

---

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON YOUTHS' DRUG-TAKING BEHAVIOUR**  
BY LIANG SUET LAY, RESEARCH EXECUTIVE, SINGAPORE ANTI-NARCOTICS ASSOCIATION

---

### **Introduction**

Social media (SM) has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of young people. It refers broadly to digital platforms that enable users to create, share and interact with content and with one another in real time, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. For youths, social media serves multiple purposes: maintaining friendships and social networks, expressing themselves through photos and videos, seeking information and support, and consuming entertainment. It is a part of their social environment in which they live, grow, and seek identity.

The scale of usage reflects this reality for Singapore youths. In Singapore, a 2021 study by the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) reported that at least 90% of respondents aged 16 to 25 years old used social media (SUSS, 2021). Local data also suggest high screen engagement. A 2024 survey conducted jointly by Channel News Asia (CNA) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) reported that Singapore teenagers aged between 13 and 19 spent nearly 8.5 hours a day on screens, with around 1.5 hours spent on social networking. The CNA-IPS study also noted that 58.8% of the respondents reported using devices to cope with stress or negative emotions (Tang, 2025). Given the high prevalence of social media use and the substantial amount of time youths spend on these platforms, it is important for us as a society to understand how social media may influence our youths' attitudes and behaviours, including those related to drug-taking.

### **The impact of Social Media on Youths' Drug-taking Behaviour**

Social media is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it provides a space for social support (Phelan et al., 2025) and is used to cope with stress (Wolfers et al., 2022). On the other hand, research also suggests an association between social media use and substance abuse (Liu et al., 2024).

## **Positive Roles of Social Media**

### *Social Media as a Support Tool*

Wolfers et al. (2022) characterises social media as a dynamic environment for stress management, where users employ a spectrum of both reactive and proactive coping strategies. When used in a reactive way, individuals utilise these platforms to regulate negative affect by seeking cognitive distractions from stressful encounters or by using digital spaces for emotional venting. On the proactive end of the spectrum, social media facilitates instrumental problem-solving by providing access to information and expansive support networks. Central to both approaches is the mobilisation of peer groups, which allow individuals to secure the social validation and emotional support necessary to address the underlying sources of their distress.

Additionally, research by Phelan et al. (2025) suggests that social media can serve as a supportive environment for individuals navigating substance use disorders. This is particularly true for youth populations, who utilise digital platforms to access recovery-oriented content and connect with both professionals and peers. In their study of 255 U.S.-based participants aged 18 and older, the authors found that social media was widely adopted as a primary tool for recovery support. Furthermore, a majority of the participants perceived these digital interactions as beneficial, noting that social media helped improve their sense of community and reinforced their commitment to the recovery process.

## **Negative Roles of Social Media**

### *Social Media as a Stressor*

Social media stressors such as approval anxiety, fear of missing out (FoMO), exposure to misleading or threatening information, and the persistence of constant notifications have been identified as significant contributors to psychological distress, such as increase in social isolation and decrease in self-acceptance (Wolfers et al., 2022; Cipolletta et al., 2020). Given that stress is a well-established precursor to substance use disorders, recent research has begun to examine how these digital pressures correlate with drug use. Specifically, a Norwegian study by Brobakke et al. (2025) found that adolescents aged 16 to 21 years old who experienced social media as a stressor faced a heightened risk of using illicit substances or having drug problems, most notably cannabis. While these findings demonstrate a noteworthy association, further research is required to determine a definitive causal relationship.

Singapore data, while not directly linking social media use to drug abuse, indicate related concerns. A study by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) found that 45% of youths aged 13 to 25 reported mixed or negative emotions after using social media (NTU, 2025). Six in ten respondents in the SUSS study reported experiencing negative online behaviours such as negative comments, harassment or exclusion (SUSS, 2021). Additionally, a 2024 study by the Institute of Mental Health reported that about one in three young people aged 15 to 35 years old experienced severe or extremely severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or stress, with excessive social media use linked to these symptoms (CNA, 2024). Given the well-established association between stress and mental well-being with substance use, these findings suggest potential pathways through which social media may indirectly increase vulnerability.

### *Social Media as a Reinforcement Pathway*

Emerging research suggests that social media may influence the brain's reward systems. When youths scroll through feeds and receive likes or notifications, dopamine is released - the same neurotransmitter involved in reinforcing substance use behaviours such as alcohol and drug consumption. This conditioning may make young brains more vulnerable to chasing stronger stimulations, such as drugs, later in life (De et al., 2025; Savoia, 2025).

This neurological vulnerability manifests in measurable behavioural trends among adolescents. For instance, a U.S. study of 586 middle school students found that higher problematic internet use scores were significantly associated with higher odds of using cannabis and e-cigarettes (Liu et al., 2024). This correlation is particularly relevant in our local context, as research by the Institute of Mental Health has reported that about one in two Singaporean youths aged 15 to 21 exhibit problematic smartphone use (Tushara, 2024). Although behavioural addiction to smartphones is not equivalent to substance addiction, studies note overlapping features such as impaired control and continued use despite harm (Amirthalingam et al., 2024). Such behavioural patterns may co-exist with or heighten vulnerability to other risky behaviours such as drug abuse (Liu et al., 2024).

### *Social Media as a Driver of Pro-Drug Norms*

Social media algorithms prioritise user engagement, which can unintentionally foster 'pro-drug' echo chambers by filtering content that reinforces existing interests. Frequent exposure to media that portrays drug use as harmless, desirable or socially rewarding may lower perceived risks and stimulate curiosity. This effect may be amplified within the social media spaces where substance use is frequently glamorised, for example through content that portrays drug use as trendy or fun, or through endorsements by influencers and celebrities (Ekinici et al., 2025).

Recent research quantifies the impact of this digital exposure. Liu et al. (2024) observed that encountering drug or alcohol-related posts significantly increases the odds of substance use. This risk is further compounded by a stark narrative imbalance: nearly 76.3% of substance-related content has portrayed drugs or drug use positively, while only 20.2% highlights the negative consequences (Rutherford et al., 2022).

### *Social Media as a Drug Marketplace*

Another concern is the role of social media as a potential marketplace for illicit substances. Platform features such as private messaging, ephemeral content (photos, videos, or posts that disappear after a set period), and perceived anonymity may lower barriers to access. A scoping review study by Fuller et al. (2023) found that, on average, more than one in ten social media posts contain advertisements promoting illicit drugs. In early 2025, a Europol-backed operation shut down two of the world's largest platforms offering illegal goods and services, including drugs, which collectively had over 10 million users (Marchini, 2025).

The risk is not only for those seeking substances; the design of these platforms ensures that drug-related content finds the user. This is reflected in a 2023–2024 study in UK where 29% of secondary school students encountered drug advertisements without actively searching for them (Fuller et al., 2025).

Such active and passive exposure increases the visibility and perceived accessibility of drugs, lowering perceived risks and contributing to the normalisation of drug use. While local data remains limited, this global trend suggests that the visibility of drugs on social media is becoming a standard part of the digital experience, underscoring the need for monitoring and preventive efforts.

### **What can we do?**

While the risks are significant, total restriction or regulation of the social media is often impractical nor desirable, given its role in communication, education and social connection. In fact, 54% of U.S. teens report that it would be difficult to give up social media (Vogels et al., 2022).

This reliance on digital platforms necessitates a shift from restrictive policies toward proactive, research-driven strategies. However, because there is currently sparse evidence on the efficacy of interventions specifically targeting social-media-influenced drug norms and behaviours, the strategies discussed here are informed by broader frameworks for mitigating digital harms.

### ***Strengthening Media Literacy and Resilience***

Developmentally appropriate media literacy programmes can help youths critically evaluate content, recognise misinformation, and resist manipulative messaging (Kupersmidt et al., 2010), for example, teaching youths to recognise misinformation and the reality behind "glamorised" and "normalised" drug content. In terms of message design, research has found that meme-like interventions are more effective in promoting media literacy among young adults obtaining substance use information from social media (Austin et al., 2026).

Fostering media literacy is a collective responsibility that extends from educators to the family dinner table. As adolescents often mirror their parents' social media habits (Morawska et al., 2025), parents can play a significant role in shaping their children's digital behaviours by modelling healthy online habits and maintaining open conversations about their online experiences (American Psychological Association, 2023). In the local context, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) has addressed this need through the Digital for Life portal, providing Singaporean parents with the resources to guide their children's digital journeys with confidence (Koh, 2025).

While parental guidance and formal education provide the foundation for digital safety, peer-led interventions capitalise on the unique social capital adolescents hold within their own networks. Research indicates that youths are more likely to internalise health-related messaging when it is delivered by peers who share their lived experiences and digital vernacular (Valente et al., 2017). In the context of drug prevention, "peer influencers" - youths who are trained to promote healthy norms - can effectively counter the glamorisation of substance use by sharing authentic, relatable content that highlights the reality of drug-taking behaviours.

## **Creating a Safer Online Space**

While regulatory oversight and platform governance are essential, the sheer velocity of user-generated content means that top-down solutions alone are insufficient. We must complement these systemic efforts with individual digital citizenship - a final line of defence against the proliferation of pro-drug misinformation. By practicing intentional digital habits, adhering to ethical standards, and actively reporting harmful content (Digital for Life, 2025), users can transform from passive consumers into guardians of their own online ecosystem.

## **Closing Remarks**

Social media is deeply embedded in the modern youth social ecosystem, offering vital avenues for connection while simultaneously introducing risks regarding substance use. Research suggests that the impact of these platforms depends less on usage frequency and more on the nature of engagement. Consequently, restrictive measures are often counterproductive, potentially triggering social isolation or severing access to support networks. A more sustainable approach lies in enhancing media literacy and fostering safer digital environments, empowering youths to navigate online spaces critically and avoid the pitfalls of drug-taking behaviours. However, success necessitates integrated, multi-stakeholder strategies involving peers, parents, schools, policymakers and platform providers. Together, we can foster a safer and more responsible social media environment for everyone.

---

## **Limitations**

It should be noted that this article draws from a specific selection of studies; it is not intended to be a comprehensive systematic review. Many cited studies are correlational, and causality cannot be established. Furthermore, findings from overseas contexts may not fully generalise to Singapore due to cultural and social differences.

---

## **References**

- American Psychological Association. (2023, May 9). *Keeping teens safe on social media: What parents should know to protect their kids*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/social-media-parent-tips>
- Amirthalingam, J., & Khera, A. (2024). Understanding social media addiction: A deep dive. *Cureus*, *16*(10). <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.72499>
- Austin, E. W., Seo, H. Y., Sutherland, A. D., & Domgaard, S. (2026). Media literacy intervention effects on young adults' decision making about substance use-related social media messages. *Health Marketing Quarterly*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07359683.2026.2635874>

Brobakke, S. K., Drageset, J., Andersen, A. I. O., & Skogen, J. C. (2025). Association Between Social Media as a Stressor and Illegal Drug Use Among Adolescents in Norway: Findings from the “LifeOnSoMe”-Study. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Use*, 30(3), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/29973368.2025.2485031>

Cipolletta, S., Malighetti, C., Cenedese, C., & Spoto, A. (2020). How Can Adolescents Benefit from the Use of Social Networks? The iGeneration on Instagram. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(19), 6952. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17196952>

CNA. (2024, September 20). *Excessive social media use linked to mental health symptoms among youths: IMH study*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/youth-depression-anxiety-stress-social-media-body-image-cyberbullying-4617641>

De, D., El Jamal, M., Aydemir, E., & Khera, A. (2025). Social Media Algorithms and Teen Addiction: Neurophysiological Impact and Ethical Considerations. *Cureus*, 17(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.77145>

Digital for Life. (2025, October 22). *Reporting to platforms*. Infocomm Media Development Authority. <https://www.digitalforlife.gov.sg/learn/resources/all-resources/reporting-to-platforms>

Ekinci, Y., Dam, S., & Buckle, G. (2025). The Dark Side of Social Media Influencers: A Research Agenda for Analysing Deceptive Practices and Regulatory Challenges. *Psychology and Marketing*, 42(4). <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22173>

Fuller, A., Vasek, M., Mariconti, E., & Johnson, S. D. (2023). Understanding and preventing the advertisement and sale of illicit drugs to young people through social media: A multidisciplinary scoping review. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 43(1), 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13716>

Fuller, A., Vasek, M., Mariconti, E., & Johnson, S. D. (2025). Platforms, risk perceptions, and reporting: the impact of illicit drug advertisements on social media among UK secondary students. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 22(154). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-025-01299-5>

Koh, S. (2025, November 1). *New resources launched to help parents guide children’s digital habits*. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/new-resources-launched-to-help-parents-guide-childrens-digital-habits>

Kupersmidt, J. B., Scull, T. M., & Austin, E. W. (2010). Media Literacy Education for Elementary School Substance Use Prevention: Study of Media Detective. *PEDIATRICS*, 126(3):525–531. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-0068>

Liu, J., Charmaraman, L., & Bickham, D. (2024). Association Between Social Media Use and Substance Use Among Middle and High School-Aged Youth. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 59(7):1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826084.2024.2320372>

Marchini, C. S. (2025, May 27). *The digital drug revolution: How online markets are reshaping global illicit trade*. Global Initiative. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/digital-drug-revolution-online-markets-global-illicit-trade-ocindex/>

Morawska, A., Adina, J., Khan, A., & Turner, K. M. T. (2025). Parental Factors Associated with Social Media Use in Adolescence: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Adolescence*, 98(1):51-68. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.70062>

(NTU) Nanyang Technological University (2025, August 13). *Youth Report Social Media Usage Impacting Their Self Worth and Mental Health*. Nanyang Technological University. <https://www.ntu.edu.sg/business/news-events/news/story-detail/youth-report-social-media-usage-impacting-their-self-worth-and-mental-health>

Phelan, C., Katz, A. P. M., Merrill, J. E., Jackson, K. M., & Wray, T. B. (2025). Social media for recovery support for people with substance use disorder. A cross-sectional study of use patterns and motivations. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence Reports*, 15(465), 100331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dadr.2025.100331>

Rutherford, B. N., Lim, C. C. W., Johnson, B., Cheng, B., Chung, J., Huang, S., Sun, T., Leung, J., Stjepanović, D., & Chan, G. C. K. (2022). #Turntrending: a systematic review of substance use portrayals on social media platforms. *Addiction*, 118(2):206–217. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16020>

Savoia, R. (2025, October 15). *From Screens to Substances: How Social Media Increases Risk for Adolescent Drug Use*. Oxjournal.org. <https://www.oxjournal.org/from-screens-to-substances-how-social-media-increases-risk-for-adolescent-drug-use/>

SUSS (Singapore University of Social Sciences) (2021). “Youths in the Digital Space.” Published by the Centre for Applied Research, *Singapore University of Social Sciences*. [https://www.suss.edu.sg/docs/default-source/content\\_about/youths-in-the-digital-space-\\_technical-report.pdf?sfvrsn=80757473\\_3](https://www.suss.edu.sg/docs/default-source/content_about/youths-in-the-digital-space-_technical-report.pdf?sfvrsn=80757473_3)

Tang, L. (2025, February 6). *Singapore teenagers spend nearly 8.5 hours a day on screens: CNA-IPS survey*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/screen-time-devices-survey-teens-spend-daily-stress-4908281>

Tushara, E. (2024, October 2). *About one in two S’porean youth has problematic smartphone use: IMH study*. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/about-one-in-two-s-porean-youth-has-problematic-smartphone-use-imh-study>

Valente, T. W., & Pitts, S. R. (2017). An appraisal of social network theory and analysis as applied to public health: Challenges and opportunities. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 38, 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031816-044528>

Vogels, E. A., Gelles-Watnick, R., & Massarat, N. (2022, August 10). *Teens, social media and technology 2022*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

Wolfers, L. N., & Utz, S. (2022). Social Media Use, Stress, and Coping. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, 101305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101305>