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### A Toast to Fewer Posts!

In August of 2019, Instagram announced the temporary launch of its [“private like counts” feature](#) in Canada. “Private like counts” hides the number of “likes” a post generates, so only individuals eager enough to manually count know the total number. As an Instagram representative explained, the new setting serves as an attempt to improve the mental health of Canadian Instagrammers.

A relatively new concept, social media claims to benefit society in facilitating socialization and connectivity. Yet what consequences do Canadians face from scrolling through endless posts? In an age of unprecedented stress and dangerously low self-esteem, social media poses the most significant threat to Canadians’ mental health. Moreover, the harm social media imposes manifests in several forms, including low self-esteem, altered sleep patterns, and “herd-mentality” thinking.

Interestingly, social media use positively correlates with risk of eating disorders and body image concerns. In an [analysis led by Jaime E. Sidani, Ph.D., M.P.H.](#), researchers found that while subjects who dedicated the most time per day to social media were 2.2 times more likely to report eating disorders or body image issues, those who checked their social media accounts most frequently per week were a startling 2.6 times more likely to do so. Unfortunately, Sidani’s



Countless personal blogs documenting social media use and mental health consequences can be found online, including the [one that provided this image.](#)

study serves as a microcosm of a broader truth: a pandemic of low self-esteem. Canadians, why are we willingly extinguishing confidence and health for a [facade of socialization and connectivity](#)? Why are we giving up so much?

Not surprisingly, social media also impacts users' sleep patterns. [A study organized by Jessica C. Levenson, Ph.D.](#) identified that while participants who spent the most time per day on social media faced twice the risk of sleep disturbance, those who checked social media most frequently per week had three times the risk. Furthermore, Levenson's team suggests that the cause of the sleep disturbance may be threefold. Firstly, engaging with social media can physically replace sleep in one's schedule. Secondly, the activity physiologically and emotionally arouses users, making sleep more difficult. Thirdly, the blue light emitted by devices used to access social media can disrupt individuals' circadian rhythms. If you enjoy sleep, put down the phone. Let it beep; count sheep!

Curiously, social media can even influence how individuals think, encouraging subscription to a "herd mentality." [A study authored by Lauren Sherman](#) investigated the "power of likes" on Instagram and found that subjects were "more likely to like photos depicted with many likes than photos with few likes". In other words, the content of the images did not matter; the sole indicator of whether or not a subject "liked" an image was how many "likes" the post already had. Of course, this finding indicates the strength of peer influence, and while peer influence has long been a part of human nature, social media *facilitates* this phenomenon, making it stronger than ever. Where have creativity and individual thinking gone?

Finally, proponents of social media may argue that its anonymity allows users to more easily express themselves, thus improving their mental health. However, social media's anonymity directly contributes to [cyberbullying](#): the use of electronic communication to bully

someone (typically via intimidating or threatening messages). Of course, cyberbullying harms the mental health of its victims, haunting the involved individuals for years.

In conclusion, Canadians must consider the risks social media introduces to users' wellbeing and make an informed decision regarding their use. Most importantly, if you feel anxious when accessing social media, speak with a physician or psychologist.

Perhaps Instagram's "private like counts" feature marks the beginning of an era of greater understanding...

### Author Biography:

A twenty-something pharmacology student at McGill University, Devin advocates for student mental health as Graduate Outreach Lead for McGill's Peer Support Center and Co-Founder of McGill's Cups of Love initiative. Devin is also, unfortunately, an Instagrammer.

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