



Bridgewater State University

Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Honors Program Theses and Projects

Undergraduate Honors Program

8-18-2022

The Negative Effects of Social Media Sites on Adolescents and the Benefits of Evoking Empathy Through Reading

Lindsay Everson
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj



Part of the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Everson, Lindsay. (2022). The Negative Effects of Social Media Sites on Adolescents and the Benefits of Evoking Empathy Through Reading. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 530. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/530
Copyright © 2022 Lindsay Everson

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

The Negative Effects of Social Media Sites on Adolescents and the Benefits of Evoking
Empathy Through Reading

Lindsay Everson

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 9, 2022

Lisa M. Litterio, PhD., Thesis Advisor

Date: 4/29/22

Jessica Birthisel, PhD., Committee Member

Date: 5/5/22

Lee Torda, PhD., Committee Member

Date: 5/5/22

Abstract

This thesis describes the rise in narcissistic behaviors, cyberbullying, and mental health issues in adolescents ages 13-19 due to frequent social media usage on sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. The rise in narcissistic behavior, cyberbullying, and mental health issues among teens places prominence on the need for adolescents to engage in activities that evoke empathy. To combat the issues that come with an adolescent's frequent social media usage this paper reveals the benefits of reading when it comes to evoking empathy in teens. The paper concludes that evoking empathy in adolescents through reading encourages them to contribute to the greater good of society as they learn how to be socially and culturally aware.

Introduction

Social media sites are spaces where adolescents express themselves to a large audience, some of whom are people they have never met. This is a cause for concern for many parents and guardians who worry about the content their children are being exposed to. TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook are social media sites that are frequently used by adolescents, but it is difficult to know what content teens are viewing and posting and the effect this has on their self-image and self-portrayal. In the article "Teens and their Experiences on Social Media" by authors Monica Anderson and JingJing Jiang they discuss how competition on social media sites has led teens to feel depressed about themselves as they share the results from a *Pew Research Center* survey, "... social media has had a negative impact on their self-esteem: 26% of teens say these sites make them feel worse about their own life" (Pew Research). This negative impact on self-esteem reveals how social media sites have lasting effects on an adolescents' mental health. The question is then, why do social media sites lead adolescents to feel down on themselves? Researcher Christina Bosson and others posit an idea in their article "Uses and Gratifications

Sought by Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent TikTok Consumers” how many adolescents are obsessed with how they portray themselves online and how this obsession can lead to feelings of low self-esteem if they do not receive the praise they feel they deserve. Dr. Sara Konrath expands on this issue in the podcast “Speaking of Psychology: The Decline of Empathy and the Rise of Narcissism” as she argues the pressures put on adolescents in school, at home, and now online lead them to focus too much on their rise to success with little concern for others. She describes how “Just Imagining. Taking a moment to imagine what other people are feeling and thinking, what the world is like from their perspective” can help adolescents become empathetic individuals during a time where the pressures in their everyday life may lead them to forget to be kind (American Psychological Association). Author Suzanne Keene builds on this concept of “perspective” to evoke empathy in her article “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” as she reveals how reading other’s perspectives through first person narratives can help individuals develop empathy. Due to adolescents’ need for praise online as described by researcher Christina Bosson and the rise in narcissism among young people as described by Dr. Sara Konrath, the need to evoke empathy in adolescents is prominent now more than ever. Evoking empathy in adolescents through reading helps combat social issues as narratives can teach young people to become socially and culturally aware. Reading exposes adolescents to the corrupt institutions and oppression in our society and allows them to form identities for the greater good of humanity, not just for others online.

Using articles from different disciplines including communications, psychology, sociology, and English studies this thesis aims to reveal the consequences of frequent social media usage among adolescents to show how reading can be used as a tool to evoke empathy. The first part of this thesis begins with a focus on the rise in narcissistic behaviors due to the

constant need for praise on social media sites and the effects this can have on an adolescents' ability to evoke empathy. Further this research continues to discuss how this need for praise on social media sites can lead adolescents to form identities based on the opinions of others. This identity portrayal on social media sites leads to the next section on the mental health issues experienced by adolescents that are caused by the competitive atmosphere online.

In the second half of this thesis the solution of reading for empathy is presented to combat the narcissistic behaviors and mental health issues experienced by adolescents due to the competition on social media sites. Further, I discuss how reading for empathy can help guide adolescents into forming identities that will benefit our society and shows them how their online identities are not as important as their identities in real life. The next section reveals the benefits of reading first person narratives to evoke empathy and combat bullying and cyberbullying among adolescents. This leads to the remaining sections which reveal how reading for empathy can contribute to the greater good of society as adolescents can learn to be socially and culturally aware individuals. The thesis ends with the argument that reading gives adolescents the tools to become aware of the social issues that exist in our society so they can learn to be empathetic individuals without defining their worth based on their online identities.

The Lack of Empathy Among Adolescents Due to Social Media Usage

With the rise of social media usage among adolescents there is a risk of mental health issues that come from social networking sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. These risks pose threats among adolescents as they are figuring out their identities in society. In the article "Uses and Gratifications Sought by Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent TikTok Consumers" by Christina Bosson and others, the researchers describe a study that concerns the motivations of pre-adolescents' and adolescents' usage on TikTok and the negative effects that come with

heavy usage. This research is conducted by Bosson building on Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler's "Uses and Gratification Theory" as the theory "examines how the primary target audience (pre-adolescent and adolescent individuals) of TikTok uses and interacts with the content, as well as other users, and seeks to uncover the key uses and gratifications of this SNS [Social Networking Site] (465). Bosson also describes how her research connects to Guosong Shao's analytical framework on the motivations of social media users as she states how Shao "suggested that individuals deal with user-generated mediums in three ways: by passively consuming, by participating and by contributing" (465). Each of these uses are driven by specific motivations and Bosson's study shows that those who are contributors to social media sites like Tik Tok are more concerned with becoming famous and getting praise. This is because adolescents are as Bosson states connecting to Cook and Kaiser's research on preteens and identity, "intensively pre-occupied with their identity development" (467). However, Bosson notes that this fame-seeking attitude that many contributors possess can lead to low self-esteem if their profile or content does not become as popular as they had hoped. Building from multiple research articles on social media sites and identity, Bosson states in her article, "A study found that adolescents preferred those SNS platforms which allowed them to construct visual identities; where definition of success was measured by social recognition and the number of followers and likes they had received" (468). Frequent social media usage leads adolescents to become occupied with how they portray themselves online. Adolescents' obsession with how they portray themselves online can lead towards feelings of failure if they base their success solely off the opinions of others.

Similarly, in the podcast "Speaking of Psychology: The Decline of Empathy and the Rise of Narcissism," Dr. Sara Konrath describes the decline of empathy and the rise in narcissism in

young people. Konrath speaks about the growing pressures on our youth that revolve around expectations to succeed both at home and in school. It is important for schools and parents to express to children how becoming successful does not only come from good grades and going viral on social media sites, but it also comes from one's ability to be kind to others and understand their perspectives. Konrath describes how these pressures on adolescents can "make them shrink their scope of self rather than expanding it to include a lot of other people and concerns" which is a characteristic of narcissistic behavior as it leads people to ignore the feelings of those around them (American Psychological Association). Educators and guardians are supposed to support children, yet they fail to see the increasing need for empathy as narcissism is on the rise. It is important for educators and guardians to realize this issue because as Christina Bosson states in her findings, revealing her concerns about young consumers of the social media site TikTok: "Although we may conclude that Tiktok is light-hearted fun, and therefore nothing to concern ourselves about, the fact that many young TikTok consumers are actively seeking out new external networks for the purposes of becoming more popular and famous may be of concern" (473). Social media sites can be a cause for concern as there is no way of knowing who or what these adolescents are being exposed to. Konrath also reveals the importance of a good role-model in an adolescent's life as she states, "I think the person who's spending the [most] time...will have the most influence of developing empathy" which reveals the risks of frequent social media usage as it could result in negative effects on one's empathy depending on the content that one watches (American Psychological Association). With no way to truly monitor an adolescent's usage of social media sites, it is important to find innovative solutions to evoke empathy in adolescents.

Based on the research noted above, there are many negative effects that can come with an adolescent's frequent usage of social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. Social media sites lead adolescents to spend a majority of their time constructing an image of themselves for others. In the research article "Motivation for Selfie-Posting Mediates the Relationship Between Narcissism and Empathy" authors Caroline Salafia and Anurag Rimzhim describe how selfie posting is linked to narcissism and therefore, possibly a lack of empathy. They describe how people with narcissistic traits have goals that concern attention seeking, self-entitlement, and superiority. Salafia and Rimzhim have found those who have narcissistic traits are more likely to frequently use social media sites and post selfies as it allows them to get the attention and praise that they seek. As the research above by Dr. Sara Konrath reveals, adolescents have a growing pressure put upon them to be successful in school, at home, and online. As Tik Tok emerges as a new social media site that revolves around viral videos, teens may feel even more pressured to be recognized and praised on the app through getting likes and views. According to Salafia and Rimzhim this pressure placed upon teens that revolves around one's image and identity could lead them to develop more narcissistic traits. As authors Salafia and Rimzhim state building from Bergman's research concerning narcissism and social media usage, "Given that one of the uses of social media is self-promotion, it is possible that the rise in use of social media makes people more self-centered, thereby decreasing their empathy" (359). This rise in narcissistic behavior caused by selfie posting shows how social media is a place filled with attention seeking motives that can lead people to ignore the feelings of others in their own rise to success. Also, as described by Salafia and Rimzhim, those who do show empathetic responses on the media may only do so because, "having empathic concern serves narcissistic goals, then individuals with narcissistic traits may engage in prosocial behavior" (373).

Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint the goals of those who do show empathetic responses on social media sites as they may be doing so only for their own benefit. With this growing confusion of whether empathetic responses are genuine on social media sites it is important to find ways to evoke empathy in adolescents that are separate from the online world to ensure it is genuine.

The Increase in Mental Health Issues Among Adolescents Due to Social Media Usage

Social media sites are filled with competition and an obsession to be recognized or appreciated. Due to the heavy usage of social media sites, adolescents can feel pressured to act in ways that have negative effects on their mental and physical health. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's article "Social Media and Teens," concerning adolescents' usage of social media sites:

Surveys show that ninety percent of teens ages 13-17 have used social media. Seventy five percent report having at least one active social media profile, and 51% report visiting a social media site at least daily. Two thirds of teens have their own mobile devices with internet capabilities. On average, teens are online almost nine hours a day, not including time for homework. (aacap)

The amount of time that adolescents are spending online suggests that there is a lack of communication with others in real life. This lack of communication and drive for competition is unhealthy and can have many saddening outcomes on one's mental health. Teens are so engulfed in their online lives with little attention paid to the real world. While social media can be beneficial in some ways, such as its abilities to connect people and help people form friendships,

it is hard to know if these online connections and friendships are equivalent to in-person connections and friendships.

Social media sites attract people who have narcissistic behaviors, leading to other negative effects on an adolescent's mental health due to the frequent need to succeed and be accepted. The frequent usage of sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook makes it hard for adolescents to see the worth of their identities as separate from the online world that lives in their pockets. According to the researchers Susan C. Herring and Sanja Kapidzic in their article "Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media" teens use the media to create online identities to make a "favorable impression on others" (1). The online world forces teens to create an identity that they feel is acceptable and attractive based on the opinions of others. With the growing pressures of presenting oneself online, teens may feel pressure to become more accepted and praised, no matter the consequences. Author's Heena Kaura and Sarita Saini expand on this issue as they argue that social media sites are filled with pressures that can lead many teens to develop mental health problems. Kaura and Saini, building from Muduli's research on technology addiction, describe in their article, "Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Emotional Intelligence Among Adolescents" how teens are so far away from reality when using social media sites and how that may result in:

...budding cruelty in their mind due to brutal games, growing restlessness to accomplish targets of games, distraction from academic goals, changed lifestyles, poor organizational skills, and dietary patterns, causing dependency and psychiatric disorders such as distress, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and attention deficit disorder (581).

Since social media sites such as TikTok are frequently used by adolescents it is hard to control what they are exposed to. With mental health issues such as "distress" and "bipolar disorder" and

physical issues such as poor “dietary patterns” it is important for educators and guardians to realize what is at stake concerning the health and well-being of adolescents who frequently use social media sites.

The negative effects on an adolescent’s mental health due to concerning online content is seen in the case report “The Paradox of Tik Tok Anti-Pro-Anorexia Videos: How Social Media Can Promote Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Anorexia” by Giuseppe Logrieco. In the report, Logrieco describes a fourteen-year-old girl’s experiences with anorexia nervosa as she struggles with the disorder after being influenced by others on Tik Tok. Logrieco examines how Tik Tok, along with other social media sites, have algorithms that are specifically catered to the user. Therefore, if a teen likes a post that has to do with losing weight or dieting, they will continue to have videos on their “for you” page concerning those topics. This can become an issue if the content on their “for you” page is damaging to one’s mental health, as the fourteen-year-old described in the case study above. Videos supporting anorexia nervosa and other types of self-harm are online for anyone to see, making it even harder for parents and guardians to monitor what their teens are viewing. While many people assume that adolescents with poor body image develop disorders such as anorexia nervosa Logrieco describes that in some cases, it has nothing to do with body image at all. Logrieco also reveals that social media sites like Tik Tok encourage content creators who describe their own self-harm to become competitive as they show others how their suffering is worse than anybody else's. For example, as stated by Logrieco, describing the fourteen-year-old girl’s experiences with Tik Tok, “...she reported that the video makers are often competitive with one another, as they are tempted to prove they are in the worst condition by showing the numbers, calories, and parameters of ‘being really sick’” (3). In the case of the fourteen-year-old girl, we see a situation where Tik Tok influences adolescents to become

obsessive in their rise to success, no matter the consequences or who they hurt. The behavior of this girl and her need for success in suffering is an example of how social media sites are causing narcissistic behaviors. Instead of putting herself in her parents' shoes and wondering how they may feel, she refuses to listen and continues to show that her health conditions are worse than others online. This competition in suffering is more important than her own health and well-being. Also, this behavior reveals the urgent need to evoke empathy in adolescents who frequently use social media sites so they can begin to stray away from the narcissistic behaviors in the online world and learn that their actions can hurt others. To lessen the mental health issues influenced by a need to succeed and compete with others online, adolescents need to develop empathy so they can understand that success and praise are not the only things that matter in this world.

The research described above by authors Caroline Salafia and Anurag Rimzhim reveals how people with narcissistic traits tend to use social media sites more frequently to gain approval or praise. This is dangerous for adolescents as they may feel pressure to gain approval or praise when surrounded by others who have narcissistic behaviors on an online space. Social media sites are competitive spaces as adolescents post content for views, likes, and comments. For example, in the conference paper "A Longitudinal Examination of the Association between Sharing Alcohol References on Social Media and Binge Drinking" published by *The International Communication Association*, the authors describe the risk of alcohol use among teens who use social media sites. As teens are figuring out their identities both in school and online, they may feel the need to show off certain behaviors that are socially acceptable to gain praise from others. The authors describe in the paper how alcohol use, for example, is something many teens brag about both in school and in online spaces as they post pictures with drinks in

their hands and tell stories about what they have done while intoxicated. The authors build from multiple research articles concerning alcohol use, teens, and social media sites as they state in the conference paper: “It has been argued that young people share alcohol references to increase social approval and relational intimacy, to facilitate socialization with friends and peers and to explore and express their identity” (5). As teens find it socially acceptable to post pictures of themselves consuming alcohol, social media sites become a competitive place where teens feel the need to express their identities through sharing “alcohol references.” This competitiveness concerning one’s identity online shows how social media sites influence teens to portray themselves in negative ways to gain approval and praise from others. Therefore, this need for praise could lead to a decrease in both mental and physical health. This competitiveness reveals how narcissistic behaviors exist on social media sites as adolescents ignore the dangers of drinking in their obsession for praise.

The Benefits of Reading for Empathy During the Age of Social Media Sites

Many adolescents use social media sites to feel less alone in the world, but without a way to monitor the content they watch, there is no way to tell if they are being affected by the narcissistic and harmful behaviors online. Reading is a way for adolescents to realize they are not alone in this world and if they read the experiences of others, they will be aware of a life outside their own. Reading, unlike social media sites, is easier to monitor to make sure that its primary purpose is for the benefits of adolescents. In the article, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” by Suzanne Keene, she reveals how reading and empathy coincide. Keene describes how reading fiction evokes empathetic responses through using the first person as it draws readers into the mind of the main character, which could make it easier to identify with that character. Even if one cannot relate to the experiences of the main character, they may still identify with their

feelings. Keene also reveals that narrative empathy not only draws readers into the story, but it also makes them aware of a life different from their own. As Keene states in the article concerning empathy and reading, “empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or not a match in details of experience exists” (214). It is important for adolescents to see into the lives of others through first person narratives as it could help them become more accepting to their peers around them. Social media sites could help increase empathy if adolescents are exposed to appropriate content, but it is impossible to control what they will see. Reading, however, exposes adolescents to the emotions of others and shows them they are not alone in their feelings while also making it easier for guardians to monitor what their children see.

Educators and guardians need to become aware of the benefits of reading since it could help decrease the rise in narcissism discussed by Dr. Sara Konrath in her podcast as adolescents become more aware of the emotions of others and therefore the world around them. If schools update their selection of books for adolescents, they could choose stories that are more likely to exhibit empathetic responses. As adolescents continue to feel pressure both in school, at home, and online, reading can act as a healthy escape as it helps teens identify with characters’ emotions and evokes empathy while decreasing the narcissism that comes with a growing need to become successful in the online world.

The Benefits of Reading for Empathy and Adolescent Identity

Adolescents use social media sites to find their identities in competitive ways that could bring harm to themselves. To stray away from this dangerous identity search that many adolescents go on using social media sites, it is important to show them the benefits that reading could bring to their self-discovery as it could help them understand the world around them and

the experiences of others. Since social media sites are a place filled with narcissistic behaviors, it could prove difficult to evoke empathy in ways that are genuine. Reading can act as a guide to evoke empathy in adolescents in a variety of ways. Authors Monica Anderson and Jing Jing Jiang reveal this need for reading due to the frequent social media usage among adolescents as they state in their article “Teens, Social Media, and Technology 2018” that back in 2018 “45% of teens...say they are online on a near-constant basis” (Pew Research). Almost all adolescents in the United States have access to social media sites which could lead them to form identities based on the competitive online influence. Reading, however, can help guide adolescents to form an identity that is beneficial for society and separate from their identity on social media sites as reading reveals the experiences and emotions of others which are key factors in developing empathy. In the article “Teach Empathy with Literature” by Christina Gil, she describes how reading literature about unlikeable characters shows students how others’ experiences and unique behaviors may affect the way they are treated in society. She posits how reading literature about people with different lives, who adolescents may share similar emotions with, could help to evoke empathy. Gil also reveals that reading literature about people who are from different places can help teens understand and respect cultures completely different from their own. She argues that if adolescents are exposed to experiences that are completely different from their own lives through shared emotions, they can better consider how they choose to treat people who do not act or live as they do. Gil illustrates this concept in her article revealing the importance of literature when considering ways to evoke empathy in adolescents: “One of the key elements to developing empathy is the ability to realize and admit when we have made a mistake. Everyone judges at times, and everyone makes assumptions at times. But when we can see our mistakes as something that we can easily move past, then we will be much more likely to feel empathy for

others” (Gil). The importance of realizing when we make a mistake is key in developing empathy as it allows us to step back and become a better person to contribute to the greater good of the world. Through reading to evoke empathy adolescents can become more aware of their mistakes as many assumptions and judgements can be exposed through personal narratives.

Social media sites are filled with hatred and conflicting views which could pose threats to an adolescent’s ability to evoke empathy as false assumptions are made online every day. In the article “Reading Outside the Boundaries: Children’s Literature as Pedagogy for Building Empathy and Understanding of Social Justice in the College Classroom” by Theresa M. Bouley and Pheobe C. Godfrey, they discuss the positive role of children's literature in college classrooms when trying to evoke empathy in students. Many of the key points discussed in this article can easily be applied to middle school and high school classrooms as well since they concern ways reading can evoke empathy. Authors Bouley and Godfrey reveal how social media is not the only problem that poses threats to an adolescent’s ability to evoke empathy as they describe how many classrooms ignore the importance of evoking empathy in students through reading as there is more of a focus on analyzing or logical reasoning. Bouley and Godfrey reveal the changes needed in classrooms that do not prioritize evoking empathy through reading literature as they state quoting from Judith Langer’s book *Envisioning Literature*:

Inherent in the act of literacy understanding is the promise of touching the many-sidedness of human sensibility. It is through the envisionments we develop as we explore new horizons of possibility that we can at least begin to imagine the perspectives of others – in other circumstances, eras, and cultures – and be moved to make new sense of ourselves, our times, and our world. (37)

Since social media sites are places where adolescents go to build an online identity, it is hard for parents and guardians to monitor what they are viewing and if the identity they are forming is beneficial to their being and therefore the world around them. Reading the experiences of others, however, is a fantastic way for adolescents to understand themselves and others in a world that makes navigating identity difficult. Through reading literature, adolescents are more likely to form an identity that is beneficial for their well-being and the well-being of others. Social media sites can be harmful as adolescents voice their opinions hidden behind a screen. Reading can show adolescents they are not alone in the world and help them form identities not based on the negative opinions of others and not based on a need of approval and praise. It is important that adolescents learn that their identities in the real world are worth more than the identities they put on for others in the online world as it is key in teaching them the importance of developing empathy while also pushing them away from narcissistic behaviors.

Reading literature can help evoke empathy in adolescents during a time in their lives where they are figuring out their identities and their places in this confusing world. As discussed above social media sites push adolescents to form identities in the online world based off the approval and praise of others. In contrast to this superficial way of forming identity contemporary research studies focus on ways reading can help adolescents to develop empathy which is seen in Maria Nikolajeva's article "Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction" as she describes how developing empathy through young adult fiction allows for adolescents to form identities that benefit the greater good of the world. She describes how adolescents can develop empathy through reading the experiences of others and learning about perspectives other than their own. Nikolajeva reveals how reading young adult literature helps adolescents form positive identities through its ability to evoke empathy as she states

“Switching on empathy and theory of mind... Let us remember that theory of mind, or mind-reading, is the ability to understand other people's thoughts, beliefs, and intentions independently of one's own. Empathy is the ability to understand other people's emotions. Both are indispensable social skills” (94). She describes both theory of mind and empathy as “indispensable social skills” as they are something that many adolescents need in their lives to learn to be kind to others. If adolescents are actively learning not to judge someone based on differences, reading allows for a deeper connection to the emotions of the narrator. As Nikolajeva states describing the benefits of reading with a focus on Kidd and Castano’s research on fiction’s ability to shape identity, “Again, this is why we read fiction: it has the power to shape our identities...thanks to neuroscience, that reading fiction definitely improves readers' theory of mind” (88-89). It is important for educators and guardians to take into consideration the beneficial outcomes of reading as it helps evoke empathy and leads teens away from online identity formation. Reading helps teens develop an identity that is for the greater good of the world as they are exposed to the lives of others through realistic and relatable narratives, so they learn how to avoid judging those who are different from them. As social media sites invite narcissistic behaviors to flourish with the praise and approval gained through online identities, reading strays away from the negative behaviors and towards evoking empathy which can change the world for the betterment of society.

The Issues of Cyberbullying and the Benefits of Empathy for Adolescents

Bullying and cyberbullying are serious issues in the lives of adolescents as dangerous competition and judging someone in comparison to oneself occurs both in school and online. In the article “A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying” Monica Anderson describes the dangers that can come with social media usage as she states “59% of U.S. teens have been bullied or harassed online, and a similar share says it's a major problem for people their age. At the same time, teens mostly think teachers, social media companies and politicians are failing at addressing this issue” (Pew Research). It is important for these adolescents, who spend a majority of their time online, whether they are bullies, the victims, or the bystanders, to know the lasting consequences of bullying. To understand the actions of a bully, a victim, or a bystander, one must know the experiences they have undergone. In the article “Portrayals of Bullying in Young Adult Literature: Considerations for Schools” by Janette Hughes and Jennifer Lynn Laffier, they describe how young adult literature can be used in classrooms to combat the ongoing issues of bullying and cyberbullying. Hughes and Laffier argue that if adolescents can understand the experiences of these distinct roles, they can learn what steps need to be taken in their personal lives to actively stop bullying. Since adolescents are at a time in their lives where they are trying to figure out their place in the world, it is important to show them how their actions can profoundly affect people in negative or positive ways depending on how they choose to approach situations. Hughes and Laffier provide young adult texts for teachers to use in the classroom that portray bullying in ways that look familiar to adolescents' real experiences in school. They reveal how such texts allow adolescents to read about the distinct roles in bullying and the experiences of those roles so they can learn solutions and participate in discussions to combat bullying and cyberbullying. Hughes and Laffier describe

the benefits of a specific young adult novel *The Reluctant Journal* in connection to evoking empathy in adolescents, building from Wendy Craig's research on bullying:

The bullying that is happening to Henry's brother affects the entire family; both of his parents are experiencing depression and anxiety as well. This domino effect of bullying can be discussed with students, so they understand the consequences of bullying's reach far beyond just the victim. Reviewing such widespread consequences can promote empathy, altruism, and a sense of responsibility among students, thus acting as deterrent to bullying behaviours. (16)

Adolescents struggle with their identities in the online world as they form identities based on the opinions of others and it is easy to see that this is also something that occurs in school. This need for acceptance leads many adolescents to not care for the well-being of others as they focus on whether their actions are socially acceptable not whether their actions are kind. However, young adult literature that concerns several types of bullying and its negative effects opens students' eyes to a world where people's differences are not a bad thing. It can show adolescents the emotions of bullies, victims, and bystanders so no matter which role they may play in real life, they can learn the true reasons behind a bully's actions towards a victim or a bystander's silence. Young adult literature can help adolescents create identities that are kind and understanding through its ability to reveal the experiences of people who are going through challenging times which can show adolescents the reasons as to why people, such as bullies, behave as they do. It can also show adolescents the saddening outcomes of bullying on a victim's life which once again, can show them the horrible effects of bullying both online and in school and lead them to want to make changes in their society. Reading has the power to guide teens towards positive identities through putting them in the shoes of characters who have different lives and struggles

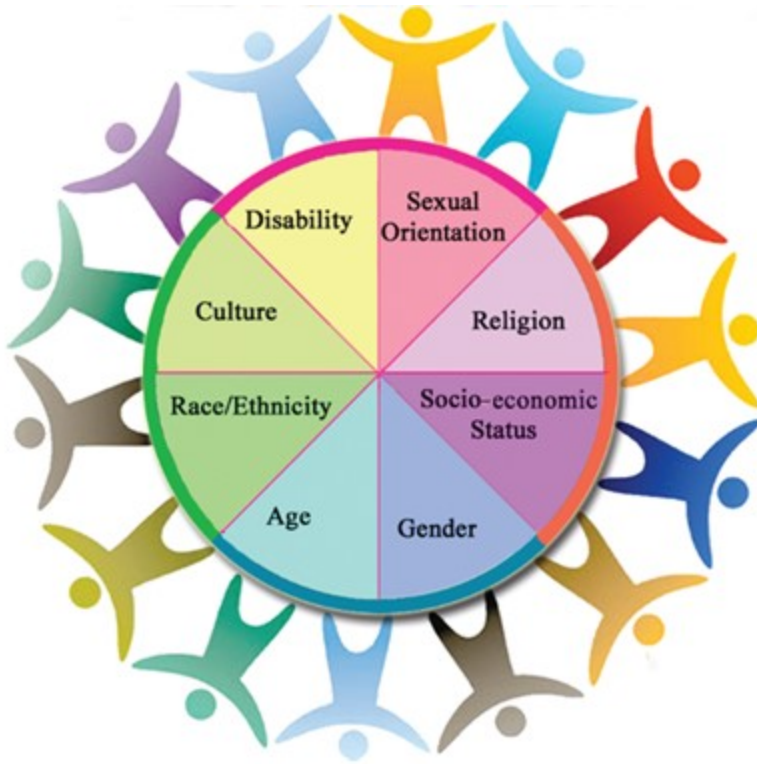
yet who share similar emotions so they can refrain from judging people because they look or behave different from what is socially acceptable. Therefore, reading prepares adolescents with the abilities to learn how to be empathetic individuals.

The Benefits of Reading for Empathy for Cultural Awareness and to Combat Social Issues

Literature not only looks at present issues, but it also takes on issues of our past and history that is often left out of middle and high school social studies courses. A narrative of one's experience allows adolescents to not just learn the history but to see through a lens that allows them to better understand the emotions of those who went through the history. The emotion of a first-person narrative allows adolescents to further connect with a narrator, allowing readers to learn about lives that exist outside of their own. In the article "Teaching Social-Emotional Skills Through Literature" by Carol Jago, she describes how reading literature can evoke empathy through using narratives to reveal social issues in our society that are hidden in our curriculum. If a student is revealed to a narrative, it can open their eyes to an experience and therefore a world that they have never known before. Jago describes how learning the experiences of the past can help adolescents reflect on their present society and its corrupt ways— the first step to combatting social issues. She mentions the benefits of evoking empathy for social awareness in middle and high school students when reading the memoir *March Forward, Girl: From Young Warrior to Little Rock Nine* by Melba Patillo Beal which is a first-person narrative that describes a girl's experiences in the Little Rock Nine during the Jim Crow South. Jago states in her article, "The book is much more than a catalogue of racial mistreatment, however. It is a testimonial to the institutions—family, church, and community—that not only sustained Beals as a child but also inspired her to be a champion of human rights" (29). If adolescents read memoirs in class, they experience a personal narrative glimpse into the history that is often left out of social studies

courses since there is a larger focus on dates and “facts.” A personal narrative that concerns racism and corrupt institutions allows adolescents to begin questioning history so they can be more critical of their society in the present. This realization is the first step to combatting various social issues, corrupt institutions, and oppression in our society. Reading literature helps evoke empathy in adolescents and presents them with the skills to not judge one’s actions in the present without looking at what has happened in the past. These empathetic emotions can drive the motivations of adolescents to combat the ongoing issues in our society.

For adolescents to have the motivation to become more empathetic and understanding there needs to be a change in the reading curriculum in schools, so they are encouraged to read in their free time. Reading relatable books in school encourages adolescents to read books for their own entertainment and therefore be less caught up in the competitions of the online world and more caught up in what truly matters in the real world. It is an educator's job to help teens have a positive relationship towards reading through their book selections, especially if parents and guardians do not have a large influence in their children’s reading lives. Many stories that are read in high school include *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Odyssey*. Each of these books are written by white authors and only one was written by a woman which further reveals why there needs to be changes in the high school curriculum so adolescents can learn to have empathy to become culturally aware. Below I have provided an image from The American Society for Public Administration which shows a pie chart of what it looks like to be culturally diverse:



Since reading young adult literature can produce an understanding of another's life, it is an effective way for adolescents to learn how to be more accepting of differences. With such a small focus on social and cultural awareness in the classroom it is hard to know if adolescents are being informed about key issues in our society so they can learn how to fight rather than contribute to the ongoing issues. Steven Wolk describes in his article "Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature," how reading young adult literature can provide adolescents with good morals while also revealing to them the social issues of our past. As stated by Wolk revealing the benefits of reading for adolescents:

Using young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the wonderful stories of good books. And within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as they are in endless civic issues...Teaching for social responsibility

means being honest about our problems and injustices, and literature can help us to confront these truths. (667)

Wolk reveals the power that reading has on an individual and our society as it gives them tools to become caring individuals so they can learn to be socially responsible. He speaks of “being honest about our problems and injustices” which can be exposed to students through various novels and memoirs as history textbooks often lack the ugly truths of the past and lack an entertaining narrative that draws readers in. Connected with learning about the past is the concept of “historical empathy” which Wolk describes as “an understanding of past people and events” in relation to a book recommendation titled *My Mother the Cheerleader* which reveals the injustices of our past concerning racial segregation (668). Instead of forcing adolescents to learn a ton of historical events from a textbook which is disinteresting and lacking emotion, it is important to slow down and allow the time to focus in on the event through a narrative that feels more personal and allows for empathetic reactions and understanding.

When adolescents are given stories about other teens and their experiences, they can better relate to their experiences and be more understanding of others. Traditional texts are often confusing and unrelatable to teens, leaving them with a negative relationship toward reading; the exact opposite of what we want if we are trying to evoke empathy and understanding in adolescents. In the research article “Using Young Adult Literature to Increase Student Success and Teach Multiculturalism,” researcher Kirsten Toscano describes the powers of young adult literature in comparison to traditional texts. Toscano reveals how young adult literature encourages reading in adolescents as she states, “Through field notes, interviews, student surveys, assessment grades, and library records, it was proven that students enjoy reading and are more successful when tested on young adult literature” (3). Adolescents who enjoy reading are

more likely to partake for fun and therefore gain an understanding of diverse experiences to help them become empathetic individuals. Similar to Steven Wolk's argument Toscano goes on to describe the benefits of young adult literature concerning cultural awareness as she states "Young adult literature can be an excellent lens for students to explore the culture and community in which they live. It also affords students the opportunity to view and have discussions regarding societies, religions, and people different from themselves" (21). Since young adult literature encourages reading among adolescents, it allows for an understanding of other's experiences, cultural awareness, and a glimpse into the issues of our past and present. Educators can help to encourage reading in adolescents so they read outside of school for fun and therefore are exposed to even more lives outside their own which provides them with the opportunity to become empathetic, socially, and culturally aware individuals. With all the issues that are present in social media sites, including the declining mental health among adolescents, it is important to encourage teens to have positive relationships towards reading as it can take them away from the online world and help them escape the competitive and negative atmosphere. While some teens may argue they use social media sites to escape the stress of their everyday lives, if they have a good experience with reading inside the classroom, they can learn a more beneficial way to escape that provides them with the tools to become more empathetic and therefore less competitive and narcissistic.

Since adolescents are at a time in their lives where they are figuring out their identities it is important that they learn to accept each other for their differences. In both middle school and high school, it is important that adolescents learn to be socially aware through reading to avoid judging people based on their sexual orientation. One example of how reading can help young people become more aware of other's experiences is through LGBTQ+ narratives. Gabriel Flores

connects to multiple research articles on teaching LGBTQ+ awareness through young adult literature, as he describes in his article, "Toward a More Inclusive Multicultural Education: Methods for Including LGBT Themes in K-12 Classrooms" how, "The presentation of LGBT-themed literature and lessons may help build tolerance and acceptance among children and in turn help reduce bullying and abuse" (190). Since bullying and cyberbullying occurs in the LGBTQ+ community due to our heteronormative society it is important to introduce literature that promotes diversity and has LGBTQ+ narratives so adolescents learn to be accepting of the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ narratives have the power to evoke an understanding in adolescents so those in the LGBTQ+ community can feel protected and free to live without judgement. In the article "Opening Doors: Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Literature for an Inclusive Curriculum" by Katherine Batchelor, she describes how LGBTQ+ narratives can benefit adolescent readers as she states, "Based on our book club conversations, we believe that teachers should use LGBTQ-themed literature in classrooms as a mirror, a window, and to assist in identity formation (e.g., instilling the belief that students are more than their sexuality and labels)" (32). As the research mentions above, social media sites force teens to create identities not necessarily for themselves but based on the approval of others. However, reading can show adolescents who they are in this world apart from the opinions of others on social media and in real life. Instead, their identities are formed through certain narratives that may or may not be relatable in experience but are relatable through emotions. As Batchelor describes above, reading LGBTQ+ narratives show adolescents they are more than what our structured society (social media sites included) tries to label them. Reading allows for students to break away from the constructs that society tries to force upon them through exposing them to the experiences of others that were once hidden and therefore, evoking empathy within them.

Conclusion

Social media sites are dangerous places as adolescents are surrounded by narcissistic behaviors due to the need for recognition which can lead to unhealthy competition, cyberbullying, and therefore possible mental health issues. Since social media sites drive adolescents to form identities based off the opinions of others it is key to encourage reading among teens so they can start forming identities in new ways separate from the online influence. Reading can evoke empathy and can help guide adolescents to form identities that not only benefit themselves but also the world around them. Adolescents will continue to use social media sites frequently, however, if educators and guardians can encourage reading outside of school, they can promote social and cultural awareness among teens. This awareness due to empathetic responses through reading prepares adolescents with the tools they need to form identities for the greater good of the world and stray away from the narcissistic behaviors of the online world.

Future studies could explore ways to encourage reading among adolescents through social media sites. Since adolescents will continue to engage in activities on social media sites it is crucial that we find solutions to make teens excited about reading. Educators and guardians can only accomplish so much when it comes to finding ways to encourage reading among adolescents who are already too engulfed in the online world. The limitations of this thesis could be expanded in future studies to include the benefits that social media sites could have on adolescent reading.

Works Cited

- “A Longitudinal Examination of the Association between Sharing Alcohol References on Social Media and Binge Drinking.” *International Communication Association*, 2017, pp.1-35.
- Anderson, Monica. “A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying.” *Pew Research Center*, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/09/27/a-majority-of-teens-have-experienced-some-form-of-cyberbullying/>. Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Anderson, Monica, et al. “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018.” *Pew Research Center*, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>. Accessed 10 February 2022.
- Athanases, Steven. “A gay-themed lesson in an ethnic literature curriculum: Tenth graders’ response to ‘Dear Anita.’” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 66 no. 2, 1996, pp. 231.
- Barnes, Moewaka, et al. “Alcohol and social media: Drinking and drunkenness while online.” *Critical Public Health*, vol. 26 no. 1, pp. 62–76, 2016, doi:10.1080/09581596.2015.1058921.
- Batchelor, Katherine, et al. “Opening Doors: Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Literature for an Inclusive Curriculum.” *The Clearing House*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2018, pp.29-36.
- Bergman, Shawn, et al. “Millennials, narcissism, and social networking: What narcissists do on social networking sites and why.” *Personality & Individual Differences*, vol. 50, no.5, pp. 706–711.
- Bosson, Christina and Rita Kottasz. “Uses and gratifications sought by pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok consumers.” *Young Consumers*, 2020.

- Bouley, Theresa M., and Phoebe C. Godfrey. "Reading Outside the Boundaries: Children's Literature as Pedagogy for Building Empathy and Understanding of Social Justice in the College Classroom" *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 33-51.
- Brown, Rebecca and Melissa Gregg. "The pedagogy of regret: Facebook, binge drinking and young women." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2012, pp. 357–269. doi:10.1080/10304312.2012.665834.
- Cook, Daniel and Susan Kaiser. "Betwixt and between age ambiguity and the sexualisation of the female consuming subject." *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2004, pp. 203-227.
- Craig, Wendy, et al. "Responding to bullying: What works?" *School Psychology International*, vol. 28, 2007, pp. 465–476. doi:10.1177/0143034307084136.
- Elihu, Katz, et al. "Utilization of mass communication by the individual." *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*, 1974, pp. 19-32.
- Faltas, Iberkis. "Cultural Diversity in the Community and Workplace" *American Society for Public Administration*, 14 December 2018, <https://patimes.org/cultural-diversity-in-the-community-and-the-workplace%EF%BB%BF/>. Accessed 28 February 2022.
- Flores, Gabriel. "Toward a More Inclusive Multicultural Education: Methods for Including LGBT Themes in K-12 Classrooms" *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2012, pp.187-197.

- Gil, Christina. "Teach Empathy With Literature." *George Lucas Educational Foundation*, 2017, <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/teach-empathy-literature>. Accessed 12 February 2022.
- Hebden, Ross, et al. "When you add alcohol, it gets that much better: University students, alcohol consumption, and online drinking cultures." *Journal of Drug Issues*, vol. 45 no. 2, 2015, pp. 214–226. doi:10.1177/0022042615575375.
- Herring, Susan, et al. "Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media." *International encyclopedia of social and behavioral sciences*, vol. 2, 2015, https://www.ecoseven.net/wpcontent/uploads/2016/04/info.ils_indiana.edu_herring_teen_s.gender.pdf. Accessed 5 February 2022.
- Hughes, Janette, et al. "Portrayals of Bullying in Young Adult Literature: Considerations for Schools." *Canadian Journal of Education*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1-24.
- Jago, Carol. "Teaching social-emotional skills through literature." *Literacy Today*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2020, pp.28-29.
- Kaura, Heena, et al. "Relationship between Social Media Usage and Emotional Intelligence among Adolescents." *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing*, vol. 11, no. 10-12, pp. 581-584.
- Keene, Suzanne. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *The Ohio State University Press*, 2006.
- Kidd, David and Emanuele Castano. "Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind." *Science*, vol. 342 no. 6156, 2013, pp. 377-380.

Langer, Judith. *Envisioning literature: Literacy understanding and literature instruction*. New York, Teachers College Press, 1995.

Logrieco, Giuseppe, et al. "The Paradox of Tik Tok Anti-Pro-Anorexia Videos: How Social Media Can Promote Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Anorexia." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031041>. Accessed 5 February 2022.

Mascheroni, Giovanna, et al. "Girls are addicted to likes so they post semi-naked selfies: peer mediation, normativity and the construction of identity online." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-14.

Moita-Lopes, Luiz. "Queering literacy teaching: Analyzing gay-themed discourses in a fifth-grade class in Brazil." *Journal of Language, Identity, & Education*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2006, pp. 31–50.

Muduli, Jyoti. "Addiction to Technological Gadgets and its Impact on Health and Lifestyle. A Study on College Students" *National Institute of Technology*, 2014.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction." *Narrative Works*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 85-107.

Niland, Patricia, et al. "See it doesn't look pretty does it? Young adults' airbrushed drinking practices on Facebook." *Psychology & Health*, vol. 29 no. 8, 2014, pp. 877–895, doi:10.1080/08870446.2014.893345.

- Salafia, Caroline, et al. "Motivation for Selfie-Posting Mediates the Relationship Between Narcissism and Empathy." *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2020, pp. 353-380.
- Shao, Guosong. "Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: a uses and gratification perspective." *Internet Research*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7-25.
- "Social Media and Teens." *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, March 2018, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Social-Media-and-Teens-100.aspx#:~:text=Surveys%20show%20that%20ninety%20percent,mobile%20devices%20with%20internet%20capabilities. Accessed 28 February 2022.
- Swartz, Patti. "Bridging multicultural education: Bringing sexual orientation into the children's and young adult literature classrooms." *Radical Teacher*, vol. 66, no. 11, 2003.
- "The Decline of Empathy and the Rise of Narcissism" *Speaking of Psychology*. From American Psychological Association, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/empathy-narcissism>.
- Toscano, Kirsten. "Using Young Adult Literature to Increase Student Success and Teach Multiculturalism." *St. John Fisher College*, vol. 8, 2012, pp.1-56.
- van Djick, Jose. "You have one identity: performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn." *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2013, pp. 199-215.

Wolk, Steven. "Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult literacy*, vol. 52, no. 8, 2009, pp. 664-673.