Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health: A Paediatrician's Guide for South Africa

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Individual and Society

Introduction & Why This Matters

Adolescents as digital natives

- Digital technologies are deeply woven into daily life
- Adolescents = hormonal, cognitive, & social shifts
- Increased sensitivity to social approval, identity, and self-perception

Purpose of this presentation

- Equip paediatricians with tools to understand:
  - Social media and mental health
  - Contextual challenges in South Africa
  - What can paediatricians do?

Social media accessibility & use: Global & SA landscape

Globally

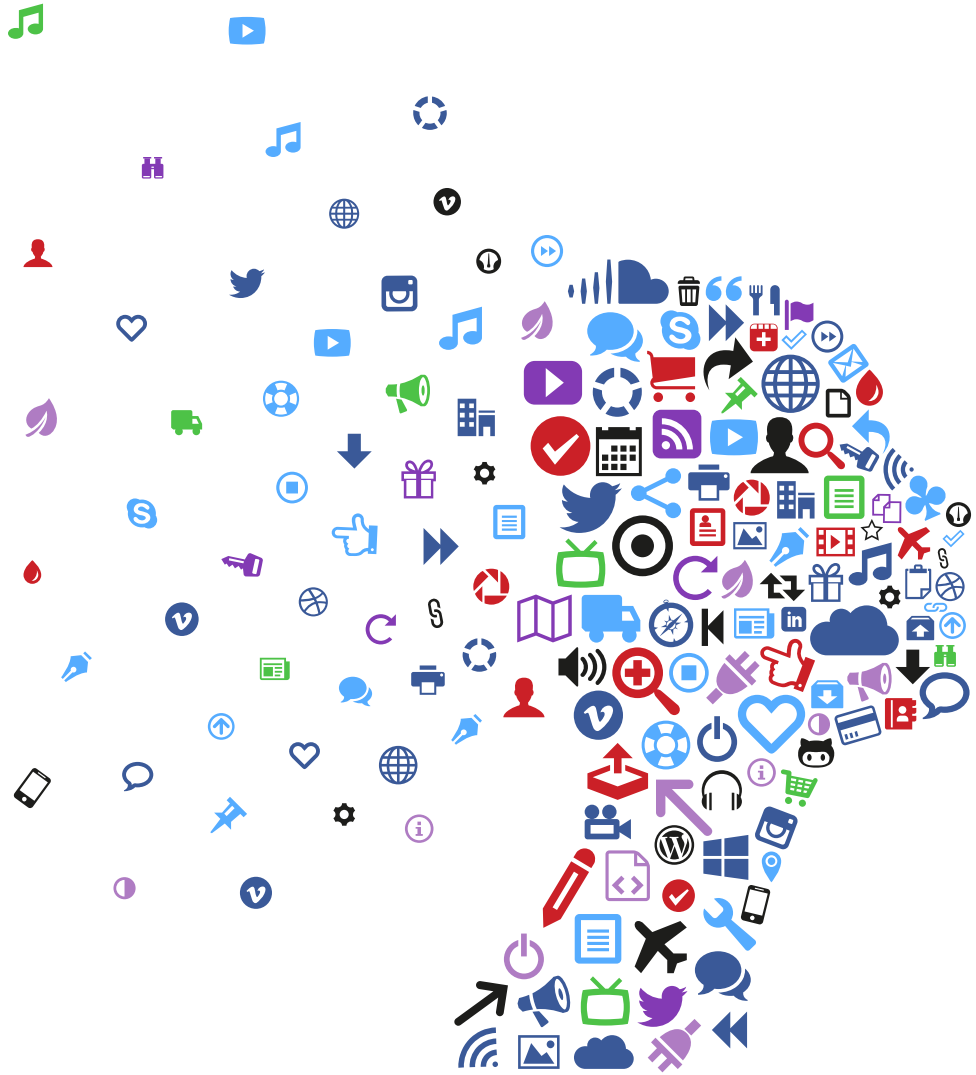
- 1 in 3 internet users is a child
- 79% of 15-24-year-olds use the internet

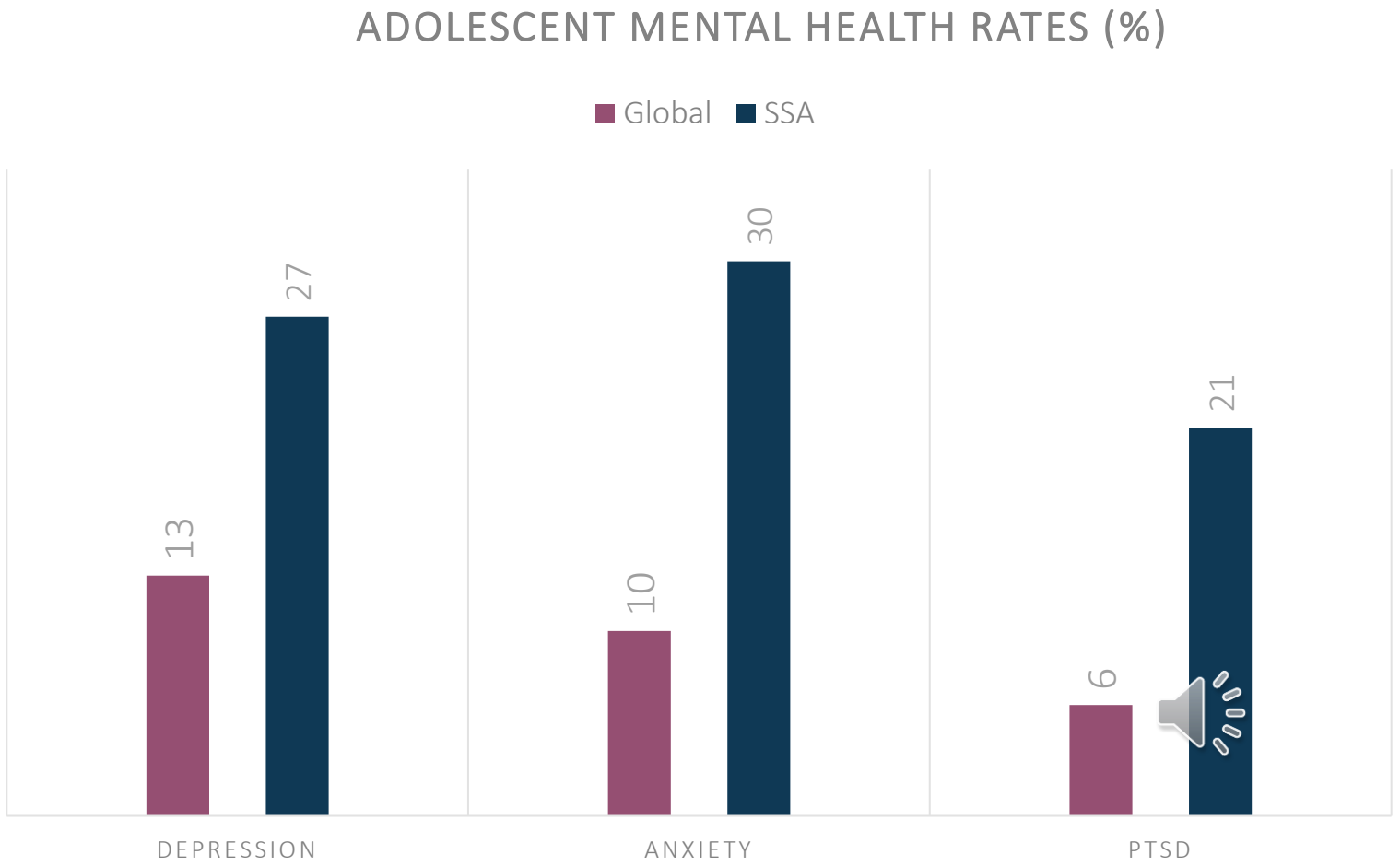
South Africa

- 26.7 million social media users in 2025
- Adolescent internet users (70.4%)
  - Go online using smartphones
  - At home
  - Use mobile data
  - Cell phone plans drive content engagement
  - Engagement increases with age

Adolescent Mental Health

Global & Sub-Saharan African (SSA) Stats





The complex relationship: beyond sensational headlines

Exaggerated Causation

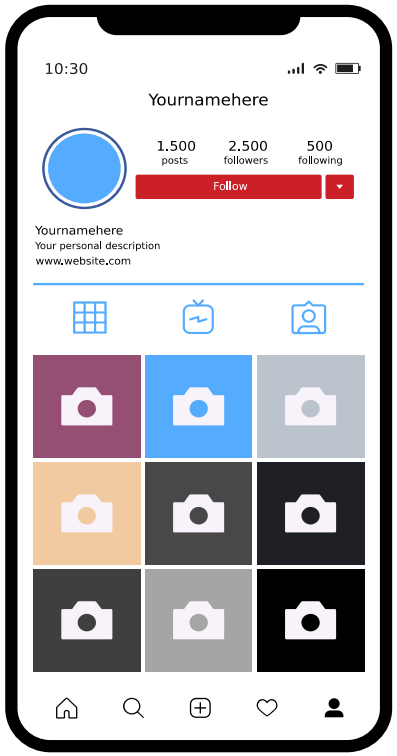
- Social media causes mental health
- Overlooks reverse pathways

Overemphasis on Problematic use

- Ignores benefits such as
  - Social connection
  - Self Expression
  - Access to support

Lack of context and Nuance

- Generalisations ignore
  - diverse experiences
  - offline context
  - Developmental complexities



Screen time, content & harm

Key Findings

Study across 40 countries, 40000 adolescents

Screen time → Weak/ inconsistent link → Mental Health outcomes

Harmful online content and abusive experiences

What matters most:

Its not **how much time** online; Its **what** teens encounter

Excessive screen time may still affect

- Sleep
- Eyesight
- Physical activity

Need for a Balanced approach

Live experiences of SA Adolescents

4C's capturing different types of risks & opportunities

CONTENT

Opportunity *"I use my phone to* ***browse the internet for information****… I also use it for purposes of* ***downloading*** *applications that can* ***teach****…"* (11-year-old adolescent-BEACON)

Risk: "most people type **sexual things** that are not meant for the eyes" (12-year old -GKO)

CONTACT

Opportunity: *"I use my phone to browse the internet for information, especially when I also use applications such as* ***WhatsApp*** *which* ***enable us to communicate*** *with others* ***without*** *using* ***airtime****" (11-year-old - BEACON)*

Risk: *"they once sent me a* ***message*** *just here* ***on Facebook*** *and it was addressed in Sesotho where they were* ***asking me to meet them*** *in order* ***to send them my nude pictures****"* (11-year-old adolescent- BEACON)

CONDUCT

opportunity: *"For me I use Facebook to* ***explore how other people live*** *their lives especially in other areas* ***outside South Africa*** *because I stay alone."* (13-year-old - BEACON)

Risk: *"Mam there is this child who is called [Name], she was doing grade 8. She had many boyfriends…So one day she went out with one of them. So this guy made a* ***sex tape*** *with her and it* ***went viral****, she was* ***pregnant*** *by then when* ***people started finding out about that tape*** *and so* ***she ended her life****."* (13-year-old BEACON)

CONTRACT

Opportunity: *"With me I just* ***report all these cases through*** *these* ***social media platforms****. They either block them or deactivate their accounts" (13-year-old adolescent)*

Risk: *frequently having older* ***strangers inviting me, seeing nude adverts*** (17-year-old, GKO)

Nuance & Context

Digital Determinants of Mental Health

Individual

- Developmental stage, Gender, Personality, Affective responses (sleep quality, arousal, neurodiversity), Digital literacy, Coping mechanisms

Household

- Lower SES background, Parental monitoring & mediation, parental modelling, access, parent-child relationships, siblings

Community

- School regulation, online access in public spaces, access to blue & green spaces, exposure to violence, peer interaction, support services

Government

- Regulatory policy, privacy and protection, prioritising children's rights

Factors Shaping Technology Use & Mental Health Outcomes

Risk

Individual

- existing mental health conditions,
- low self-esteem,
- impulsivity,
- fear of missing out (FOMO),
- uncontrolled technology use,
- maladaptive coping skills (e.g., using social media to avoid negative emotions)

Environmental

- lack of social support,
- weak family communication,
- experience of offline risks or stressors (e.g., violence, bullying),
- strict parental monitoring (can be less effective if children are not taught self-regulation),
- parental "phubbing" (ignoring immediate social interactions for smartphone engagement)

Protective

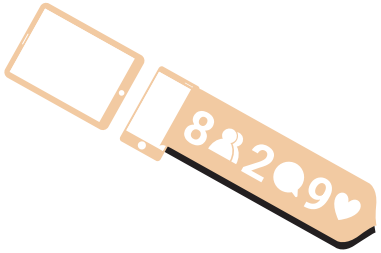
Individual

- self-confidence,
- positive motivations for going online (e.g., information-seeking, learning), ,
- adopting strategies to protect privacy and self-regulate use (e.g., turning off notifications),
- developing digital literacy and skills,
- healthy coping skills

Environmental

- parental interest and active mediation of child's technology use (e.g., open discussions, setting boundaries),
- parents modelling healthy digital habits,
- social support (online and offline)
- digital-free spaces (e.g., no devices in bedrooms)

The Impact of Social Media Design Features



Profit-driven

Addictive algorithmic features

Hyperconnectivity

Being online constantly

Prompts

What's on your mind?

Inadequest safeguards

Legal protection lags behind

What Paediatricians Can Do

Routine screening:

Ask about online and offline experiences

Provide evidence informed guidance:

Explain risks & benefits, focus on both content & time spent alone

Promote offline alternatives:

Encourage physical activity, outdoor play, in-person interaction

Identify vulnerable adolescents:

Watch for those at greater risks from digital harm

Facilitate access to care:

Ensure available services for mental health care

Conclusion & call to action

Understanding

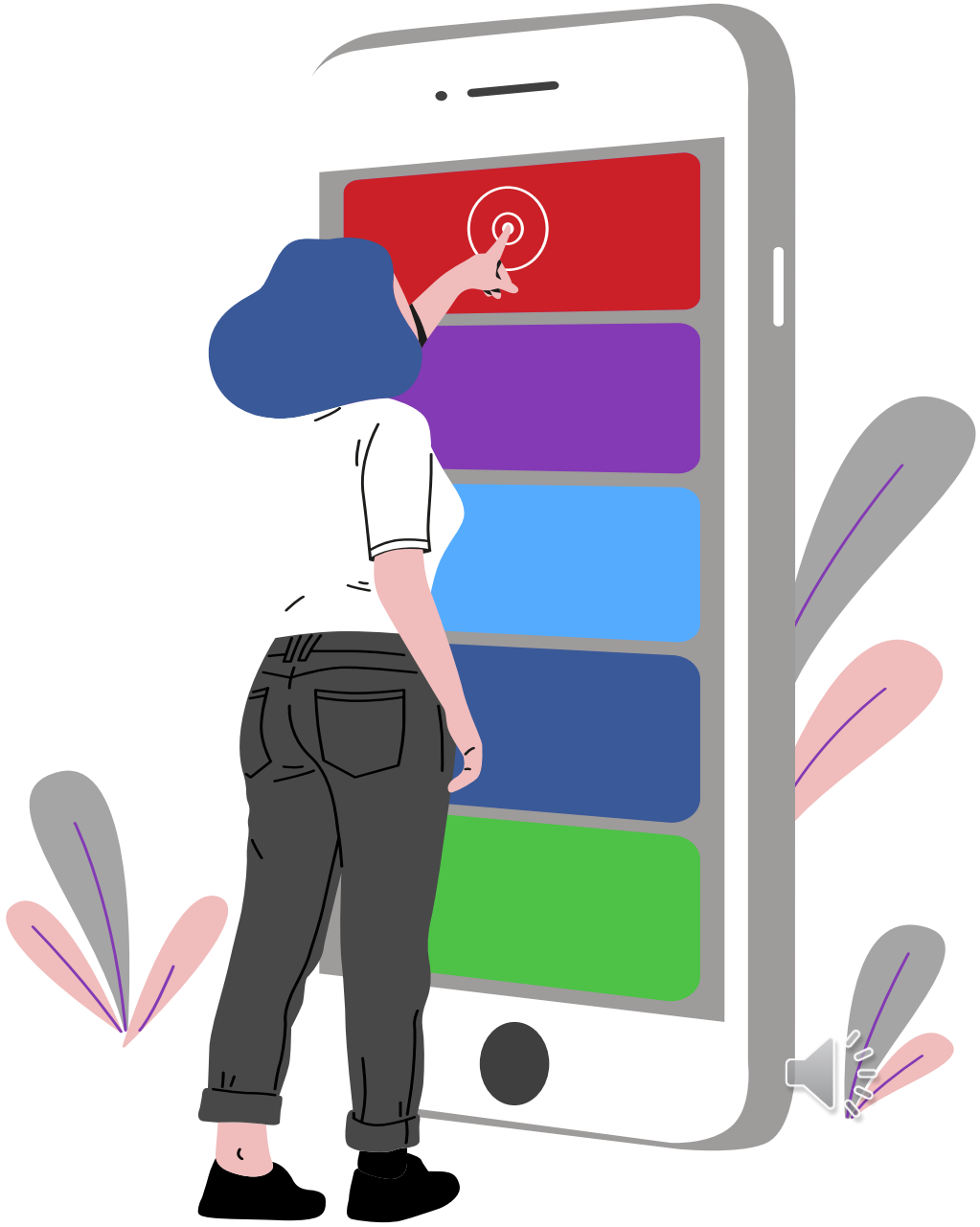
- Digital tech = opportunity + risk for youth wellbeing
- Evidence is complex, calls for nuanced understanding
- Vulnerability varies—tailor approaches, elevate marginalized voices

Responsibility

- Pediatricians lead the way in healthy digital engagement
- Proactive, multi-sectoral response is essential
- Youth voices & policy advocacy must be front and center

Action

- Digital wellbeing shapes our shared future
- We can’t wait—action starts today



Get In Touch

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