



Is social media harming students?

Social networking may increase engagement and facilitate collaboration, but its growth in recent years has caused concern and created new, and potentially dangerous, pressures on children

Illustration Robbie Cathro

Social media networks, which are designed to increase social interactions, ironically often have the opposite effect.

Uploading a tweet or video can have the power to make people feel happier and more important, or deflated and anxious – depending on the amount of ‘likes’ received.

In the September 2015 issue of *IB World* magazine, we explored the wealth of possibilities social media creates: it brings schools around the world together, helps create exciting lessons and puts students in touch with people who would otherwise be inaccessible. However, it is now widely acknowledged that, if used excessively, social media can cause more harm than good, affecting development and wellbeing.



Depression, anxiety and body image concerns

The need to be constantly available and respond 24/7 to alerts on social media can cause depression, anxiety and reduce sleep quality for teenagers, according to research from the University of Glasgow in Scotland.

Another study from the University of Pittsburgh, US, found that participants who most frequently checked social media throughout the week were 2.7 times more likely to be depressed, compared with those who checked their social media accounts least frequently. Researchers cited that this could be due to three things: exposure to highly idealized representations of peers can elicit negative feelings; excessive use can fuel an ‘internet addiction’, which is closely linked to depression; and spending more time on social media may increase the risk of exposure to cyberbullying.

However, the study also said that it may be that people who already are depressed turn to social media to fill a void. Brian Primack, director of Pitt’s Center for

Research on Media, Technology and Health, calls this a ‘vicious circle’.

“We were shocked by our findings. Media and technology are double-edged swords that have great potential and power, but also have some concerning aspects that we need to address,” he says.

“Social media interaction can give people a distorted view of the world. The way these platforms are structured, people are sending out curated versions of their lives. It can seem like everyone else is leading a happier, more successful life. This can make people feel left out and lead to decreased ability to function at school and at work, and, in serious cases, cause anxiety and depression.

“Social media is also a place where people post about dramatic and scary things that happen in the world, which can cause anxiety – as everything is magnified.”

The same university found that frequently logging on to social media sites is linked to young adults developing a negative view of how they look. Participants who spent the most time on social media had 2.2 times the risk of reporting an eating and body image concern.

But what is considered excessive social media use? “There aren’t specific definitions at the moment,” says Primack. “There is a category called ‘problematic internet use’ (PIU). This is when increased social media use leads to significant interpersonal conflict; decreased ability to function in other areas of life; or if an individual experiences withdrawal symptoms.”



Loss of concentration and other fundamental skills

Although social media can enhance creativity, as it encourages collaboration, it can have other consequences. English Teacher Lorna Page, from the International School of Stavanger, Norway,

says: “My students struggle to concentrate for long periods of time because everything needs to be instant. It’s the ‘now’ generation, and asking students to do any reading or sustained writing for any longer than 10 minutes can be a real challenge.”



The growth of narcissism

Numerous studies claim to have made direct links between the increase in narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and social media. Behaviours such as attempting to attract more followers, wanting to tell followers about your life, and the need to project a positive image at all times have been described by researchers as examples of exhibiting narcissistic personality traits on social media. Too much narcissism can lead to an inflated ego, a lack of empathy, and being highly reactive to criticism.

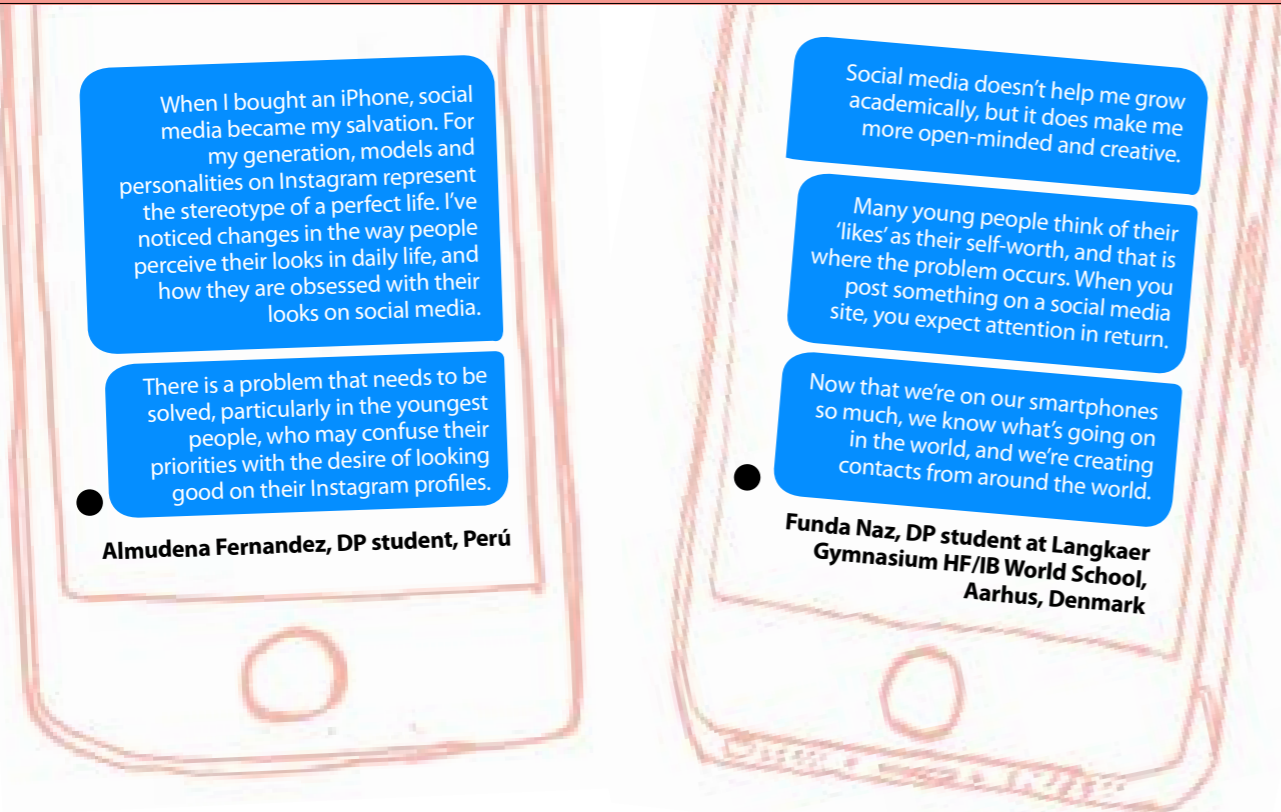
“There is a competitiveness to get more likes,” says Page. “Children equate the number of followers and likes with how well liked they are in real life, which affects self-esteem and wellbeing. There is a pressure to post and comment every day and if they don’t, then there is something wrong.”

But is it pre-existing narcissism that makes social media so popular? Speaking to the UK’s *The Guardian* newspaper, Lucy Clyde, a counsellor and psychotherapist, believes everyone has narcissistic tendencies, but we’re more aware of these traits because of the prevalence of social media.

“In terms of a personality disorder, social media isn’t the cause, but an expression. If you’re a narcissist, you’re looking for a positive reflection of yourself and curating your life heavily on social media,” she says.

“What is important is how other people see you and your life is geared towards creating a positive impression,” adds Clyde. “Like taking huge care to capture the perfect selfie, as this stuff stays online forever. That’s a unique pressure and it has to create a

What the students say...



painfully pressured state of mind. It has the potential to amplify pre-existing narcissism.”

But gaining gratification from the number of likes we have essentially comes down to how our brains are wired, according to a University of California study. The same brain circuits that are activated by eating chocolate and winning money are engaged when teenagers see large numbers of likes on their own photos.



Banning and blocking sites

One way to avoid exposing children to the dangerous trends that come from social media – such as the ‘cinnamon challenge’, which sees people trying to swallow a tablespoon of cinnamon powder, or the ‘Kylie Jenner challenge’, where thousands

of girls attempted to plump up their lips, sometimes causing irreversible damage – is to ban all platforms.

In China, for example, unless you're living and/or working within a 17 square mile area of Shanghai, you cannot use social networking sites because the government prohibits people receiving uncensored messages. But this has hindered learning and makes it difficult to teach 21st-century skills, says Brian Lalor, Head of Primary at Xi'an Hi-Tech International School, China. They instead use Skype to interact with schools around the world. People in China also use alternative sites, such as Weibo instead of Twitter and Renren instead of Facebook.

Lalor does see some benefits in censorship: “Children are exposed to social media at too young an age. It seems to me that children in China have a special kind of innocence that is long lost in the West.”

Charlie Smith is Co-Founder of GreatFire, a not-for-profit organization that monitors the status of websites censored by the ‘Great Firewall of China’ and helps Chinese internet users circumvent the blockage of some sites. He believes censorship has harmed academia.

“The Chinese are not able to get access to information and resources, which means they cannot make informed decisions,” he says. “Considering China has over 700 million internet users, censorship does more harm than good. Educators and parents need to learn how to use social media to enhance a child’s education.”



Follow the four bees

It might seem drastic to ban all social media platforms, especially as they can be very useful tools in the classroom, but it's important for children to be aware of the dangers present on the internet. In the UK, an estimated 5.43 million young people have experienced some form of cyberbullying, with 1.26 million subjected

to extreme cyberbullying on a daily basis, according to ditchthelabel.com.

At the International School of Stavanger, students are educated about the risks, but Page is concerned at the pace of change: “One of the challenges for teachers is keeping abreast of how students engage with social media,” she says. “We need to ensure that it doesn't spoil classroom learning, and maintain a healthy balance.”

PYP students at ISS International School Singapore are encouraged to have a Twitter account and contribute to a class blog. As the children move through the school, they become involved in writing the blog and tweeting. This provides teachable moments of digital citizenship that can be applied to their personal use of social media, says PYP Teacher Gemma Cass. “We discuss our behaviour policy, the ‘Four Bees’ (Be Safe, Be Honest, Be Responsible, Be Respectful), which offer guidelines for the use of the internet.

“We encourage students to think about the effects their posts have on themselves and others and use teachable moments, such as cyberbullying, to develop understanding of the strength of social media.”

Cass works with parents to encourage the implementation of the same guidelines at home: “This is successful in ensuring continuity, and an open forum where students voluntarily share with an adult when they have seen something unsuitable or upsetting.”

How to handle social media

So can teachers achieve a healthy balance? IB Director General Dr Siva Kumari believes that, working together, the IB and



teachers can manage the situation: “Both the IB and educators need to focus on how we put in place policies that advise the

What do students use...



Students are so spoilt for choice with the ever-growing number of ways to keep in touch with friends that it's hard for parents and teachers to keep up. Here's a list of just a few:

Twitter 320 million people around the world use Twitter to communicate

LinkedIn The professional networking website lowered its age restriction to 13 to connect students

Periscope A live video streaming service with 10 million users

Facebook The most popular social networking website on the planet

Beme A video messaging app that enables users to create short videos

WhatsApp Allows users to connect with friends and family via free messages and calls

Snapchat A smartphone-based app that allows users to send ‘snaps’

Instagram The photo and video-sharing app can be used in 25 languages

YouTube Video-sharing website used by around a third of the population

Tumblr This microblogging and photo sharing website is most popular among younger people



adults in the system on helping students to better tackle the already omnipresent use of media – social or otherwise,” she says.

“The anonymity of the internet allows people to create what they think are undiscoverable personas and behave in ways that society would take exception to were they to do so in person. The IB needs to ensure that schools are equipped to educate children about the use of media and the need to be principled despite the use of all these tools. That is a task worth taking on.”

Cass agrees that schools should create a set of guidelines for how social media is used and taught, which should be reviewed regularly to stay up-to-date.

“We should be careful that social media is used when appropriate and that we do not become over-reliant on it, as this could encourage students to become dependent on social media themselves,” she adds.

Teachers and parents shouldn't ban social media use, says Primack, but instead limit it and encourage alone time, which enhances creativity. “Encourage in-person relationships and creative activities. When people spend two hours creating and learning something or engaged in an activity, versus spending two hours on social media looking at what everyone else is doing, there is a big difference in how they feel and there is a sense of accomplishment.”

He also encourages teachers to ask students to think critically and not to take everything at face value. He adds: “We are all going to use social media. It's extremely valuable in so many ways so we don't want to get rid of it; we want to make its use more valuable. We want children to think critically, analyse and evaluate what they see. It's about using the medium to help us and not falling prey to the negatives.”