

Increased Rates of Reported Depression in a Pandemic-Era of Excessive Teenage Social Media Use

Sierra Lai
Sierralogan5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with reported increases in hopelessness, sadness, and general mental health concerns for teenagers in the U.S., alongside increased social media usage in a context of evolving media platform regulations and widespread school closures. This review asks the following question: How has social media usage contributed to depression in American teenagers since the COVID-19 pandemic started? To answer this, this study systematically reviewed 21 articles published in psychology, psychiatry, behavioral health, and sociology from 2020 to 2025 on causes of teenage depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid increase in teenage social media usage, which has been linked to higher levels of depression through exposure to stressful news and media promoting unrealistic standards for physical appearance, life, and achievements. Unhealthy coping mechanisms implemented to cope with stress and social isolation during the pandemic, including substance use and increased overall screen time, further contributed to worsening depression among teenagers. The COVID-19 pandemic's varied impact on teenage mental health across race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic stability highlighted the disparities in access to adequate mental health support in American healthcare systems. This paper argues that recent literature concerned with the increased rates of teenage depression in the US reveals that such increases are pandemic-induced and may be best conceptualized as a type of depression outbreak among adolescents in a critical stage of psychological development.

Keywords: depression, social media, teenagers, pandemic, psychological anthropology

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, CNN found that more than half of parents reported a decline in their teenager's mental health since the beginning of the pandemic (Marples 2021). The Washington Post reported that the CDC found that nearly 45 percent of high school students in 2021 were unable to participate in everyday activities due to overwhelming sadness and hopelessness (St. George 2022). In 2022, The World Health Organization (WHO) listed social isolation and lack of social support as potential factors for the global increase in depression in the first year of the pandemic. However, it overlooks the increased amount of time spent on social media as a factor for teenage depression. Social media algorithms are designed to be addictive and

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deliberately target teenagers to maximize engagement and profit (Duffy 2025). As of October 2025, only 10 states have passed laws requiring parental permission or age verification for minors on social media (AVPA).

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted adolescents' social and educational environments, contributing to worsening mental health outcomes. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic. By March 25, 2020, all U.S. public school buildings had closed due to health concerns, and by May 6, all states except Wyoming and Montana had closed their schools for the 2019-2020 academic year (Decker 2020). Health guidelines from the WHO included getting vaccinated, keeping a minimum distance of 1 meter away from people, avoiding large crowds, and wearing a properly fitted mask. Students began to adapt academically to online learning, using platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Canvas to continue education. According to a New York Times Student Opinion Forum, the pandemic "made it so that I didn't socialize with anyone, and when I did, it was through a screen", and "people spent a lot more time on their phones and were a lot less likely to talk to new people" (The Learning Network). Adolescent symptoms of depression include loss of energy and motivation, low self esteem, poor school performance, and self harm (Mayo Clinic). The number of global teenage depression cases have nearly doubled from 1990-2021, and are predicted to continue increasing (Zhu et al.).

Between 2019 and 2021, the average teenage screen media usage increased from 7 hours and 22 minutes to 8 hours and 39 minutes per day (Rideout et al.). Students claimed that social media allowed them to live "vicariously through my favorite social media influencers" during the pandemic and that they "spent more time surrounded by algorithms on social media than we did surrounded by other people" (The Learning Network). Teenage social media use has been found to lower self esteem, increase feelings of loneliness, and increase rates of depression and anxiety. By May 2021, more than half of US public school children were enrolled in full-time in person learning, and 98 percent of public schools offered in person learning by September 2021 (National Center For Education Statistics).

Depression in teenagers can cause behavioral changes such as poor academic performance, social isolation, substance use, and self harm. Experiencing depression as a teenager has been linked to chronic mental health issues, strained personal relationships, and lower incomes in adulthood (Chang and Kuhlman). 55 million American students were impacted by COVID-19 school closures, and the long term social and emotional impacts of the pandemic require further research. The relationship between teenagers, social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased depressive symptoms can be understood using the Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that in unclear times, individuals will naturally evaluate their self worth and personal performance by comparing themselves to others (Sisler 2021). Curated content from influencers and peers on social media platforms can heighten this social comparison process, which can ultimately influence social media users' evaluation of self worth. This literature review aims to answer the following question: Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, how has social media usage contributed to depression in American teenagers?

METHODS

This study is a systematic literature review examining the relationship between social media usage in teenagers and depression following the COVID-19 pandemic. Articles were identified using PubMed through keywords including “depression”, “social media”, “America”, “teenagers”, and “pandemic” in my search. The initial search was conducted on January 26, 2026, and yielded 27 articles on PubMed on the date of my search. Articles yielded in the search were published in the following disciplines: psychology, psychiatry, behavioral health, and sociology.

Studies were included if they (1) focused on adolescents, teenagers, or young adults, (2) examined depression or related mental health outcomes, (3) addressed social media usage, and (4) were conducted in North America. Included studies were published between 2020-2025. When referring to adolescents, I use the WHO definition of an adolescent as “the phase of life between childhood and adulthood from ages 10 to 19. When referring to teenagers, I use the definition commonly used by the literature published in this area which is ages 13 to 19. The term young adults can apply to ages 18 to 30, but I use “young adults” to refer to a population early in adulthood, aged 18 to 25. I incorporate all three terms when discussing my findings in the research literature to include a larger population in my analysis.

Studies were excluded if they (1) focused primarily on a middle-aged or older population, (2) studied populations outside of North America, or (3) did not directly examine mental health outcomes. Using this criteria 6 articles were excluded in the yield that were not related to teenagers, depression, the United States and social media. This included articles that were geographically outside of the US.

Topics were identified through repeated thematic patterns that emerged from the included studies. These themes included (1) the relationship between social media use and depression systems, (2) coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) disparities in mental health support among different teenage demographics.

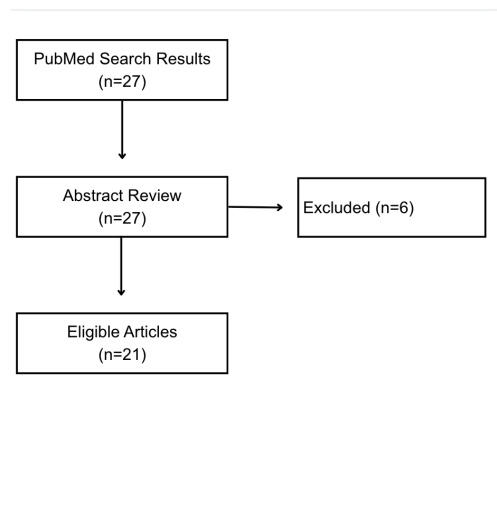


Figure 1: Flowchart for studies in the systematic review.

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USING SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASES SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION AMONG TEENAGERS

Adolescents who spent a higher number of hours on social media were more likely to have depression and anxiety symptoms. Murata (2022) found that increased amounts of social media use in adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic predicted symptoms of depression. This study reveals that the level of social media use is a factor for teenage depression. Fruehwirth (2024) found that 18 months into the pandemic, social media had a significant negative impact on college students' anxiety and depressive symptoms. This reveals that social media use continued to impact the mental health of young adults after a return to in-person learning.

Exposure to unrealistic standards and racial discrimination through social media may have increased stress levels in adolescent lives. Bauman (2022) found that social media comparison, or comparing one's own appearance, life, and achievements to the curated personas of others online, was a social stressor for Pittsburgh adolescents between March 2020 and March 2021, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Woolf (2025) found that social media pressures adolescents to compare themselves to idealized versions of others online, fostering negative body image and low self esteem. Woolf's (2025) findings reveal that social media exerts unrealistic physical and social expectations on youth and contributes to negative mental health symptoms. Similarly, Chu (2025) found that social media platforms exposed Black and Asian American teenagers to racial discrimination, increasing their stress levels. Chu's findings suggest that other racial minorities experienced online discrimination using social media platforms. This recent literature in media studies together suggests that societal pressures and racist content contributed to teenage depression during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of social media.

Viewing or interacting with COVID-19 related media through social media platforms may increase symptoms of anxiety and depression among teenagers. Increased exposure to COVID related media was associated with higher risk of suicidal behavior in adolescents (Murata 2022). This reflects a negative relationship between exposure to stressful content and adolescent mental health. Similarly, Hologue (2020) found an association between searching online or posting on social media about the pandemic, and greater psychological distress in American adults. Frequent exposure to distressing news through internet access was found to negatively impact the mental health of young adults (Brunette 2023). This reveals that creating or interacting with COVID-19 related media during the pandemic increased stress levels in many Americans. Ultimately, this recent research on the impact of distressing pandemic media suggests that frequent use of social media and exposure to distressing news contribute to teenage depression symptoms.

During COVID-19, while adolescents used social media to communicate virtually, overreliance on social media limited meaningful connections for many adolescents. Cingel (2022) found that adolescents in virtual learning environments were more likely to report problematic social media use than adolescents in hybrid or in-person learning. Bauman (2022) found that youth reported that their peers believed that their "social life is online" and "think that's so sad", reflecting the negative feelings towards online

socialization among the teenage participants in this collaborative film making study. However, higher amounts of social media use in college students was also associated with lower suicide risks (Bountress 2022). This study reveals the complexity of the relationship between social media usage and mental health during prolonged periods of social isolation, like what was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online communities can help teens maintain healthy relationships and emotional support, which can be accessed through social media platforms when in-person connections are restricted or unavailable. Ultimately, the recent literature published on online socialization suggests that social media use did not provide sufficient social connection to adolescents in a virtual learning environment.

UNHEALTHY COPING MECHANISMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Motivation for social distancing impacted teenage implementation of COVID-19 health protocols during the pandemic. Oosterhoff's (2020) March 2020 survey of teenagers found that 98.1% of the participants reported engaging in social distancing, and teenagers motivated by social responsibility and state lockdowns were more likely to engage in social distancing than those motivated by convenience. These findings reveal the extent to which government social distancing guidelines impacted teenage lives during the pandemic, and how different motives impacted the extent to which teenagers complied with these guidelines. Public understanding of safety measures such as vaccination, social distancing, and wearing a mask was important for actually implementing the behavior (Charide 2022). Additionally, Charide (2022) found that youth aged 15-24 accessed COVID-19 health guidelines and decided whether to implement safety measures independent of their guardians. Charide's findings reveal how comprehension of safety guidelines impacted whether teenagers implemented them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Different coping mechanisms impacted adolescent mental health changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Canadian students who used coping mechanisms such as having a routine, connecting online with friends, and exercising experienced fewer negative mental health changes than students who coped by spending time alone and eating junk food (Riazi 2023). A longitudinal cohort study from May 2020-April 2021 in Ontario, Canada found that higher levels of digital media usage were associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and inattention in 6 to 18 year olds (Li 2021). The literature suggests that teenagers using electronics to cope were more likely to experience negative mental health during the pandemic.

Substance use during the pandemic was associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety. In a 2021 survey, people with symptoms of anxiety or depression were more likely to report an increase in alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic (Capasso 2021). Students who drank alcohol, vaped, ate junk food, and spent time alone were associated with having a greater decrease on the 8-item Flourishing Scale (FS) (Riazi 2023). College students experiencing greater COVID-related exposure, stress, housing/food instability, and an increase in substance use reported higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms (Bountress 2022). The literature suggests that there is a correlation between increasing alcohol consumption during the pandemic and higher levels of depression.

Social isolation during the pandemic potentially contributed to teenagers feeling disconnected from their peers. During the 2020-2021 school year, adolescents aged 14-16 in virtual schooling reported feeling less socially connected with their classmates than before 2020 (Cingel 2022). Implementing social distancing using online education could increase loneliness in teenagers. A perceived increase in social isolation in college students during COVID-19 was also associated with higher anxiety and depression levels (Fruehwirth 2024). This suggests that feeling socially isolated due to social distancing policies potentially contributed to teenage mental health issues during this time.

INCREASED DEPRESSION AMONG AMERICAN TEENAGERS WITH A GAP IN ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Askari (2024) concluded from an integrative literature review that between 1991 and 2020, rates of depression in adolescents have risen significantly. The National Youth Tobacco Survey estimated that 34% of high school students had ever used a tobacco product, and the most common reported reason for teenage use of e-cigarettes is feeling symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression (Gentzke 2022).

Gender and sexual identity was also identified as a factor in mental health during the pandemic. About 60% of LGBTQ college students experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Gonzales 2020). Woolfe (2025) reports that LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to struggle with mental health issues. The literature suggests that teenagers in the LGBTQ community were more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender was also found to be a factor in teenage depression. Woolf (2025) reports that suicidal ideations and suicide attempts in girls are more common than in boys. As suicide ideations are a symptom of severe depression, Woolfe's (2025) findings indicate a significant difference in depression between boys and girls. Liu (2021) found that girls had an earlier and more pronounced increase in depressive symptoms during the pandemic than boys. However, Liu (2021) found no difference in reported loneliness between girls and boys in this study. This suggests that teenage girls in America were more likely to experience greater symptoms of depression during the pandemic than boys.

Race is another factor to consider in mental health services. Chu (2025) reports that the racial demographic of psychologists and psychiatrists does not accurately reflect the racial demographic of youth with psychiatric needs, advocating for the increased need for racially conscious therapists. Brunette (2023) reported that American young adults identifying as White were more likely to report receiving mental health services than those identifying as Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Szkody (2025) found that social media advertisements for digital single-session interventions underrepresented rural teens with racial minority identities. These findings suggest that non-white Americans are less likely to receive adequate mental health care.

A PANDEMIC-INDUCED DEPRESSION OUTBREAK AMONG TEENAGERS ONLINE

As the COVID-19 pandemic caused nationwide school closures and social distancing regulations, American teenagers adapted to online socialization through increased use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, and Snapchat. These apps were used for communication, maintaining and forming friendships, and providing a sense of community online. However, using these platforms increased teenage exposure to stressful news and media promoting unrealistic standards for physical appearance, life, and achievements, fostering increased depression and anxiety symptoms in many teenagers during the pandemic. Content promoting racial hate also contributed to increased stress levels in Black and Asian Americans during this time. This could best be understood as a pandemic-induced increase of social media use among American teenagers. Pandemic-induced refers to the intensified impact of social distancing measures on the behavior of teenagers, specifically as an accelerated increase in the use of social media platforms. The concept of pandemic-induced behavior can also be applied to other age groups outside of teenagers, as well as future pandemics to examine the impacts of public health measures on high levels of social media usage.

Teenagers also exhibited unhealthy behaviors to cope with the implementation of social isolation policies during the pandemic. During this period of social isolation, many teenagers reported increased loneliness and depression. Coping mechanisms included increased substance use, such as alcohol, tobacco, and vaping, and increased overall internet usage and screen time, which was found to be linked with more intense symptoms of depression. Public health researchers have defined a “depression outbreak” as a sudden, significant increase in the prevalence of depressive symptoms or disorders within a population, often triggered by widespread stressors like pandemics, natural disasters, or severe economic crises (Bueno-Notivol 2020). This can be observed with COVID-19, in which pandemic-induced excessive social media usage cultivated a sharp increase in teenage depressive symptoms.

The COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on mental health highlighted existing disparities among American teenagers. While teenage depression rates have been steadily increasing, many minority groups face a greater risk of struggling with mental health issues since the COVID-19 pandemic. Girls during the pandemic reported higher levels of depression than boys, and teenagers identifying as part of the LGBTQ community were more likely to struggle with mental health issues. Non-white American teens were less likely to receive adequate mental health care. While the impact of COVID-19 on teenagers’ mental health is best framed as a pandemic-induced depression outbreak, there are differences in the experiences of teenagers linked to racialization, gender, sexual orientation, and economic stability that magnify these symptoms and are often overlooked. In this paper, the term “depression outbreak” is used to describe the sharp increase in depressive symptoms among teenagers during the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to a clinical classification. Many long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teenagers have yet to fully appear, and will be entangled in race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic stability in specific ways that reflect gaps in adequate mental health care access in the US privatized healthcare landscape.

This systematic review is limited by the North American focus in existing literature on teenagers, depression, and social media usage. Within the North American focus, the literature primarily focuses on

American populations, and among the 21 included articles, only 2 studied populations outside of the United States; they were both Canadian populations. Correlation studies are a common research approach to these topics, and are well represented in the included articles reviewed. Many of these studies are connecting social media usage with increased depressive symptoms, but often causation cannot be definitively established because of the complexity of researching depression and social media usage among teens. Relying on secondary literature without original empirical data can limit the ability to contribute to, or refine causal conclusions.

CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a pandemic-induced increase in time spent on social media by adolescents. This spike in social media usage has been linked to an increase in teenage depression through increased exposure to stressful news and media promoting unrealistic standards for physical appearance, life, and achievements. Unhealthy coping mechanisms used by teenagers to cope with stress and social isolation during the pandemic, including substance use and increased overall screen time, were also linked to worse depressive symptoms. The COVID-19 pandemic's varied impact on teenage mental health across race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic stability highlighted the disparities in access to adequate mental health support in American healthcare.

The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of American teenagers have yet to fully appear, and the rates of depression in this population should be studied longitudinally as they enter later stages of life, with a focus on race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic stability. Understanding this depression outbreak will become increasingly important as this population enters the workforce. Experiencing a depression outbreak will have serious impacts on socialization, belonging, and hope for the future, over the life course in ways that are not yet known. Additional research on the impact of extreme increases in social media usage during a pandemic on both teenagers' developing brains and their social lives should also be conducted to adequately inform the regulation, policymaking, and safety guidelines for new and existing social media platforms to ensure the mental well-being of young social media users.

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