

Social Media and Mental Health

Abstract

The diffusion of social media coincided with a worsening of mental health conditions among adolescents and young adults in the United States, giving rise to speculation that social media might be detrimental to mental health. In this paper, we provide quasi-experimental estimates of the impact of social media on mental health by leveraging a unique natural experiment: the staggered introduction of Facebook across U.S. colleges. Our analysis couples data on student mental health around the years of Facebook's expansion with a generalized difference-in-differences empirical strategy. We find that the roll-out of Facebook at a college increased symptoms of poor mental health, especially depression. We also find that, among students predicted to be most susceptible to mental illness, the introduction of Facebook led to increased utilization of mental healthcare services. Lastly, we find that, after the introduction of Facebook, students were more likely to report experiencing impairments to academic performance resulting from poor mental health. Additional evidence on mechanisms suggests that the results are due to Facebook fostering unfavorable social comparisons.