

Youth Report Social Media Usage Impacting Their Self Worth And Mental Health

68 percent of the respondents reported difficulties with focusing, and 52 percent admitted they frequently got distracted by social media during their class at school.



AsianScientist (Aug. 13, 2025) –Researchers from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore-based research agency Research Network, in collaboration with US-based AI platform ListenLabs.ai conducted a study across Singapore and Australia, surveying more than 500 young people and their parents. The study found that prolonged social media use is associated with teens reporting having difficulties in sustaining focus, increased emotional fatigue, and behaviors resembling addiction.

The report is the first in a new series of white papers exploring the impact of social media on young minds.

The researchers examined the views of 583 youth between the ages of 13 and 25, along with their parents through an innovative AI-driven interviewing platform called Listen Labs.

Participants for the study were selected based on their age, social media usage, and location. They took part in voice-based semi-structured interviews, during which questions were presented as text on their mobile or desktop screens.

The AI adjusted in real time to each respondent's answers, enabling deep, personalized conversations about attention, well-being, and digital life. The resulting transcripts were analyzed using a combination of machine learning and thematic coding to identify patterns, themes and demographic differences.

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents reported difficulties with focusing, and 52 percent admitted that they frequently got distracted by social media during class, with many attributing these distractions to the short-form nature of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels.

The study also found that 15 percent of participants typically consumed videos at twice the normal speed, which trained their brains to expect constant novelty and immediate gratification. Instead of feeling connected and in control, many teens described being caught in a compulsive loop, scrolling not for enjoyment but out of habit, often at the expense of their focus, sleep, and self-worth. Emotional spikes and crashes were common, with some experiencing anxiety just seconds after moments of gratification.

Almost half (45 percent) of the respondents reported mixed or negative emotional reactions after using social media. Many expressed feelings of guilt, emptiness, and anxiety, particularly following prolonged scrolling sessions.

Others noted "comparison anxiety," triggered by curated images of beauty, success, or happiness, which made them feel inadequate. This emotional volatility, according to the researchers, mirrored the constant highs and lows associated with algorithmically curated content, which one respondent described as "emotional whiplash."

Previous research has indicated that social media platforms often amplify peer comparison and idealized self-presentation, which is particularly impactful during adolescence, a critical period for identity formation and social sensitivity.

Many teenagers also expressed concern that their current digital behaviors might hinder their success in higher education or the workforce. Sixty-five percent believed that their use of social media negatively impacted their learning, with numerous individuals acknowledging struggles to complete homework without checking their phones or losing focus during classes.

This finding aligns with recent cognitive studies indicating that accelerated content consumption, such as speed-watching, diminishes processing depth, understanding, and memory retention.

The researchers feared that students are being conditioned to interact with information superficially instead of engaging deeply, a troubling trend for future job performance in knowledge-intensive economies.

Some parents voiced similar concerns, describing their children as “mentally absent” during family interactions, and stated that the current educational assessments do not address long-term attention decline.

Only a small yet vocal segment (8-10 percent) noted advantages from actively creating content instead of merely consuming it. These participants described gaining confidence, acquiring new skills like editing, scripting, or reviewing games, and discovering supportive online communities, and exhibited greater self-awareness and purpose in their use of social media. They also experienced lower levels of comparison anxiety, likely because their focus was on creation and community rather than just consumption.

“With global discussions about the impact of platforms like TikTok happening now, our findings provide crucial evidence of the real-world effects on young minds,” said Gemma Calvert, lead investigator of the study, neuroscientist, and professor at the Nanyang Centre for Marketing Technologies (NCMT) at NTU’s Nanyang Business School.

“The challenges revealed in our study are not just individual issues but societal concerns that warrant attention from everyone, including policymakers, educators, and tech companies,” she added.

“It’s time for the platforms and device makers who built the attention economy to take responsibility for redesigning it with user well-being at the core. We must move beyond cosmetic features like screen-time limits that are easily bypassed and stop designing to monetise attention. It’s time to design to restore it, especially for the generation born into the scroll,” said James Breeze, chief executive of Research Network and co-author of the report.

“We need default-on safeguards embedded in social platforms, such as scroll breaks, time-use cues, social comparison prompts, and attention-aware interface design, to help young users pause, reflect, and choose more intentionally. These aren’t constraints, they are ways to return attention to its rightful owner,” he added.

Source: [Nanyang Technological University, Singapore](#); Image: Shutterstock

The white paper of the study can be found at [“Scroll. Like. Repeat. The Hidden Cost of Social Media on Young Minds”](#)