

Social Media in Florida: My Experience

By: Anjani Sharma

As of January 23, 2024, the Florida House of Representatives is currently debating House Bill 1 in committee. This bill prohibits Social Media Use for Minors under 16 and requires social media platforms to prohibit minors from creating new accounts, terminate accounts, and provide additional options for termination of such accounts. It also mandates the use of reasonable age verification methods to verify the ages of account holders and requires platforms to disclose specific policies and provide specified resources, measures, and disclaimers.

Last week, I went to Tallahassee on behalf of my organization, Minds Without Borders, to advocate for mental health issues and found myself giving testimony on this bill. As a mental health activist and researcher, I have witnessed social media's tremendous impact on mental health, especially among students. From conventional beauty standards to media influences, there is a clear link between mental health issues and social media. Minds Without Borders, a community of 2500 students advocates (many who reside in Florida), were polled to see if social media affected their mental health negatively. Eighty-two percent of students answered yes, and many provided comments on personal issues with disordered eating and body image dissatisfaction. Additionally, we found that these trends have been documented in women and men, in the LGBTQ+ community, and in people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Other than that, Minds Without Borders found that social media has a severe impact in regards to cyberbullying. Fourteen-point-nine percent of adolescents have been cyberbullied, and 13.6 percent of adolescents have made a serious suicide attempt according to the NIH. The rise in mental health issues is clearly linked to the overuse of social media.

When I was in Tallahassee lobbying to legislatures, the common consensus from these officials was to have youth support House Bill 1 because of the clear link to mental health issues and social media. Immediately based on what Minds Without Borders had researched, I thought it was a great idea to endorse-- but then I had a conversation.

I went to talk to my friend and press secretary for Minds Without Borders, Jaya, about what I should say in my testimony. I was going to support and talk about the statistics and correlation to mental health, but then Jaya said one thing that changed my entire perspective. "If you were not able to have social media, Minds Without Borders would not be what it is today."

I started the Minds Without Borders Instagram in 2020 to post tips and support during the Covid-19 pandemic for individuals impacted by mental health. Through this, I connected with students like me from all around the world. From Ariane in Mexico interested in drug abuse on mental health to Dataveyon in Texas working to make mental health support accessible for the black community, I found that this account brought me together with like-minded students but also taught me unique perspectives about the world that I can use to inform my advocacy. Florida is one of the most diverse states in the United States. Through social media, we are able to learn about different grassroots movements happening all around our state. We are able to connect with diverse individuals as well as individuals we can only find through social media. Many minority communities such as the LGBTQ+ community and racial communities find safe havens to connect with each other and advocate for their communities.

Through social media, many especially in Florida have started activism movements like the mental health movement I started; on social media. Additionally, students are able to start small businesses that help their families and communities thrive.

According to Bank Rate, “social media connects you directly to your customers so that you can listen to their problems and concerns with your products and service as well as it drives traffic and sales to your business.”

From the diverse perspective of the Hispanic community to the Indigenous people, social media has been able to really bring awareness, build community, provide education, and is truly a catalyst for change.

Instead of opposing or supporting House Bill 1, I talked to both perspectives. I still recognize the negative consequences of social media on mental health issues, but I also think social media brings communities and gives voices to marginalized communities. Moving on, the Florida legislature should also consider both perspectives and ensure that there is an equilibrium so mental health issues decrease but also engaging in diverse perspectives increase.