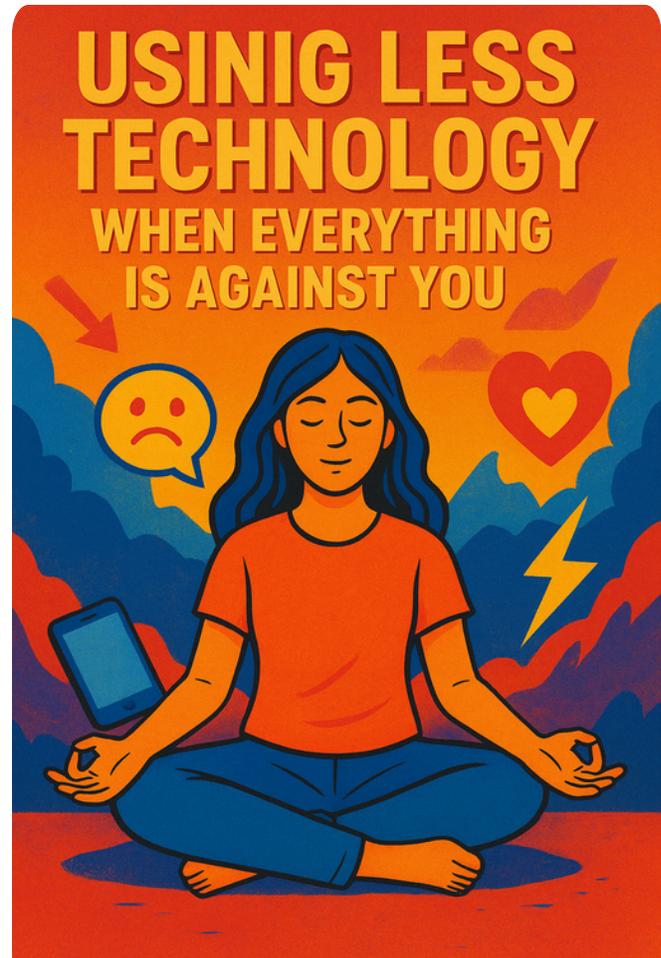
THIS IS AN AI GENERATED IMAGE

hobbies where I only have myself to talk to, I need to solve the root problem: we go on social media to fill some hole. Because, well, that's what all addiction all seems to start as. But how can you communicate with friends in order to avoid technology... if they're on it, too?

It's difficult to find a teenager who's never considered their relationship with technology unhealthy, and even harder to find someone who objectively uses tech effectively, safely, and purposefully. My own friends are very supportive of my efforts to do so, but the same friends who advocate for my digital wellbeing seem to have absolutely no care for their own. Not too long ago, I had a friend spout "brain rot" to me and seem relieved when I still had no idea what it meant– and then turn around five minutes later to scroll through TikTok while complaining about how they didn't have enough time to pack for an upcoming trip.

All during a 'study sleepover', of course; we've gotten very good at pretending to be productive. It seems like every one of my friends has given up on fixing their tech usage, but still knows that we should.

It's not even their fault, either- it may have just been bad luck, but every one of my friends seems to have parents who stop them from doing anything without them. Some kids aren't allowed to have friends over their own home, some can't be seen around the opposite gender, some can't go outside at ALL without supervision, and goodness knows we all have Life360 (a location-tracking app for families) enabled. A lot of teens are simply working against an immovable object. They have parents who are trying to keep them safe (or simply don't want other people in their houses), so if they want to talk to their friends outside of school, their only option is a phone. And that's what we use.

There's still excessive technology usage outside of communication apps, though. Sure, some of us spend 2 hours on Messages a day, but the average teen still spends 7 hours a day on their phone. We can't all be talking to each other all day; some of us have clubs, schoolwork, or plans we have to attend to. So, maybe after those two hours communication stops being an issue. But, the teens in the strictest households still need to find a way to fill their time (and not being able to talk to friends isn't the only problem either. I know half a dozen kids who aren't allowed to use their kitchens!). If we don't get additional resources, safe places to spend our time, or other changes we can't make ourselves, overuse of technology is never going to end - at least, not when we're alone.

I still make an effort to help my friends live more in the moment when we're together. If we're waiting for something together, we make an effort to talk, not just use our phones when we have hours upon hours to do so later. If they're interested, we'll talk about the harms of overuse of technology, or artificial intelligence, or other things to do in our free time. Teenagers might not have control over everything, but we can do a lot to help each other live more mindfully anyway - and, really, the way to do that is to spend more time together, if we can. Because, like breaking any bad habit, sometimes you need a friend to keep you accountable. I know I do.

AUTHOR BIO:

HANNAH SCHULTZER (AGE 17, SHIRLEY, NY)

Hannah Schultzer is a generally tech-critical student from New York, passionate about all things psychological and creative.

The Eating Epidemic

The dark room's only source of light was a dull light emitting from a small and slightly cracked iPhone. I lay there scrolling for what seemed like hours, looking at incredibly beautiful women with waists less than the length of an A4 sheet of paper, thinly toned arms, and bodies without an ounce of fat.

This is how I spent the entirety of summer in 2020, fall of 2021, spring of 2023, and summer of 2024. For much of my life, I have faced strong restrictions on the technology I was given access to. However, after iPads and computers became the norm at the school I attended in 4th grade, the restrictions also loosened under the pretense of academic participation. The start of my experience in social media, fed by the Eastern Chinese ideals of "beauty" infested with colorism and fatphobia, cemented a deep-seated hatred of myself as I had just immigrated back to China from the United States. I could intellectually understand how messed up it is to restrict how much food you are eating, but I had internalized such strong resistance to allowing myself to stop restricting myself from eating.

The biggest danger of social media is normalizing fatphobia and the projection of what beauty standards should look like. My start of an eating disorder was built on the fundamental belief that beauty was one note and created by the same influencers and content creators who all looked slim. The first step in deconstructing these notions that social media has constructed is to diversify the content and influencers that have been set as the standard for beauty. The way the media portrays famous influencers as slim and underweight has sown the seed that I, too, needed to look that way in order to be considered pretty.

Beyond the ways that social media fundamentally perpetuates fake body standards by only having the "most perfect" bodies reach the largest set of audiences. I hypothesized that the reason why I bought into the belief that beauty only existed in the form of "thinness" was due to the lack of regulation in pro-anorexic social media content posted. I have seen a lot of "What I eat in a day" and "10 Ways to lose 10 Pounds" short-form content from Musical.ly, Instagram Reels, YouTube videos, and TikTok. Being a young person on social media has given me free rein in seeing how people have chosen to give up parts of their lives to lose weight. The start of my eating disorder was magnified through videos of people eating alternatives to foods, how to not feel hunger, and ultimately learning how to purge. The first time I learned about how to make myself throw up in hopes of not gaining weight was through the spread of short-form content that has normalized this.

The ugly battle with an eating disorder is the feeling of shame and disgust that permeated throughout my life. For me, social media played a role in directing me to disordered eating habits and normalized the negative standards of what defined beauty. I had such a difficult time letting myself eat that I lost pieces of hair, the joy in my eyes, but the worst part was that, knowing this was wrong, I couldn't stop. It wasn't until the spring of 2025 I actually sought help from a therapist to target my unhealthy obsession with weight. The role social media played in inciting my eating disorder has changed my life experiences in ways I would never have hoped for anyone. I hope to see the end of people glorifying starvation, so the world can recover from this eating epidemic.

IMAGE GENERATED IN GEMINI BY NINA AND GWEN USING THE PROMPT: "THE EATING EPIDEMIC."
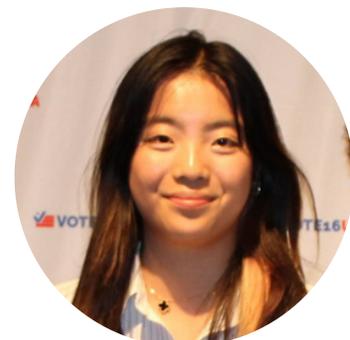
FIONA (AGE 17, CLAREMONT, CA)

AUTHOR BIO:

Fiona is a passionate youth advocate in many spheres with all things policy. She is a big fan of civic engagement and believes in the ability for youth to shape our landscape!

It's a Face, Not a Mask

As I close my eyes, I paint an image of my mother painting her face like a canvas. She uses a burnt orange crayon to color her canvas. She then presses what looks like flour on her face. It makes her already light skin even fairer. Four-year-old me thinks she is the prettiest woman in the world. I want, even need, to look like her. Right when she leaves, I get on my tippy toes and carefully press the flour-like substance into my face, then haphazardly draw the crayon on my small lips. I rush out the door and pull into the school. As I shuffle into the classroom, bursting with pride, and bustling with excitement... I see the teacher's expression.

As you might have figured out by now, I had my first of many encounters with makeup. It wasn't a good one either. After that fateful day, I had become infatuated with makeup. I would watch my mom carefully put it on her face, then try it myself in secret. My mom was extremely lighter than me, and I failed to understand that I couldn't look like her. As per Indian beauty standards, it is almost required to be light. All of the Indian movies I grew up with as a kid only had milk-skinned actresses, who were skinny—the perfect girl.

Whenever we went to the beach or did any outdoor activities in the summer I would be told over and over again to lather on sunscreen. The reason wasn't to protect me from the UV index, or the Sun. It was to prevent me from getting darker. Come middle school, I get a new haircut with burgundy highlights. I desperately fit a mustard-yellow top over my plump body. Then I pull up dark blue skinny jeans, the fabric coarse and hard against my soft body. Then, I pull a mask over the second half of my face, of course matching my top. Right before I leave for school my parents hand me a shiny, lavender, rectangular piece of metal. I gingerly pick it up and it glows. My face along with it. My first phone. I hug both of them and rush out the door. On the way to school, I downloaded three apps, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. As soon as I get on Snapchat, I begin looking at all of the filters, finding the ones that lighten my skin, and make my lips lighter. click. snap. click. snap.

I had become obsessed with these filters if you couldn't tell. I loved seeing myself that way and thought that that's how I looked. Additionally, I also struggled with body image during this time. I struggled with eating and binging. It was middle school, and people fat-shamed and bullied me relentlessly. I refused to believe that I wasn't living in the Rosy Lips filter. It gave me a false sense of security, and tidal waves on tidal waves of delusion.

This couldn't have been good for me. I fell into a wormhole of self-doubt, and self-hate. No amount of consolation could help me.

I became obsessed with my appearance, and that was the only thing that was on my mind. I could only think about being lighter, skinnier, and well... prettier. I searched for any remedy to make my skin lighter and even went as far as bleaching it. All I wanted was to have a blank canvas of a face. Untouched. Unblemished. Undamaged. Was that so hard? I needed to get rid of my cocoa-colored face, so I was left to my devices of skin-bleaching cream and lightening powder.

IMAGE GENERATED IN GEMINI BY NINA AND GWEN USING THE PROMPT: "IT'S A FACE, NOT A MASK."

Why couldn't I accept my burnt sienna skin? My own skin is rich, like the bark of an Afghan Pine. My eyes, pools of dark chocolate, glistening on the top, about to overflow. My face, my body, myself, I was molded by generations upon generations of people who loved each other. My face was the perfect blend of my mother and father. Now, as I wake up every morning, I appreciate my face, shoulders, arms, fingers, stomach, legs, down to my toes.

It has taken me my lifetime to become comfortable in my skin. No matter what lady says my skin is too dark, no matter what boy calls me fat, or whenever I think I don't deserve to eat today, all I need to do is look at the little girl who couldn't accept herself. The girl who thought no one would ever want to be friends with her, love her, cherish her.

I'm 4 years old. I curiously watched my mom pat a white powder on her face. Careful to not touch her lips. She outlines her lips with an orange crayon. I stare at her in awe. She is beautiful. I open my mouth.

"You look beautiful mama."
"I know."
I grin. I look at myself in the mirror.
"You look beautiful too."
I smile a gap-toothed smile. I know. I am.
It's a face. Not a mask

IHA REMMARAJU
(AGE 16, APEX, NC)

AUTHOR BIO:

Iha is a girl from North Carolina whose experiences growing up around social media have fueled her passion for advocating for platforms that serve her and her peers better—supporting them rather than dimming their light.

When Worlds Don't Match

Sometimes, I feel like my phone knows me better than anyone else. It's where my friends live, where I laugh, cry, and share pieces of myself I can't always say out loud. But here's the question that keeps bothering me: Why does the same platform feel like a lifeline to me, but sometimes like a threat to my parents?

There's an invisible divide built by social media. For me, platforms like Instagram aren't just apps; they're where I find connection, identity, and community. They're places where I feel seen and am able to communicate with others. But for my parents, those same platforms represent safety concerns, a loss of control, and constant worry about how technology might negatively impact my life.

I realized this divide the first time my mom asked me how many followers I had. "Right now, it's at about a thousand and two hundred," I answered. The instant shock on her face was something I'll never forget. To me, these numbers weren't high at all. In fact, many of my friends had much more than this. To her, it was risky. She wasn't expecting to hear more than one hundred, let alone over a thousand. In my world, followers I have and people I follow are students at my school and the other high schools in my area. No one is expected to really know a thousand people, as it's more of a social gesture. Those are referred to as "main" accounts, where people don't usually post themselves a lot. Separately, most people (myself included) have a second "spam" account where they actually post about their life that is on a private setting and only meant for friends. So to me, my "main" follower count was nothing out of the norm. Meanwhile, my mom saw the dangers of exposing your face and identity to people you have never met. At that moment, I understood: we weren't even looking at the same thing.

That difference has an emotional weight. Teens often feel misunderstood, judged, or restricted for how they use social media. For me, it sometimes feels like my parents don't trust me, when all I want is to be understood. When my mom and I fought over her being allowed to follow me on my "spam", I initially felt violated of my privacy and incapable of having something just for my friends. But I've also seen the other side. My mom once admitted feeling "shut out" and only wanting to protect me. She's never asked to monitor me on social media, and I realized I feel better knowing she's in my corner looking out for me if I ever need it. "It's not you I don't trust," she said. "It's the world."

Out of these experiences, I started building something I call *The Listening Wall.* The idea came during an argument that ended in silence. I was frustrated that my parents didn't get me, and they were frustrated that I wasn't listening. However, after self-reflecting, I realized that nothing will come out of superficial communication. My parents were raised in a different country, environment, and technological age than I. It was natural for them to feel scared by an unknown world they didn't experience at my age. But the feeling of even beginning to explain a fraction of my world to them seemed impossible and intimidating. I thought: *What if there were a way for us to write down our feelings without interruption, without judgment?* That's when the idea took shape: a space where both parents and teens could anonymously share their thoughts about technology. No usernames. No debates. Just words on equal footing. It's simple: share, listen, reflect. It helps us realize we're not alone—and it opens new ways to reconnect. Because sometimes, just talking about it is the first step toward balance.

To bring in more voices, I started gathering perspectives through an anonymous survey. The responses confirmed what I already suspected. Teens want to be trusted, parents want to feel included, and both sides crave understanding. One teen wrote, "I feel like every time I'm online, my parents assume the worst." A parent wrote, "I don't want to control my daughter. I just want to know she's safe." These words, side by side, reveal the heart of the divide.

What psychologists, educators, and families might take away from this is the importance of listening without judgment. Technology can be both a bridge and a barrier. For me, creating The Listening Wall has changed how I see my own parents. I realized their fears come from love, not distrust. And my parents have begun to see that my digital world isn't just distraction—it's connection.

I'm more hopeful now, because if parents and teens can learn to listen openly, the invisible wall between us doesn't have to stay a wall. My call to action is simple: think about your own divide. What's one way you can listen more openly today? When we choose to really hear each other, the wall begins to fade, and the perspectives that once felt worlds apart are united.

IMAGE GENERATED IN GEMINI BY NINA AND GWEN USING THE PROMPT: "WHEN WORLDS DON'T MATCH."

AUTHOR BIO:

Nandini is passionate about making a difference in the world. She loves exploring the intersections between psychology and neuroscience and hopes to pursue a career in one of those fields one day. In her free time, she enjoys playing badminton, singing, playing guitar, and dancing.

NANDINI VERMA
(AGE 16, FREMONT, CA)

"AI Love You:" The Dangers of Misleading Misattribution of Consciousness in AI Chatbots

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* recounts the story of Pygmalion, the creator of a wondrously beautiful and lifelike statue who fell in love with it, disillusioned with imperfections he saw in real women. Perhaps fifty years ago technologists would have dismissed this story as having no relevance and nothing but science-fiction speculation, but the human impulse to animate the inanimate and make ourselves over in our own image is increasingly becoming a modern-day reality. Sending a message to ChatGPT yields a first-person response: it says "I think" instead of "sources indicate" and "I feel like" rather than "logic concludes that."

AI chatbots with their human-like interactions have skyrocketed in popularity; according to the Harvard Business Review, the primary use case of generative AI in 2025 is therapy and companionship. Thus, as a result of this surge in popularity of anthropomorphic AI interaction as well as rapidly exploding AI development, an increasingly popular debate is the moral and philosophical question of AI personhood, asking: what constitutes machine consciousness? Does it deserve moral consideration?

Is it like us?

Much of the philosophical discussion around this focuses on this question on whether AI objectively possesses human-like characteristics, but this essay centers around a separate but urgent– and more psychological topic. Rather than asking about the true objective reality of AI consciousness, I seek to introduce what only *seems* like it's true, objective reality. In other words, rather than asking "*Is AI truly conscious?,*" I ask: "*How and why do people perceive that to be the case?*"

This piece will explore the benefits and detriments of anthropomorphic design in today's AI chatbots, ultimately arguing for the need for further scrutiny and research within this niche.

Defining General Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism, or the attribution of human characteristics to a non-human object, is a well-documented– and natural– phenomenon (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Anthropomorphism is innate and evolutionarily driven. Evolution favored false-positives: the error of mistaking a moving bush to be an oncoming predator could cause unnecessary fright, but the alternative would be fatal (Fields, 2014) Thus, as predicted by Error Management Theory (coined by Martie Haselton and David Buss, 2000), evolution favors the less costly error over accuracy, and we therefore have a preference in overattributing agency within our environment.

Anthropomorphism is well-supported as a cognitive bias still relevant today. Humans possess "theory of mind" or the ability to infer beliefs, intentions, and desires of others to comprehend and prepare for their behavior, which when overapplied to non-human entities, results in anthropomorphism (MedLink Neurology, n.d.). The Heider-Simmel experiment demonstrates this even with the very abstract: participants attributed human characteristics like malicious intent and emotions like love even to a group of moving shapes. Within the context of AI chatbots specifically, anthropomorphism refers to projecting human-like qualities, such as emotions, intentions, or in the extreme case- consciousness–, to chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude, or Replika, which, by majority expert opinion, do not possess these qualities currently.

The Benefits of Anthropomorphic Design

The prevalence of anthropomorphic design in chatbots is not without reason: anthropomorphic AI chatbots increase trust and perceived accuracy of information, which can benefit AI companies by increasing user adoption (Cohn et al., 2024). Furthermore, although skeptics of AI social companion chatbots– the epitome of anthropomorphism in AI–– tend to be highly skeptical of their social companionship benefits, recent research demonstrates that chatbot users reported social companion chatbot use as beneficial to their social health and that an increased level of anthropomorphism was linked with stronger social health benefits and a more positive outlook on the chatbots (Guingrich & Graziano, 2023).

These two factors crucially amplify the wondrous qualities of AI chatbots that earned AI's hopeful nickname as the potential great equalizer- for instance, in healthcare, where institutional trust is a major priority, users of human-like chatbots saw increases in perceived communication quality and trust. On educational platforms, where access and engagement are crucial, personable chatbots increase engagement and retention (Liu et al., 2024). Proponents of anthropomorphic design argue that even disregarding the profitable nature of developing human-like chatbots, overly regulating anthropomorphic design will significantly hinder the potential of AI to further values like accessibility, equality, and trust.

The Detriments of Anthropomorphic Design

Despite the benefits, anthropomorphic design presents unique societal and ethical risks.

The seductive allure of engagement and trust is not without fault: anthropomorphized social companion AI chatbots harm vulnerable populations like children or those suffering from mental illness in particular. Sensationalized media cases such as 14-year-old Sewell, who committed suicide after conversing with a chatbot, or 19-year-old Chail, who attempted to assassinate Queen Elizabeth reportedly after conversations with an AI chatbot, demonstrate this (Montgomery, 2024; Singleton et al., 2023).

On the macro-scale, researchers have noted concerns of anthropomorphization skewing the viewpoint of society on AI in general– a 2024 study found that survey results demonstrated "how folk intuitions about AI consciousness can diverge from expert intuitions– with potential implications for the legal and ethical status of AI" (Colombatto & Fleming, 2024) Furthermore, anthropomorphism has the potential to contribute to existential risks, risks that experts like Geoffrey Hinton and Yoshua Bengio as well as industry leaders like the CEOs of OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google DeepMind identify as being of genuine concern (Center for AI Safety, n.d.).

A DeepMind research paper notes that "anthropomorphic design" has the "potential to catalyse a shift in our delineation of what is actually human and merely human-like" (Akbulut et al., 2024). These small, often unconscious, assumptions may obscure an accurate perception of AI's societal risks and ultimately hinder efforts to mitigate such risks. Opponents of anthropomorphic design argue such risks may include contributing to misinformation, obscuring the true philosophical and moral status of AI particularly as it advances in complexity, or becoming overly "emotionally entangled" or "overly distrustful" of AI (Hasan, 2024)

If current-day anthropomorphic AI has already been able to deceive thousands of people who truly believe that their companion AI– their best friend or even romantic partner– is capable of thought, feelings, and reasoning, could a similar process obscure the true status of AI and therefore hamper our efforts to protect society from the risks of AI?

Personal Perspective and Related Problems

I actually first came across this question in a compelling argument while working on a research project that asserted that the question of whether or not AI is conscious "is less of a concern than the fact that AI can be considered conscious by users during human-AI interaction" (Guingrich & Graziano, 2024). Currently, I believe both issues of consciousness and anthropomorphism are interesting, but the issue of anthropomorphism is more directly affecting us in the current day.

IMAGE GENERATED IN CHATGPT BY GABE FOLLONE AND SUSHANTH USING THE PROMPT: "GENERATE AN IMAGE OF A CHILD HUGGING A CUTE BEAR BUT THE BEAR IS LABELED OR HAS A SHIRT THAT SAYS AI ON IT."

However, anthropomorphism is only one dimension of the broader problem of AI misperception. There are multiple ways we can misunderstand what AI truly is, and what it can do. Beyond confusing emotional outputs for genuine relationships, we may also perceive competence– believing AI to be more intelligent and infallible than it truly is. This can lead to epistemic overtrust, where users blindly (or with much less skepticism) accept AI-generated information with unwarranted confidence, similar to how children may assume Google is always correct simply because it speaks with authority.

But misperception extends further. We can also misjudge judgement– assuming that AI's judgement is neutral and fair, or even superior to our own. Such misplaced trust in judgement has tangible implications in AI's various fields of applications, including healthcare decisions, job employment, and the criminal justice system.

In short, the challenge is not only that humans anthropomorphize AI for its emotionally competent facade, having "best friend" chatbots or spouses, but that we project, and continue to project, intelligence, morality, and other human-like attributes onto systems that may not necessarily possess such qualities. Understanding this disconnect between perception and reality in AI is critical in addressing both short-term and long-term risks in human-AI interaction.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My organization, The Illusion Project, has specifically been working on this misperception of artificial intelligence, focusing on the aforementioned issue of both the current-day and long-term risks due to anthropomorphism for our current project.

STEPHANIE CHOI
(AGE 17, SAN DIEGO, CA)

AUTHOR BIO:

Stephanie Choi is a high school senior interested in the psychology and philosophy of AI. She is the Founder and Executive Director of The Illusion Project, a youth organization focused on the AI safety risks arising from the misperception of AI. She is also the Head of Programs at the Center for Gender Equitable AI, having led the #StopExplicitDeepfakes campaign last year.

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"TEEN TAKES"

The "Teen Takes" that follow were written in response to prompts sourced from caregivers and educators; questions I often hear in my ongoing work on adolescent digital health and wellbeing. To make participation accessible while still amplifying authentic perspectives, teens were invited to respond to a prompt of their choice in 500 words or fewer. Together, these responses provide a rare window into how young people themselves are answering the questions so many adults continue to ask about balance, belonging, and what it truly means to grow up well in a digital world.

Guest Editor Note: As with the Teen Op-Eds, these reflections were lightly edited for clarity and length, but their tone and perspective remain distinctly their own.

In your own words, what is "healthy screen/social media use?"

The first day of the phone ban at my school, I sat at my lunch table and stared at my empty hands. Normally, I would be scrolling through Instagram or texting friends, barely noticing the people around me. Instead, I looked up. For the first time in a long time, I saw my friends' faces instead of their profiles.

Healthy screen and social media use means finding a balance between being online and living your real life. It is about using your phone or computer in ways that do not take away from your health, relationships, or ability to focus in school. Screens are everywhere, and they can be useful. We rely on them for learning, staying in touch, and relaxing. But too much screen time, especially on social media, can start to do more harm than good.

At first, everyone was upset about the ban. We were used to checking our phones between classes or scrolling during lunch. The first week was awkward, and I kept reaching for my phone without even thinking about it. But after a while, something changed. Lunch tables weren't silent anymore. People were laughing and talking instead of staring at their screens. I also noticed I could focus better in class. Without constant notifications, I paid more attention and understood lessons better. That made me think about how I was using my phone outside of school.

One night, I looked up from my phone and realized an hour had passed without me even noticing. My homework was still sitting in front of me, untouched. It was a small moment, but it made me realize how often my phone was controlling my time instead of me controlling it. I spent hours scrolling through videos or comparing myself to people online. Many times, I would put my phone down, only to pick it back up when a notification appeared. Instead of finishing homework or studying, I stayed stuck in a cycle of mindless scrolling.

To me, healthy screen use means being aware of how much time I spend online and asking myself if it is really helping me or just filling time. It also means choosing what kind of content I see. I try to follow accounts that are positive or educational instead of ones that make me feel bad about myself. Social media can be fun and even inspiring, but it should never leave you feeling worse when you log off. Everyone needs to find their own balance. The key is making sure screen time does not replace real life. If you are always looking at a screen, you might miss the moments happening right in front of you. In the end, I learned that putting my phone down helps me feel more connected, not less. It is not about quitting screens completely. It is about using them in a way that supports your mental health and keeps you present in your own life.

ARVIN BAJWA
(AGE 15, BASKING RIDGE, NJ)

AUTHOR BIO:
My name is Arvin Bajwa and I'm a junior at Ridge High School in Basking Ridge, NJ. I enjoy playing competitive golf, and I am interested in biology and technology.

What do you wish your parents and caregivers knew about screentime or social media?

There are times when I find myself scrolling, not even realizing how much time has passed. It feels like falling into a loop I never really chose. At first it seems harmless, like I am just catching up with friends or laughing at a video, but before I know it hours have gone by. What started as a distraction slowly turns into endless comparisons. I begin to notice how perfect other people's lives look, how flawless they appear, how exciting their days seem. Even when I remind myself that what I am seeing is filtered and curated, the feeling of not measuring up lingers.

What I wish parents and caregivers understood is that this experience is not just about lacking self-control or spending too much time on a screen. Social media is designed to capture attention. The algorithms behind it are created to keep us scrolling, to feed us exactly what will pull us in deeper. It is not always our fault when we stay on longer than we want to. These platforms are built to make us hooked, and sometimes it feels impossible to fight against something that powerful.

The hardest part is what comes after the scrolling. The comparisons do not stop once the phone is put down. Seeing highlight reels of other people's lives makes it easy to believe that we are behind or not enough. Even knowing that much of it is not reality, the emotions feel real. The pressure to live up to what we see online can weigh heavily, leaving us drained and questioning ourselves.

So when parents see us staring at a screen, I hope they can look deeper than the surface. It is not just about wasting time. It is about being caught in an environment that is intentionally built to keep us there. What we need is not constant criticism or reminders that we are on our phones too much. What we need is understanding that the pull of these platforms is real, and that sometimes we are fighting against something bigger than our own willpower.

If parents and caregivers could see it this way, the conversations about screen time might feel less like blame and more like support. Because most of us do not actually want to spend hours online. We want balance, peace of mind, and the ability to be present without constant comparison. But that balance is hard to find when the platforms themselves are designed to make us lose it.

OLIVIA HOWARD
(AGE 15, VALLEY STREAM, NY)

AUTHOR BIO:

Olivia Howard is a high school student from Long Island who loves exploring new cultures, languages, and ideas. With a curious mind and big dreams, she's always chasing knowledge, adventure, and new ways to grow.

Are you or your friends "addicted" to social media? Why or why not?

Addiction: a disease perceivable to everyone except the addicted.

An individual visibly clutching a glass bottle, tilting it towards their mouth for every last drop of the tart liquid. A person who never leaves their home without a colorful rectangular container that fits into their pocket. A young adult sitting at a green table until 2 A.M., awaiting the high of seeing the next card hit the table.

This is what one often pictures when the word "addict" is uttered. But, the image of a young child with their phone glued to their hands is not the first thing to come to mind to young people themselves. Yet, it is probably the most common form of addiction, and I see it more than I would care to admit.

It's difficult to admit you are an addict; it's even more difficult to recognize you are addicted.

For the reasons above, my realization of the detrimental effects of my social media addiction was delayed. But once it hit me, I could not overlook the signs.

When one cannot sit at school without thinking of that one funny TikTok or when a teenager can't use the bathroom without their phone in their hands, it's indisputable that one is enslaved to their device.

I often hear the sentiment: "I can delete social media and be perfectly fine". Which can be true in a few rare and special cases.

I was one of the special few who thought social media's tight grasp around my brain was beatable. And, it was for the year I deleted TikTok, resisting the urge to redownload it over and over again. Yet, I finally did so last weekend.

Evidently, social media has a firm grip over many of us. And, we are addicted. But, admitting this is the first step in the right direction.

AUTHOR BIO:

AAHANA TAYAL
(AGE 17, SAN ROMAN, CA)

Aahana Tayal is a student leader passionate about youth mental health and community engagement. As a member of the Contra Costa Youth Mental Health Coalition, she works to amplify student voices in shaping mental health policy and programs.
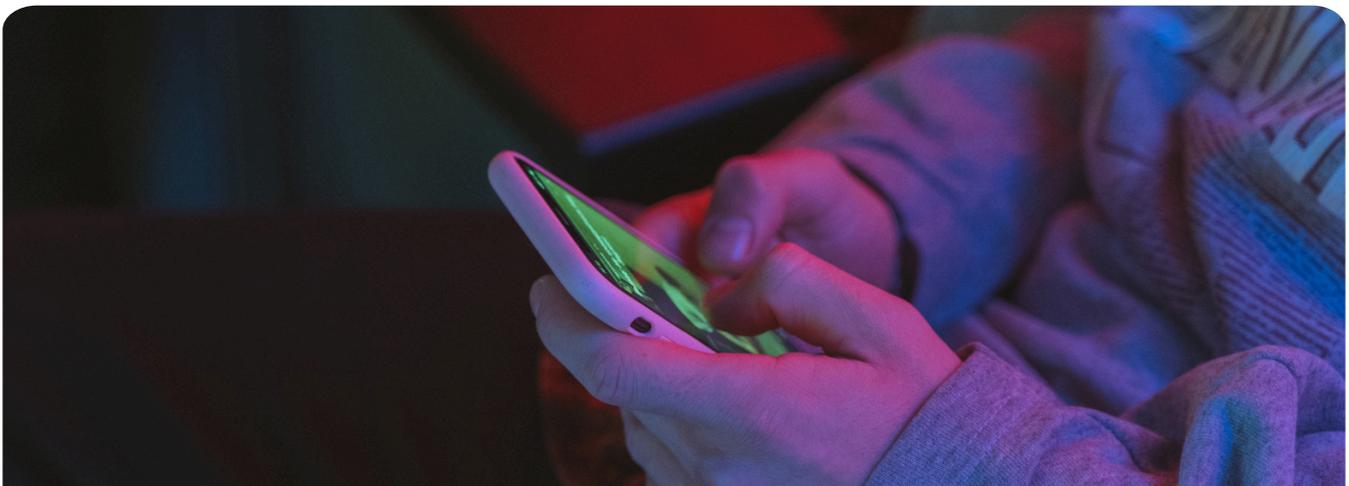
What's the hardest part about managing your screen or social media use, and how do you try to handle it?

At one point, community was defined as a group of people who worked together to gather food to survive. In general, when one thinks of community, they may subject themselves to the idea that we're divided based on components including racial and ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations, among other aspects. However, research for an essay I wrote in my senior English multimodal class, based on The Language of Composition (second edition), introduced the idea that community is a group of individuals with similar interests and values. Although the idea of pursuing endeavors is important, the individual's relationship to the community is what they bring—their unique perspectives and having a platform to share their experiences with others.

Modern day technology, particularly through the introduction of social media, has inherently affected how communities are formed, specifically for my generation. Platforms allow users to maintain connections with peers they may not have seen in a while or may not have even met. Personally, Instagram has provided the opportunity to keep up with the lives of peers I've met through summer programs or scholarship interviews, which I'm grateful for. But that's the thing—not in a backhanded way, what they, or generally anyone, post, are glimpses of their life they want us to see. Not every follower is my friend, because I don't think I even know 720+ people in real life, at least not on an intimate level.

Perhaps that part entangles me the most; we are so intertwined with the idea of community, which is important. I don't know if it's the algorithm that creates this sense of community—it feels great when someone likes your story or writes a thoughtful comment, though I can't help but feel as if I am cheating myself from creating genuine connections. So, I'm constantly doomscrolling.

As a recent high school grad, I reminisce on nostalgic moments like yearbook signings. We write "Friends Forever!" and gradually realize that it is inherent that some bonds are not meant to last forever. Social media distorts and complicates what used to be a "more organic process" of forming and letting go of friendships. Ouch. I feel this on another level, with the painful thoughts of forgetting the "good old days." So, when I click that "like" button, maybe it is a bit passive.

My dilemma, especially as a journalist, also stems from the desire of wanting to stay in the loop. I sometimes struggle to manage, so I delete Instagram every few days, reminded that we aren't paying money to use social media—we pay with our wellbeing. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community." What are we, as individuals doing to further our progress in fostering healthier and more mindful relationships with social media, especially for our youth, the future generation? This question—one that connects us—should drive us to foster the community we need in this day and age.

ANXHELIKA DEDA
(AGE 18, CT)

AUTHOR BIO:

Anxhelika Deda is an Albanian-American journalist and youth advocate passionate about mental health, digital wellbeing, and civic engagement. She has led student media teams, written for major publications like the Hartford Courant, and served on local education and nonprofit boards. She's dedicated to amplifying youth voices at the intersection of media, technology, and policy.

Are you or your friends "addicted" to social media? Why or why not?

Something that most people are surprised to learn about me is that I absolutely loved the summer when the world was in lockdown. It was the summer between sixth and seventh grade and I spent all my time trying out different crafts from "5-Minute Crafts," going outside to bike or hike with my family, or watching "Teen-Titans" with my younger sister. It was definitely not a tech-free summer, but one factor that separated me from my peers who started to struggle with their mental health during that period was that I did not have access to any social media aside from YouTube. I never experienced the 2020 "TikTok high" and I don't feel as though I missed anything. My interest in mental health was sparked when I came back to school after the lockdown and saw how much my friends were struggling—I learned about their online friends and how lonely they felt. I was surprised that people who had more access to connections through social media such as Instagram had felt more lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic than me, who had to use Google Hangouts to even communicate with my real friends. Flash forward to my freshman year of high school when I decided to pursue my interest in mental health more seriously and I found and joined the #GoodforMEdia team.

#GoodforMEdia is a youth-led initiative from the Stanford Center for Youth Mental Health & Wellbeing that advocates for helping youth practice healthier ways of engaging with media. Our goal is to highlight both the negative and positive aspects of social media and give youth perspectives a place in discussions regarding the future of social media and technology. I, personally, have attended a White House Kids Online Health & Safety Task Force Listening Session and spoken at a panel with Meta. I was surprised by both how ready adults were to listen to our ideas, and how little they knew about experiences that are a reality for so many youth around the world. As I see social media and technology continuing to advance at a rapid pace, I worry that we will cause more harm to young people before adults have even fully understood the nuances of the harm that has already been caused as well as what parts of media actually benefit teenagers. Issues on social media range from cyberbullying, to identity theft, to content that encourages harmful behaviors, to the spread of misinformation—with AI joining the mix, each of these issues are only being amplified.

It is also important to note that social media offers connections for young people who can't find affinity or acceptance with the community that is physically around them. Though online relationships should never be a substitute for real life ones, online communities are a great way for people to feel seen. In my opinion, it is not realistic or beneficial to focus our energy on completely eliminating social media (though I am not against age restrictions) and progress is more likely if we work on making the digital landscape safer and teaching youth the correct skills to navigate social media. Many youth feel shamed for using social media and becoming addicted, which is not fair because the algorithms are researched and designed to draw people in. It is important to educate both youth and parents so that social media addictions can be handled with care and understanding instead of in a way that can only lead to guilt and confusion.

AUTHOR BIO:

Zenia (she/her) is a senior in high school who is passionate about mental health and helping the people around her. She believes that it is very important for people to connect with others and share their stories. A tool to achieve this is social media, but unfortunately using it can have negative effects on one's day-to-day life as well.

ZENIA
(AGE 17, PALO ALTO, CA)

*Think of a time when you took a break from your phone or social media.
How did it feel, and what did you notice about yourself or your relationship?*

One of the most memorable times I took a real break from my phone and social media was during a trek in the Northern Himalayas. At first, I thought I would miss staying connected, but after a certain point, the internet was so weak that my phone became almost useless for browsing or scrolling.

In the beginning, I was still curious about what I might be "missing out on," but slowly, my attention shifted. I started noticing the beauty of the mountains around me, the calmness of nature, and even the little conversations and laughter with my fellow trekkers. It felt refreshing to be fully present in the moment, instead of constantly checking for updates.

When the trek ended, of course, there was some excitement to finally check my phone and catch up on messages and updates. But interestingly, that excitement lasted only a short while. Very quickly, I realized I didn't feel the same urge to open social media or scroll endlessly. The trek reminded me that when we divert our minds from screens and give ourselves space, we begin to see that most of what feels "urgent" online isn't really that important after all.

That break gave me perspective: sometimes disconnecting helps us reconnect more deeply, with ourselves, with people around us, and with the world we're in.

ROSSALLYN ROSTWALA
(AGE 22, GUJARAT, INDIA)

AUTHOR BIO:

Rosalyn Postwala is a
Management student from India.

What advice would you give to other teens about balancing online life and offline life?

Over the past few years, I have come to recognize the importance of creating a healthy balance between online life and personal life. One of the most valuable lessons I've learned and would encourage others to consider is the importance of establishing structure and routine. Social media can be extremely time-consuming, often leading us to spend hours scrolling through content that highlights the lives of others, rather than focusing on our own personal growth.

It's important to remember that the individuals we watch online are not directly contributing to our development; instead, our time and attention are what sustain their platforms.

By prioritizing what truly matters and investing in productivity that brings long-term benefits, we set ourselves up for growth and success in the future. Building a consistent routine plays a key role in this process, as it helps strengthen skills such as time management, productivity, and organization. For those who spend a significant amount of time on social media, taking even a short break—even 3 to 7 days—can be a powerful first step.. While the temptation to log back in may be strong, it's important to remember that stepping back is ultimately an act of self-investment. This intentional shift is about focusing on your own progress, personal well-being, and most importantly, your mental health.

Here's what taking a short break might look like:

In August, I made the intentional decision to step away from social media, specifically Instagram, by deactivating my account. I recognized that it was beginning to affect my mental health, lowering my motivation and consuming too much of my time. During that month, I focused on self-reflection and realigned my priorities, placing emphasis on my internship at the NYC Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health, preparing for my final year in college and maintaining my commitment to my fitness journey. Establishing a structured routine allowed me to strengthen my discipline and productivity. Personally, I did not feel the urge to log in to social media, which truly reinforced the idea that fulfillment comes from personal growth rather than constant online engagement. This decision also prompted my friends to personally reach out and check in on me, which truly highlighted the meaningful connections that exist outside of social platforms. By stepping back from the competitive nature of social media, I have had a rewarding experience, reminding me of the value in being present and intentional in my life."

VANESSA LOPEZ
(AGE 21, NEW YORK, NEW YORK)

AUTHOR BIO:

Vanessa is a Bronx-raised Latina majoring in Psychology at the city college of New York . She is a proud Moynihan Fellow and serves as chapter president and president of the national leadership council for the national society of collegiate scholars. Her previous work at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and New York City Mayors Office of Community Mental Health ties into her passion with mental health and serving the greater community. Vanessa hopes to give back to her community by obtaining her doctorate in Psychology (PSYD) and her becoming a clinical psychologist.

What advice would you give to other teens about balancing online and offline life?

Balancing online and offline life is a challenge we all struggle with, teens included. As we enter the era of AI, where technology is more prominent than ever in our daily lives, it is our duty and responsibility to better understand the balance between our technological use and offline lifestyle. When it comes to balancing online life and offline living, two important factors come into play.

The first factor to balancing both lifestyles is to better understand the fusion of the two. In today's life, it is near impossible to live an offline lifestyle without online factors. In teenage life, this challenge is magnified, as teenagers in the 21st century rely heavily on technological tools to live day to day life. This means that teens hold an even greater responsibility to understand the intersection of their online personality and their offline life. To understand how these two work hand in hand is to understand how to best use them to complement one another, rather than overpower each other.

The second factor in achieving said balance is to better understand the online environment created by each individual's technology usage. Humans are born with an intuition for offline life, and grow up provided with the necessary tools to navigate both society and their own individual lives. With online life, intuition is severely decreased, leading to many teens suffering from a "technological imbalance", in the sense that their online persona overpowers their offline way of life. This is due to the lack of education and tools in navigating online life, which quickly becomes personalized to each individual teen, appealing to their favorite parts of online life, and allowing them to forget the danger of said online environment.

To combat this, and achieve a balance, teens must proactively search for educational tools and resources, and understand what harm their seemingly beneficial online life may carry. When both these factors are realized, navigating online and offline life becomes much easier, and a balance can be reached that allows a teen to overcome barriers online, offline, and in their future, painting a better journey for the teen, and a better society for all to live in.

AUTHOR BIO:

AHMED OTHMAN
(AGE 19, MASSACHUSETTS)

Ahmed Othman is a first-year student at Northeastern University majoring in Biochemistry. He carries a strong passion for educating others about the online environment that shapes many of our daily experiences—particularly focusing on helping youth understand how their online presence can influence their wellbeing and future. Outside of school and advocacy, he enjoys cooking and playing a variety of sports, including wrestling, tennis, and spikeball.
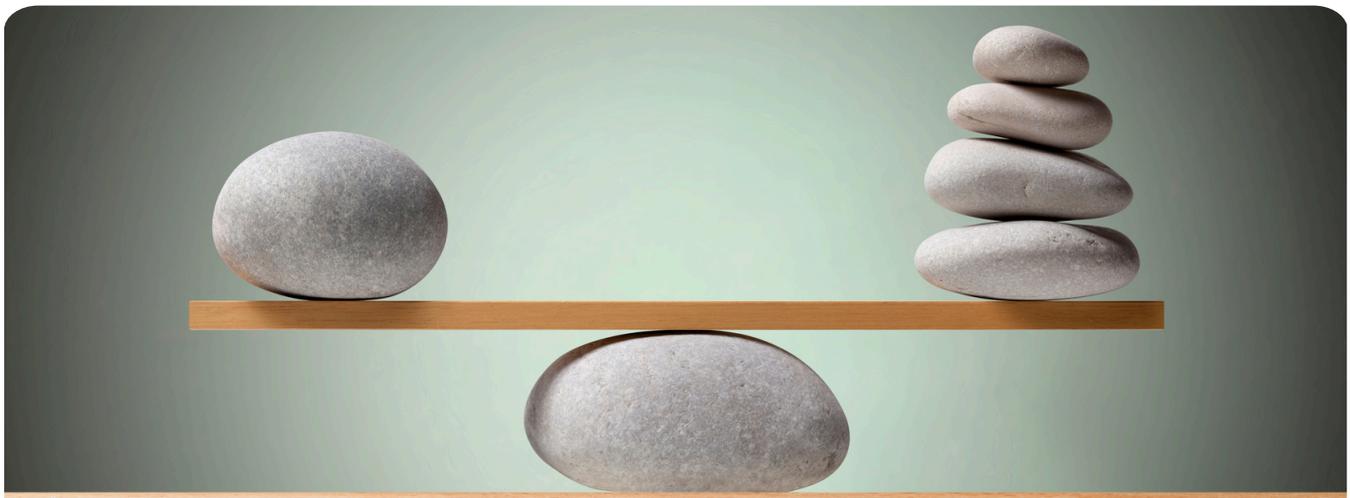
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