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 cyberbullying.

However, the study also said that it may be that people who are already 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 concerns.

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

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
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 a study. The same brain circuits that are engaged when teenagers see how many people engage with their posts on social media.

There is a problem that needs to be solved, particularly in the youngest people, who may confuse their priorities with the desire of looking good on their Instagram profiles.

Many young people think of their personal lives as something to boast about. When you post something on a social media site, you expect attention in return. "Likes" as their self-worth, and that is what they are obsessed with. Parenting and teachers need to learn how to use social media to enhance a child's education.

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 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 undiscernible 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.

“Children are educated about the risks, but 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 others and family are 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.”

Social media

What do students say...

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

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

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

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

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

There is a problem that needs to be solved, particularly in the youngest people, who may confuse their priorities with the desire of looking good on their Instagram profiles.

What the students say...

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