SOCIAL MEDIA: THE HIDDEN IMPACT ON OUR HEALTH

Scroll after scroll, social media shapes the way we see ourselves. Among young people, this influence is even stronger: 8 out of 10 girls report that social media negatively affects their perception of their physical appearance. Just one hour of daily exposure may be enough to trigger distress, especially by encouraging comparisons with often unrealistic standards. Gradually, a silent pressure sets in, undermining self-esteem. So, how can we use social media more mindfully?
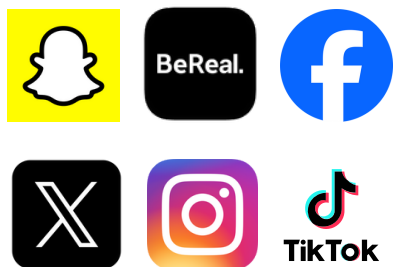
TikTok, Instagram, Facebook… These platforms, built around sharing photos and videos, are designed to capture attention and increase user engagement. The addictive nature of social media strengthens its impact on self-esteem, body image, and therefore on behavior. Billions of pieces of content are uploaded daily, many of them related to food, physical appearance, or lifestyle. They create implicit norms (body image, lifestyle habits…) aligned with today's beauty standards.

Stigmatizing messages

Restrictive messages

Misleading messages
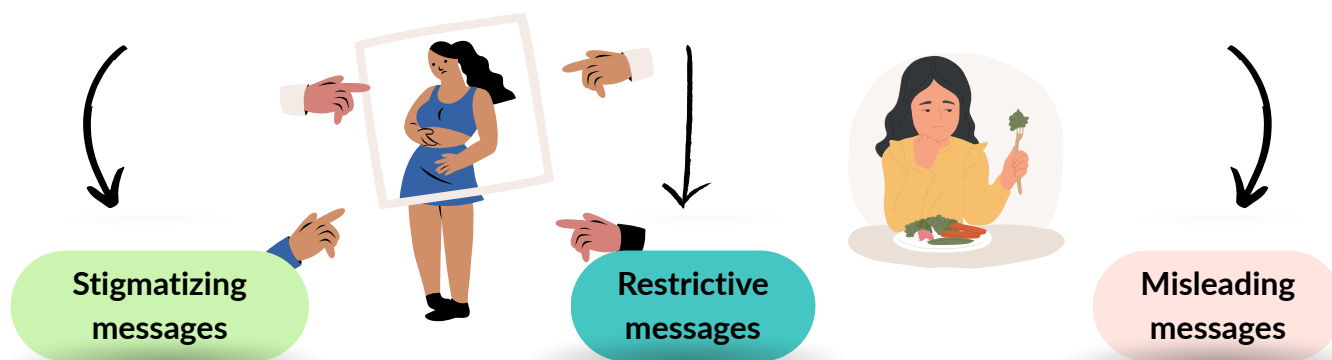
AN EMERGING ADDICTION

For some users, social media can become problematic. When the need to connect becomes uncontrollable and the time spent online interferes with social life, studies, or leisure, it is called behavioral addiction. This compulsive use often causes distress or suffering, with real impact on daily life. Unfortunately, users are not always aware of the consequences of their usage on their health. As with other addictions, tolerance develops: the more you scroll, the more you feel the need to stay connected.

The Algorithm: the Driving Force of This addiction

Social media **algorithms** are designed to analyze the content viewed and suggest similar content. This traps users in a **bubble of personalized recommendations**, increasing the risk of **addiction**. Users therefore spend even more time on these platforms, leading to **repeated exposure** to potentially **harmful** messages and a risk of **normalizing dangerous** behaviors (extreme diets, body checks*, social isolation…). Users may then seek **comfort** in these **beliefs** by further increasing their online **interactions**.

*Body checks: targeted, repeated checks of certain body areas to evaluate appearance
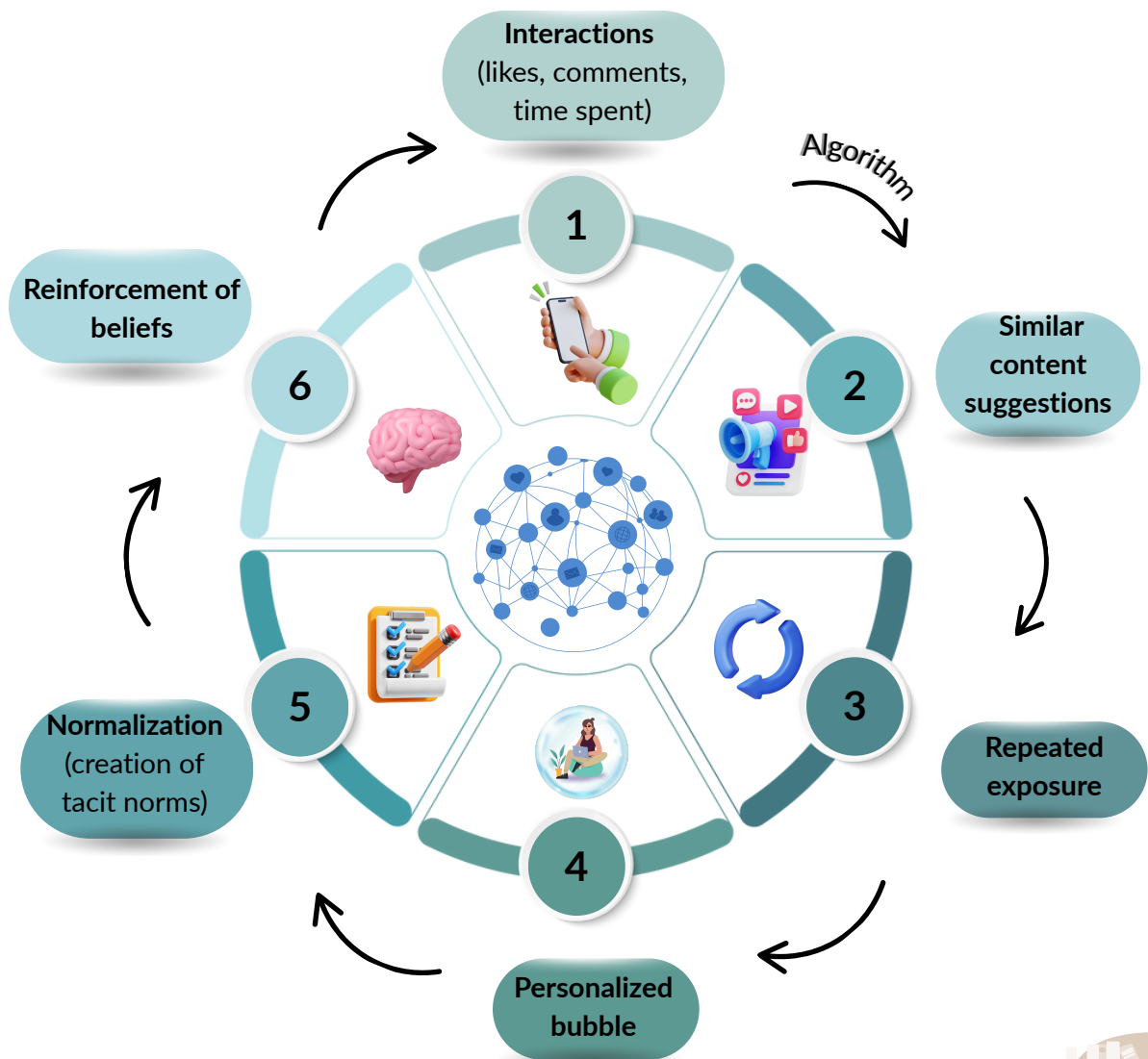
This algorithm-driven **spiral** can contribute to excessive social media use and reinforce:

- Isolation
- Pre-existing disorders
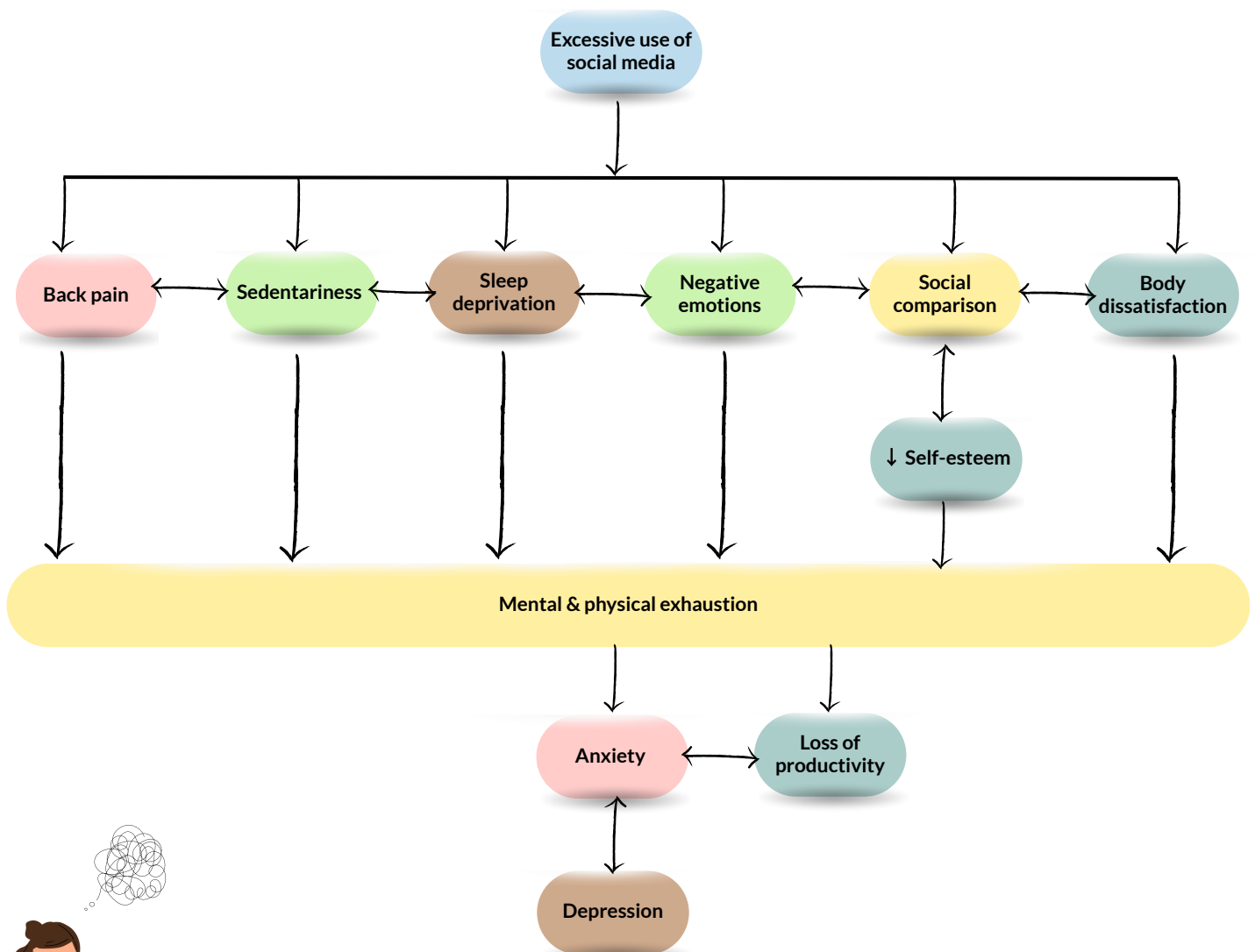- Insecurity

Mental and Physical Consequences

Excessive **social media** use can have numerous **psychological**, **emotional**, and **physical** consequences. It can generate **negative feelings** and foster **upward social comparison**. This comparison can heighten feelings of **inferiority**, lowering **self-esteem**. It also promotes **thinness ideals and body dissatisfaction**.

In the long run, these effects can easily lead to **mental exhaustion** and **anxiety**.

*Tendency to compare oneself to people perceived as superior.

Screen time can also have many repercussions such as **lack of sleep**, **sedentary lifestyle**, **back pain**, **decreased productivity**. All of which contribute to **physical and mental exhaustion.**

These factors fuel anxiety, which can evolve into depression.

Excessive use of social media

Back pain → Sedentariness → Sleep deprivation → Negative emotions → Social comparison → Body dissatisfaction

↓ Self-esteem

Mental & physical exhaustion

Anxiety ↔ Loss of productivity

Depression

In some cases, social media can also contribute to the development of eating disorders (ED), particularly through the spread of viral challenges.

Risky Challenges: Dangers Behind the Screen

What?

Some trends, such as **"pro-ana"** content (promoting extreme thinness as a lifestyle), **"fitspiration"** (glorifying an extreme pursuit of thinness and physical performance), or the hashtag **#SkinnyTok,** spread particularly **harmful** messages.

How?

Behind **pseudo-motivational** messages or the promotion of an **extreme lifestyle** (sometimes staged), hide encouragements to food **restriction**, sometimes even glorifying **hunger** and **pain**. These posts highlight extremely **low-calorie** diets, the elimination of entire **food groups**, **body checks***, **excessive exercise routines**, or guilt-inducing phrases. Conversely, some content encourages **excessive eating**.

*Body checks: repeated targeted checks of body parts to assess appearance

These trends increase the risk of **body dissatisfaction**, **disordered eating practices**, and therefore **eating disorders** or **obesity**.

Influencers, through their **communities**, also create a strong sense of **belonging** and **dependence**, which can serve as a **refuge**, reinforcing **social isolation** another risk factor for EDs.

Examples of thinness challenges: a danger to health

Belly Button Challenge
Touching your navel by wrapping your arm behind your back

Thigh Gap Challenge
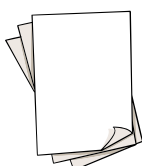Pressing your legs together while keeping a thigh gap

Collarbone Challenge
Balancing coins in the hollow of your collarbone

A4 Waist Challenge
Hiding your waist behind an A4 sheet of paper

Headphone Waist Challenge
Wrapping earphone cords around your waist

Succeeding in these **challenges** reflects **extreme thinness**, particular **body types**, or unusual **flexibility**, but does not correspond to a **healthy weight.**

These challenges are dangerous and should not be attempted.

Real Moderation?

Platforms struggle to stop the spread of these harmful trends. TikTok has officially removed the hashtag **#SkinnyTok**, but unfortunately, alternatives constantly appear and escape moderation. It is therefore crucial to implement **sustainable solutions** to counter these movements, which exploit both **moderation** loopholes and **algorithmic** power.

Taking Action and Protecting Ourselves

While social media can spread harmful messages, it can also be spaces of **inspiration** and **kindness**.

Some accounts share **uplifting quotes** or **delicious balanced recipes.**

It is therefore essential to **learn to use these tools** with a **critical eye** and a **mindful approach**, in order to benefit from their **positive** aspects without falling into their traps.

Possible actions:

1. Strengthen regulation of **harmful** content through user **reporting** and more effective **moderation**. Platforms can remove certain **hashtags** or **keywords** and redirect users to support **resources**. Reports can also lead to the suspension or blocking of dangerous accounts.

Example: TikTok displays a warning message with resource links when searching negative ED-related terms.

You're not alone

If you or someone you know has questions about body image, food or exercise – it is important to know that help is out there and you are not alone. If you feel comfortable, you can confide in someone you trust or check out the resources below. Please remember to take care of yourselves and each other.

View resources

2. Individually promote **reliable**, **kind**, and **realistic** content. Only 14% of informative social media content comes from reliable scientific sources.

3. **Develop digital literacy and media education**, especially for children and young people.

With this in mind, here are two types of social media content that promote both **awareness** and the **reduction of guilt**. First, **Body Neutrality**, where the content does not focus on the body's appearance but rather on its **functions** a more neutral alternative to Body Positivity. There is also **ED recovery content**, which raises **awareness** about eating disorders and mainly features personal **testimonies**.

⚠️ Social media does not replace healthcare professionals. The content found there should always be approached with caution and critical thinking.

Conclusion

In the end, social media is neither inherently **good** nor **bad**. Its impact depends on how it is **used**, the type of **content consumed**, and the **mindset** with which we engage with it. Learning to use it with **perspective** and **kindness** is a way to **protect** ourselves.

«Beauty begins the moment you decide to be yourself. » - Coco Chanel
translated from French

Use Social Media More Mindfully in Daily Life!

NUTRIACTIS

5-DAY CHALLENGE

DAY 1 – TAKE A STEP BACK

When you're on social media, ask yourself the right questions:
- **Is what I'm seeing realistic?**
- **Does it make me feel good, or does it stress me out?**
- **What emotion am I feeling?**

Taking a step back helps you avoid being overwhelmed by messages that are too strong or unrealistic.

DAY 2 – CLEAN UP YOUR FEED

1.**Unfollow** one account that is harmful to you, that makes you **feel bad about yourself**, or that spreads **negative** messages.

2. **Follow** an account that shares **positive, inspiring, and kind content**. Try to seek diversity!

3. If something in your feed feels **negative** or **inappropriate**, let the algorithm know **you're not interested**. Little by little, your online space will become more **positive**, tailored to you and your **well-being.**

DAY 3 – LIMIT YOUR TIME

Be mindful of the **time you spend** on social media: how much, when, and on which apps. Set clear limits, use **blocking** or **time management** tools and avoid **staying online for hours at a stretch.**

The less time you spend there, the less you are exposed to harmful content.

Examples of apps that can help you:

Minimalist Phone   AppBlock   Focus To-Do   StayFree   Forest

Pick one time in your day without screens. Instead, do an activity you enjoy:
- Reading
- Drawing
- Walking
- Cooking
- ...and more

DAY 4 – PRACTICE KINDNESS

Write down **gratitude** statements for your body, for all that it allows you to **do**, **feel**, and **experience** every day.

Choose **3 parts of your body** and thank them. Here are some examples:

«Thank you to my legs for carrying me every day, even when I feel tired."

"Thank you to my eyes for allowing me to see the people I love."

"Thank you to my hands for allowing me to write, cook, and take care of others."

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