
FACELESS

SOPHIA IHLEFELD

Megan Meier had never been so happy. Just weeks before her fourteenth birthday, a boy named Josh Evans requested to be friends on Myspace. Megan didn't know Josh, but he was sixteen years old and wanted to talk to her regularly – become her friend. She begged her mother to let her add the “hot” boy. Though they never met in person or even spoke on the phone, the two teenagers began to exchange messages consistently.

“Megan had a lifelong struggle with weight and self-esteem, and now she finally had a boy who she thought really thought she was pretty,” says Megan's mother Tina. This was a real relationship to Megan, although it never surpassed words on a screen. Josh aside, Megan had lost twenty pounds, had just begun playing volleyball at a new school, and had been seeing a therapist for years to help level out her depressive urges.

Josh opened up to Megan, and she did in return. She described herself “M is for modern, E is for enthusiastic. G is for goofy. A is for alluring. N is for neglected.”

Only a matter of weeks later, Josh's tone began to change. He began by saying that he didn't want to be friends with Megan anymore, claiming that he “heard that you are not very nice to your friends.” Over the next days his messages continued progressing in their malice.

Josh also began sharing the messages Megan had sent him

to other kids at her school, who then began sending her vile messages and creating bulletins entitled, “Megan Meier is a slut. Megan Meier is fat.”

Josh finally concluded with, “The world would be a better place without you.”

Megan Meier hanged herself in her bedroom closet in October 2006, twenty minutes after reading these words.

Megan is one of countless teenagers who've fallen victim to the dangers of social media. The Internet provides a screen behind which immature, vindictive, and sadistic users can hide and escape the consequences of their actions. The Meiers later discovered that Josh Evans was not a real person, but had been created as a ploy to make fun of Megan.

Josh Evans was really two people, the adult parents of a girl with whom Megan used to be friends.

The nuances of mental health concerns and their causes are too many to number, but analysts have noticed a trend over the past decade that indicates a new trigger for mental illness. The introduction of social media as a crucial element of young adult lives has led to higher depression and suicide rates, especially among women. There has been a positive correlation between the popularity rise of social media sites - such as Facebook, Twitter, and Insta-

gram - and the steady increase of suicides in teenagers and young adults.

Offered an illusion of community and even of reality by social media sites, young adults are weighed down by a feeling of inadequacy. This leads to depression and the belief that they are the only ones suffering in their communities. Social media sites also offer both information and incentive to bring a violent end to this pain and confusion; they normalize such behavior while simultaneously providing a new internet-provided method of harassment. It is important to explore the ways in which social media has in fact helped to counteract this trend and improve mental health, as well as how society as a whole can respond to this potentially sinister root of depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third leading cause of death for teenagers and young adults ages 15-24, preceded only by “unintentional injury” and “malignant neoplasms.” It seems that as social media expands, so does the death count, as well as the number of teenagers whose mental health is adversely affected. Research from David Luxton, Jennifer June, and Jonathan Fairall's article “Social Media and Suicide: a Public Health Perspective” reports that Facebook alone reports thirty billion pieces of content on average is shared every month on its site. That leaves copious amounts of room for questionable and potentially dangerous content. The sorts of content that users can get away with is incredible.

An example of this manipulation of social media comes in the form of a girl from my hometown, who I'll call Kelly. At age fourteen, Kelly's best friend texted her worriedly, informing Kelly that there was a video being forwarded

around their school and that people were claiming Kelly was the star. The video featured a girl with long blonde hair, like Kelly, masturbating with her back facing a mirror.

Kelly immediately informed her parents, telling them frantically that it was not her in the video. They contacted the police in an attempt to root out the original sender, but the video had been forwarded so many times that there was nothing law enforcement could do. Even though her family and friends helped spread the truth, the damage had already been done to Kelly's reputation and psyche.

Later in the school year, Kelly's attention was drawn to a new website created in her name. A picture of Kelly clad in a bikini, taken from her Facebook page, was the web page's main avatar. The blurb on the page encouraged boys aged 10-13 to contact “her,” send pictures, and post videos of themselves undressing on this website. The ploy even got one ten-year-old boy to film himself undressing till he stood bare in front of the camera, dressed only in his underwear. Also posted on the website was a video of Kelly and two girl friends from Kelly's pool party, lounging in the hot tub together. Kelly had not been aware she'd been filmed that day, but the video's caption claimed she and her friends had been “doing things” to each other.

This time, the police were able to trace the IP address back to the original computer; a boy from Kelly's school had been using her as a disguise on social media in order to humor his sexual deviancy. He was arrested but released the next day after his parents posted bail, and has yet to see any real consequences.

This boy now goes to public school with my little sister.

Kelly is thankfully free of her classmate's manipulation, but has suffered severe depression in the aftermath. Her family and friends are behind her during her healing process.

The amount of unrestricted content released per year is also an indication of how not only popular, but essential, social media has become in the modern age. With the exception of schoolwork, or perhaps reading the news, the majority of time teens spend on the Internet involves sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and Youtube. They keep track of their "friends" lives, desperately craft and maintain a picture-perfect profile of their own, and attempt to "connect" with the outside world.

The journal *Pediatrics* notes, "According to a recent [2011] poll, 22% of [American] teenagers [access] their favorite social media site more than 10 times a day, and more than half of adolescents log on to a social media site more than once a day... Thus, a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones."

The 2013 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, from Ottawa Public Health, asked 753 students in 7th through 12th grade to answer how much time they spent daily on social media, as well as to describe any symptoms of mental illness and any treatment they were currently getting, if any at all. This survey found that teens who access social media sites for two or more hours are statistically and considerably more likely to experience "poor mental health, psychological distress and suicidal thoughts."

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in the year 2011 about 2.2 million, or 9.1% of teenagers in the United States suffered a minimum of one major de-

pressive attack. Furthermore, a national survey indicated almost one third of teenagers in the U.S. satisfy the criteria for an anxiety disorder. In addition, "Some 5% to 8% of U.S. teens attempt suicide yearly, with an additional 16% seriously considering suicide within the past 12 months. Approximately 157,000 kids age 10-24 are treated in emergency departments every year for self-inflicted wounds... Victims of cyberbullying are almost twice as likely to have attempted suicides compared with adolescents who were not the target of online attacks."

Perhaps this is the reason that a child must be thirteen years or older to make an account on a website without parental permission, as dictated by Congress in the Children's Online Privacy Act. The official purpose of the law is to make websites unable to collect information on children younger than thirteen, but this is also inextricably linked to the issues to be discussed further in this essay. The information that social media sites collect and make public can be used against an individual, fueling cyber-bullies and other harassment and leading to psychological affliction. According to *Pediatrics*, other issues social media and the Internet spark are Internet addiction and coexisting sleep deprivation.

While the cause of this increasing percentage of teen suicides cannot be proven, its correlation in some respect to social media use is undeniable. It is likely, though, that the correlation is not one sided. As suggested by Carolyn Greig in an article for *The Huffington Post*, young adults struggling with mental health may be naturally inclined to use social media more frequently, in addition to the excessive use of social media contributing to poor mental health of the average adolescent.

Lui Yi Lin, graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and a lead author of a study: Social Media Use Associated with Depression Among U.S. Young Adults, asserts that "People who already are depressed are turning to social media to fill a void" which clearly cannot be filled by a computer screen or its largely fabricated contents.

Dr. Hugues Sampasa-Kanyinga supports this sentiment, saying that adolescents struggling with mental illnesses turn to social media "to satisfy unmet needs for face-to-face mental health support." These young adults feel isolated and that no one will understand. Profiles on social media, however, make it easier for these teenagers to feel a sense of connection without having to leave the comfort of their bedrooms.

Perhaps the most explicit term for this phenomenon, explained in *Pediatrics*, is "Facebook Depression" which is the occurrence of depressive symptoms after a teen spends excessive amounts of time on social media sites like Facebook. The element of social media that is the most likely cause of Facebook Depression can be linked to social psychologist Leon Festinger's 1954 "social comparison theory", which postulates that human beings attempt to determine their own worth based on their comparison to others. The ready availability of so many flawless profiles on social media, accessible on phones that teenagers carry every day, makes the barrage of comparisons and the possibility of resulting self-deprecation constant and nearly inescapable.

Even if a teen becomes self-aware of his or her depression, *Pediatrics* describes how further exploration of symptoms on crude sites and blogs for "help" may unintentionally lead to promoted substance abuse, unsafe sexual activity,

or aggressive and self-destructive actions. *Anyone* can give "advice" and instruction for someone's depression, rather than certified clinicians and specialists alone. Basically, once a teenager becomes too involved in social media and the lures of the Internet, it becomes extremely difficult to extricate him or herself from its clutches. Even if they realize and acknowledge that something is wrong, the online sources to which they run for help could only exacerbate the problem.

University of Pennsylvania student Madison Holleran fits the description of a young adult suffering from Facebook Depression. Madison loved her family, performed well academically, and ran track at UPenn after exhibiting her exceptional athleticism in high school.

When the college environment proved more stressful and overwhelming than she imagined, Madison was at a loss for what to do. All of her friends around her seemed to be perfectly fine, posting beautiful pictures on Facebook and Instagram that depicted their flawless lives. Although Madison maintained social media profiles just like these, her older sister Ashley says that Madison confided her belief that her social life was inferior to those other girls'. Everyone else is making more friends, going to crazier parties, taking prettier "selfies," eating better food, and participating more successfully in the dating scene.

Because she believed no one would understand, she kept up her own facades on social media, so much so that no one knew how truly, deeply depressed she was, or could expect what she would do next.

At nineteen years old, on a brisk January evening in Philadelphia, Madison Holleran jumped off the ninth level of

a parking garage. There was almost no blood; a passerby who found her did not even realize at first that the young woman had done anything but lie down for an alcohol-induced nap.

Just an hour before taking her flying leap off of the parking garage, Madison posted one last photograph to Instagram. It showed the trees of Rittenhouse Square, holiday lights twinkling in the branches. A perfect picture for a picture perfect girl.

Madison Holleran's suicide is an unfortunate but accurate representation of Facebook Depression, and the double lives that so many adolescent girls live. Social media is supposed to bring friends and the world together, but can unintentionally lead to a greater sense of isolation and helplessness than anyone could have imagined. "This generation is alone. They have 1,000 friends, but they are alone," says Adam Doynes, a certified biblical counselor specializing in adolescent patients, to *WORLD* magazine.

Gregory T. Eells, Cornell University's Director of Counseling and Psychological Services, is a steadfast believer in the power of Facebook Depression. He notes that social media can support a student's belief that he or she is the only person suffering on campus. His patients claim during counseling that everyone around them look content with their lives.

In response, Mr. Eells says, "I walk around and think, 'That one's gone to the hospital. That person has an eating disorder. That student just went on antidepressants.' As a therapist, I know that nobody is as happy or as grown up as they seem on the outside."

The substitution of social media for real meaning in life, which leads to depression and consequently cheapens an individual's general value of life, is not the only way in which social media use can lead to teen suicide. Cyberbullying, defined by *Pediatrics* as "Deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person," is the most common online risk for all adolescents. This, according to U.S. Legal Definitions, could be as minor as posting rumors or gossips about a person online, therefore causing animosity in the minds of others, or as antagonistic as personally labeling a victim and publishing materials that would brutally denigrate or embarrass him or her. Cyberbullying is intentional and repetitive, often including threats, personal humiliation, and harassment.

A JAMA Pediatrics study showed that twenty-three percent of teens report that they are currently, or have in the past been, the target of cyberbullying. Fifteen percent admitted to being the bully themselves. The researchers explored the connection between social media victimization and depression, showing "without exception – a significant correlation."

Cyberbullying, when connected to suicide in any way, is called cyberbullicide. A survey given to about two thousand middle school students showed that victims of cyberbullying were nearly two times as likely to attempt suicide than those who were not. Interestingly, the results also indicated that cyberbullies were 1.5 times as likely to attempt suicide. These results are indicative of what an unhealthy environment social media is for all parties involved. The Luxton/June/Fairall article states that "Although cyberbullying cannot be identified as a sole predictor of suicide in adolescents and young adults, it can

increase risk of suicide by amplifying feelings of isolation, instability, and hopelessness for those with preexisting emotional, psychological, or environmental stressors."

Ryan Halligan was one such victim of cyberbullying. He is tragically just one in a staggering statistic of cyberbullicide victims, but it is important to remember Ryan and his story.

Ryan didn't know until middle school that not everybody struggled like he did. Words and speech sometimes got all jumbled up in his head, so learning them was a little bit slow, and it took him a while to figure out just how his body was supposed to work. Later he'd learn that technically he had stunted speech, language, and motor skill development.

Although he had difficulties in school because of these disabilities, his parents enrolled him in special education services so that he would have as good a chance in the world as any other little boy. They described him as lanky, sweet and gentle; he was hard on himself when his grades weren't as stellar as he'd wanted.

Beginning in the fifth grade, and continuing all throughout the next three years, Ryan was targeted by another student at his school, along with this boy's friends. They taunted him regarding his reduced physical coordination, but since they never laid a violent hand upon Ryan, Ryan's parents couldn't do much. They sent him to therapy to discover coping mechanisms, which seemed to work.

When the bullying continued, however, Ryan begged his parents to switch schools or be home-schooled. He hated going into that middle school building every day, constant-

ly looking over his shoulder. When his parents explained how neither of those options were possible, Ryan said he at least wanted to learn how to defend himself. The Halligans agreed, helping Ryan train with a "Taebo" kickboxing set.

One day in February 2003, Ryan had his opportunity. He fought back when the bully hit him, and proudly claimed that he was "able to get in a few good punches" before the principal broke up the fight. Ryan was confident he wouldn't have issues with the bully anymore. In fact, within the next month they'd even become friends. His parents were extremely hesitant about this new development, but decided Ryan was old enough to make his own decisions.

Elated to have made a friend out of an enemy, Ryan shared a somewhat embarrassing personal story with the ex-bully, wanting to laugh with him about it. Ryan's new "friend" used this information to spread a vicious rumor online that Ryan was gay. He was taunted relentlessly, bullied during the school day and then immediately barraged by sneers again when he started up his computer at home.

That summer, Ryan attempted to become friends with another girl at his school online, in what his parents believe was an attempt to prove his heterosexuality. The girl was kind and funny, not to mention the most beautiful and popular girl at his school. They struck up a friendship online over the summer of 2003, during which she encouraged Ryan to open up to her, because she was, after all, his girlfriend. Ryan was so happy to be talking to her that it made all of the online harassment seem less suffocating.

At the commencement of the new school year, Ryan approached the girl for the first time in person, smiling and

still a bit shy. She, with her friends gathered around in the most stereotypical mean-girl fashion, looked down her nose at Ryan with a cruel smile and told him that she didn't like him at all. He was just a loser, and she thought it would be funny to play around with him online.

That day the girl copied and pasted the private IM messages Ryan had sent onto the public forums their school viewed. Ryan's extreme humiliation now had an audience.

To put an end to the constant voices whispering and taunting in his head, made visible on a screen whenever he logged online, Ryan Halligan hung himself in the family bathroom on October 7, 2003.

The positive correlation between social media and suicide among teenagers like Megan Meier, Madison Holleran, and Ryan Halligan is also due to the information on how to most successfully commit suicide the Internet provides. Luxton, June, and Fairall, explain how pro-suicide information, including detailed material on suicide methods, is easily accessible online. Forums and message boards on social media have been used to spread information on how to die by suicide, including knowledge of how likely one is to actually die by each method and how much agony is involved. For this reason, more adolescents are effectively killing themselves by gunshot or hanging, rather than conducting failed attempts through wrist cutting or overdosing.

Yet another startling phenomenon that social media has introduced is that of online suicide pacts. Online chat rooms can provide an easier way to share thoughts and feelings than doing so in person; most find it "safer" in certain respects, because they do not have to face physical rejection

or disparagement, and are speaking with those claiming to be suffering in the same way.

A suicide pact is an agreement between two or more people to die by suicide at a certain time and typically by the same lethal means. A cybersuicide pact is usually formed among complete strangers, unlike traditional suicide pacts. Sites for suicide pacts such as this are called "extreme communities," and they target those already emotionally and mentally vulnerable. Interactions among strangers through chat rooms or online forums have the potential to cultivate peer pressure to commit suicide and idolization of those who already have. Those who are currently indecisive about suicide may have their fears of pain or death assuaged.

Individuals have also begun leaving suicide notes online, on public pages. Seeing such material, if a viewer is feeling similarly, may make him become convinced that suicide is his answer as well. Rising popularity of video-sharing social media sites like YouTube have also contributed to this catastrophic phenomenon. With nearly entirely unrestricted content, suicide and self-harm videos uploaded for the public's perusal have the power to normalize such behavior.

Professor Lewis, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph, examined the availability and substance of the most popular YouTube videos related to self-injury, including but not limited to cutting, burning, and hitting oneself. By typing in keywords such as "self-injury" and "self-harm" into the YouTube search engine, Lewis was able to access the fifty most-viewed videos featuring live individuals as well as the fifty most viewed non-character videos. The results of

this study showed that the top videos had over two million viewers and fifty eight percent of the videos had no viewer restrictions like a minimum age requirement.

In order to conduct this research in the most unbiased light, however, it was necessary to explore the ways, if any, social media can actually help *improve* mental health. While they certainly do not dwarf or even balance the dangers of social media, there are certain benefits to its use. For instance, Luxton, June, and Fairall explain that the routine nature of social media interaction has proven beneficial to children and adolescents; social media use can augment communication, social connection, and technical skills.

Although social media can provide triggering and unsafe material for adolescents, it can also make available suicide prevention materials. There are specific social networking sites for suicide prevention, which facilitate connections among peers with similar experiences to the suffering individual. As elaborated upon by Luxton, June, and Fairall, these sites spread awareness for "Prevention programs, crisis help lines, and other support and educational resources." Examples of social media sites like these include the National Suicide Prevention Facebook page and the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention Facebook page, both of which have followers by the thousands. Taking suicide prevention a step further, and indicating an awareness of social media's potential for disastrous influence, there is even a Facebook page: Report and Eliminate From Facebook Pro-Suicide Groups.

Other benefits of social media include health resources that are effortlessly and anonymously accessible, which can lead to, as stated by *Pediatrics*, "increased medication adherence, better disease understanding, and fewer missed

appointments." Students can also connect with each other on social media to work on schoolwork and group projects. Social media users are able to share their artwork with their communities, fostering their individual and collective creativities. Shared interests have the potential to bring together people from all races, sexualities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which leads to greater social awareness and tolerance.

Upon reading all of the devastating statistics of depression and suicide correlated with social media use, parents and society as a whole ask themselves: What can we do? Firstly, it is important to understand the legal complexities involved, which makes only personal parental choices the truly plausible solutions.

Perhaps the most seemingly simple solution to the influence of social media on suicidal behavior is to create laws that ban content like that detailed earlier. Of course, judicial action could violate free speech and trespass on civil liberties. This makes it difficult to monitor or filter content created within the United States, for fear of breaking the First Amendment. In addition, it is doubly difficult to obtain jurisdiction over websites with international origins, as noted in Luxton, June, and Fairall's article.

The three scholars also note, interestingly, online social media has much fewer content-related restrictions than any other form of media. If a radio, television, or newspaper publishes questionable content, they risk losing followers and running out of business. Social media sites are decentralized, constantly changing and evolving, and thus do not run that risk.

Parental supervision, however, is not so limited. The

complete banning of social media from a household is not reasonable or effective. Instead, making sure more mental health resources are on the platforms adolescents are visiting, and making teenagers aware of them, is crucial. Dr. Brian Primack of Pitt's Center for Research on Media, Technology, and Health supports this, saying, "Because social media has become such an integrated component of human interaction, it is important for clinicians interacting with young adults to recognize the balance to be struck in encouraging potential positive use, while redirecting from problematic use."

Perhaps the greatest difficulty when dealing with this problem is the generational gap between parents and their children. Parents might not either understand the technology itself, or even their children's attachment to it at the base level. This makes it increasingly difficult to keep up with their children and the problems they face, as indicated in the stories of the Halligan and Meier families.

KVC Health Systems postulates that this problem can be alleviated not by an intensive technology course for all parents, but by the communication of five simple ideas to their children. The first is that a person's online profile might not be an accurate representation of his or her life. They may be masking their own mental illness, or worse, pointed malice. Everyone always posts the best parts of their lives, not the worst.

Secondly, there is a difference between an ideal and a real life. Every teenager is seeing the same content, and every one feels inadequate when faced with the seemingly perfect lives of their friends. A life does not need to be perfect to be worth living.

Thirdly, an individual's real self can be aligned with their ideal self, with the right motivation. The key is to transform hopeless fantasies into obtainable goals. Another tip for a parent is to be open and vulnerable about his or her own past. Communicating prior struggles can show a child that he or she is not alone.

Lastly, remind them of their best attributes. It is easy and habitual for self-deprecating teenagers to focus on their flaws rather than their assets. With these tips, perhaps the world won't seem so isolating to social media-navigating teens.

While social media is not the worst thing to happen to American adolescents, because of the few ways it can help their mental health, it is definitely not a resource to be used without caution. All research completed on the subject has shown a positive correlation between rising social media use and increased rates in teenage depression and suicide. Young adults compare themselves to the seemingly perfect bodies, relationships, and lives of their friends on social media, becoming convinced that they are alone in their suffering.

This sort of depression from comparison often leads to suicide, as does cyberbullying, the amount of readily available information on methods of suicide, and the encouraging and normalization of such behavior on blogs and social sites. The stories of victims lost to the negative effects of social media are tragic and instill a desire to put an end to such heartbreaking events. In certain cases, social media can actually be used to improve mental health, by providing access to educational or health blogs that can promote a better lifestyle or direct them to help needed. The question this issue exposes is that of how society

can possibly put a halt to this trend; though it may be too complex for the judicial system to change anything through law, parents and the rest of society are potentially able to help their children by supporting the uploading of mental health resources onto these platforms they visit so much.

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