

## **Chapter 6**

### The Anxious Generation

### Why Social Media Harms Girls More than Boys

#### **Summary**

Social media harms girls more than boys. Correlational studies show that heavy users of social media have higher rates of depression and other disorders than light users or non-users. The correlation is larger and clearer for girls: heavy users are three times as likely to be depressed as non-users.

Experimental studies show that social media use is a *cause*, not just a correlate, of anxiety and depression. When people are assigned to reduce or eliminate social media for three weeks or more, their mental health usually improves. Several "quasi – experiments" show that when Facebook came to campuses, or when high-speed Internet came to regions and provinces, mental health declined, especially for girls and young women.

Girls use social media a lot more than boys, and they prefer visually oriented platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, which are worse for social comparison than primarily text – based platforms, such as Reddit. The two major categories of motivations are agency (the desire to stand out and have an effect on the world) and communion (the desire to connect and develop a sense of belonging). Boys and girls both want each of these, but there is a gender difference that emerges early in children's play: boys choose more agency activities: girls choose more communion activities. Social media, appeals to the desire for communion, but it often ends up, frustrating it.

There are at least four reasons why social media harms girls more than boys. The **first** is that girls are more sensitive to visual comparisons, especially when other people praise or criticize one's face or body. Visually oriented social media platforms that focus on images of oneself are ideally suited to pushing down a girl's "sociometer" ( the internal gauge of where one stands in relation to others). Girls are more likely to develop "socially prescribed perfectionism" in which a person tries to live up to impossibly high standards held by others or by society.

The **second** reason is that girls' aggression is often expressed in attempts to harm the relationships and reputations of other girls, whereas boys' aggression is more likely to be expressed in physical ways. Social media

has offered girls endless ways to damage other girls' relationships, and reputations.

The **third** reason is the girls and women more readily share emotions. When everything moved online and girls became hyper – connected, girls with anxiety or depression might have influenced many other girls to develop anxiety and depression. Girls are also more vulnerable to “sociogenic” illnesses, which means illnesses caused by social influence rather than from a biological cause.

The **fourth** reason is that the Internet has made it easier for men to approach and stalk girls and women and to behave badly toward them while avoiding accountability. When preteen girls open social media accounts, they are often followed and contacted by older men, and they are pressured by boys in their school to share nude photographs of themselves.

Social media is a trap that ensnares more girls than boys. It lures people in with the promise of connection and communion, but then it multiplies the number of relationships, while reducing their quality, therefore making it harder to spend time with a few close friends in real life. This may be why loneliness spiked so sharply among girls in the early 2010s, while for boys, the rise was more gradual.

## Reflection

Dear parents,

In chapter 6 of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt helps us understand something many of us are already sensing as parents and educators: while social media affects all children, it tends to harm girls in particularly deep and lasting ways.

Girls are wired for relationship. This is a beautiful gift from God – one that allows them to be empathetic, connected, nurturing, and emotionally attuned. However, social media platforms are designed to exploit this very strength. Instead of face – to – face relationships, grounded in trust and shared experience, girls are often drawn into a world of constant comparison, judgment, and performance.

Social media trains girls to *watch themselves being watched*. Worth becomes measured in likes, comments, views, and followers. Over time, this can quietly erode a child's sense of identity. Instead of asking, “*Who*

*am I in God's eyes?* girls may begin to ask How do I look? Do I belong? Am I enough?

As a Catholic school community, this should give us pause. Our faith teaches that every child is created intentionally, lovingly, and uniquely by God. Their dignity is inherent – not earned, not voted on, and not dependent on approval from others. When a young girl's developing brain is immersed in an online world that constantly ranks and evaluates her, anxiety, sadness, and self – doubt can easily take root.

Haidt also points out that girls experience more social aggression online – subtle exclusion, gossip, screenshots, and group dynamics that can follow them home and into the night. Unlike playground conflicts that end when the bell rings, social media conflicts are relentless. There is no safe pause, no Sabbath rest for the heart.

As a principal, I see the fruits of this in schools everywhere: increased anxiety, perfectionism, fear of failure, and emotional fragility – often in children who are outwardly successful and kind. These are not parenting failures. These are signals that our children are growing up in a culture that does not always protect what is sacred and tender in them.

So what can we do?

First, we reclaim our role as guardians of childhood. Delaying smartphones and social media is not punishment – it is protection. Second, we intentionally ground our daughters in real relationships: family conversations, structured play, faith communities, service, and friendships rooted in presence rather than performance. Finally, we continually remind them –through words and actions – that their worth is fixed, eternal, and God – given.

In our Catholic tradition, we know that silence, prayer, and authentic community are where God speaks most clearly. Our children need these spaces now more than ever.

Thank you for walking this journey with me. Together, as a school and family, may raise children who know who they are, whose they are, and that they are deeply loved.

Grace and peace,  
Mrs. Thompson.