

Social media 'likes', infinite scrolling, direct messaging linked to poorer youth mental health

Harm depends on not just time spent online, but also how youth interact on platforms: Report

Gabrielle Chan

Certain social media features like direct messaging, which may expose young users to cyberbullying, and autoplay functions, which encourage prolonged use, pose risks to the mental health of youth.

These were among the features highlighted by an expert panel convened by the Ministry of Health in September 2025 to study the mental health impact of social media use. On July 30, the panel released a 20-page report consolidating findings and recommendations for healthier and safer social media use among young people.

The report said that harm depends not just on time spent online, but also how young people interact on these platforms – including whether they encounter manipulative design features – and whether social media crowds out activities essential for their well-being.

Problematic use, marked by compulsive or addictive habits, was more closely linked to poor well-being than time spent online alone, the report found.

The panel grouped platform features of concern into three categories: those that expose users to safety risks, encourage prolonged use and worsen mental health outcomes.

The eight-member panel is co-chaired by Lim Choon Guan, chief and senior consultant of the Institute of Mental Health's department of developmental psychiatry, and Jungup Lee, co-director of NUS' So-

cial Service Research Centre.

FEATURES THAT PUT YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK

DIRECT MESSAGING

Direct messaging – private one-to-one or group chats – can expose young users to unknown adults, creating opportunities for cyberbullying, sexual grooming, harassment or unwanted sexual content, the panel said.

The risk is heightened by anonymous or pseudonymous accounts. They reduce accountability, embolden bad behaviour and make it harder for victims to identify or report the people targeting them.

The consequences can be severe. About one in five young people in Singapore aged between 15 and 35 reported having been cyberbullied, and those who had experienced cyberbullying were about twice as likely to report symptoms of depression or anxiety than those who had not.

INFINITE SCROLL AND AUTOPLAY

Infinite scroll and autoplay keep users on platforms longer, and may have been "deliberately designed" to maximise engagement time, the panel said, adding that this may contribute to problematic or addictive patterns of social media use.

Unlike a TV episode or a newspaper, which has a clear endpoint, these features create what the panel called "an effectively boundless stream of content" that plays on people's urge to keep seeking something new.

By removing natural stopping points, they encourage users to keep scrolling, often at the cost of sleep, learning, exercise, social re-

lationships and their responsibilities.

Young people, who may be less able to regulate their own use, are especially at risk, the panel added.

FEEDS CURATED BY ALGORITHMS

Feeds that rank content by engagement can end up showing users more harmful content than they would otherwise encounter. This is because distressing or emotionally charged content tends to get more engagement, the panel said.

A national survey in Australia found that about half of respondents had come across self-harm or suicide-related content on social media, often by accident, and in nearly half of the cases, before the age of 16.

Young people were exposed more often than adults, the panel said, and most said such exposure worsened their mood. Some respondents said it led them to self-harm in ways similar to what they had seen online.

"This is particularly concerning given the evidence that adolescents may lack maturity to cogently process such content and recognise its effect on themselves," the panel added.

VISIBLE 'LIKES', COMMENTS AND 'FOLLOWS'

Visible metrics – "like" counts, follower numbers and public comments – can worsen social comparison and the need for validation, with damaging effects on self-esteem and emotional well-being, the panel said.

It cited a series of studies in which adolescents who received fewer "likes" than their peers in a simulated exercise felt more rejected, had more negative thoughts

about themselves and reported more negative emotions. The World Health Organisation defines adolescents as those aged 10 to 19.

These effects were linked to greater depressive symptoms, the panel said, adding that those who already experienced bullying at school were most vulnerable.

Reducing one's social standing to numbers like "likes" and followers can create intense pressure for adolescents whose sense of identity and self-worth are still developing.

THE WIDER MENTAL HEALTH PICTURE

The panel found that problematic social media use is more broadly linked to poorer mental health. This is backed by a growing body of local and international evidence.

In Singapore, about two in five teens aged 15 to 17 who spent more than three hours daily on social media report severe symptoms of depression. Young people who showed more addiction-like symptoms of social media use had poorer overall mental well-being.

Anxiety and depression are two of the most consistently documented mental health outcomes associated with problematic social media use, said the panel.

Young people already struggling with anxiety or depression may turn to social media for comfort, but this could backfire, it said. This coping behaviour "can paradoxically worsen the very conditions it seeks to soothe, as problematic use may deepen over time and displace healthier forms of support and regulation", creating a vicious circle.

The panel added that heavy social media use disrupts sleep, which can in turn worsen depression and anxiety symptoms.

"These explanations suggest that the relationship between problematic social media use and poor mental health is not one-directional – one can worsen the other over time," the panel said.

Problematic use is also linked to lower life satisfaction, particularly in early adolescence – around the ages of 11 to 13 for girls and 14 to 15 for boys. It can intensify social comparison, which can fuel body-image concerns and unhealthy eating habits, often driven by idealised portrayals of others' lives online.

In Singapore, about one in five young people aged 15 to 35 reported moderate to severe body-shape concerns, and were four to five times more likely to experience severe depression or anxiety.

gabchan@sph.com.sg

Problematic social media use, marked by compulsive or addictive habits, was more closely linked to poor well-being than time spent online alone, according to the report by an expert panel convened by the Ministry of Health to examine the impact of social media use on young people's mental health. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE

