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Dolna 17, Warsaw,
Poland 00-773
+48 226 0 227 03
editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

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SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND ITS IMPACT ON ADOLESCENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Aleksandra Oparcik (Corresponding Author, Email: aleksandra.oparcik@gmail.com)
Medical Center HCP, Poznań, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0008-0438-3797

Jakub Tarczykowski
University Clinical Hospital in Poznań, Poznań, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0007-4010-5068

Szymon Stupnicki
Dr. Jana Jonstona Provincial Multi-Specialist Hospital in Leszno, Leszno, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0002-2263-5691

Mikołaj Zakryś
Provincial Hospital in Poznań, Poznań, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-2170-0108

Katarzyna Anna Zakryś
University Clinical Hospital in Poznań, Poznań, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-9583-7675

Mateusz Szot
University Clinical Hospital in Poznań, Poznań, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0002-4445-1471

Natalia Kwaśniewska
Military Medical Institute – National Research Institute, Warsaw, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0000-3741-0626

ABSTRACT

Mental health problems among adolescents have risen to unprecedented levels over the past decade. A substantial body of research has explored the relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being. The purpose of this paper is to examine research on social media use and its association with rising rates of depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and suicide among adolescents. Several key themes emerge from the literature, including the negative psychological consequences of increased social media engagement, patterns of social media-related addiction, the role of fear of missing out, experiences of cybervictimization, and the influence of contagion processes. This narrative review examines articles from the PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases, with particular emphasis on recent systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and cross-sectional studies investigating how social media use affects adolescents' mental health and well-being. While social media can provide social support, it may also amplify developmental vulnerabilities. Adolescents face a range of challenges stemming not only from the amount of time they spend on social platforms but also from the nature of the content they encounter. Social media use has been linked to body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and elevated suicide risk. The mechanisms underlying these effects remain unclear, underscoring the need for longitudinal research examining specific online behaviors and social media platform features, such as algorithms and appearance-focused content. Future work should also explore gender-specific pathways and evaluate interventions, including digital literacy training and emotion-regulation strategies to reduce problematic social media use, and support healthier online engagement among youth.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Adolescents, Problematic Social Media Use, Social Media Addiction, Body Dissatisfaction, Depression, Mental Health

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Introduction

In the present technologically advanced era, social media platforms have become widely used for online social interaction. Social media use encompasses a range of online behaviors on platforms designed for social connection, including sharing content, networking, communicating, and interacting with others for personal, social, or professional purposes. Globally, nearly five billion individuals, approximately 59.4% of the world's population, actively use social media platforms and spend, on average, 2 hours and 27 minutes per day on them (Patón-Romero & Lovås, 2022). Adolescents represent a substantial segment of internet users and typically spend extended periods online. Research indicates that 45% of teenagers are almost constantly online (Frielingsdorf et al., 2025). As smartphones have become more accessible and the information society has advanced, adolescents can stay continuously connected and access their entertainment anywhere, increasing their participation in social and entertainment-related activities (George & Odgers, 2015). Excessive engagement with social media has been associated with various physical and mental health concerns, and in some cases, this level of use may resemble addictive behavior (Wiederhold, 2022).

Research examining the relationship between social media use and mental health has produced mixed findings. A consensus report by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine identified evidence of both potential risks and potential benefits for young people. Reported benefits include opportunities to maintain social connections, access support, and acquire new skills. Conversely, documented risks include harmful social comparisons, reduced participation in healthy behaviors such as adequate sleep, and disruptions in the development of attentional control (Galea et al., 2024). Social media platforms also encourage the creation of personal profiles with accompanying images, and research suggests that perceived attractiveness can influence online popularity (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016). As a result, these platforms become saturated with images of peers and celebrities, providing ongoing opportunities for appearance-based comparisons (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). According to sociocultural theory, media, peers, and parents shape internalized appearance ideals, which are often unrealistic and contribute to body image dissatisfaction (Marengo et al., 2018)(Rodgers, 2016). This dissatisfaction can result in eating disorders, including bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder, as well as reduced physical activity (Grilo et al., 2019) (Sabiston et al., 2019). Therefore, high levels of social media use or addiction may influence eating behaviors by intensifying concerns related to body image.

For adolescents, the influence of online social networks is particularly strong, as much of their social and emotional development now takes place through the internet and mobile devices. Their limited self-regulation skills and heightened sensitivity to peer pressure make them especially vulnerable when using social media (Ocansey et al., 2016). Although both boys and girls face risks, research suggests that girls may be more susceptible to negative effects (Nagata, 2020). Furthermore, rising social media use appears to be associated with an increase in mental health problems among adolescents (Mojtabai, 2024). Given these concerns, additional research is needed to clarify the causal mechanisms underlying increases in depression, anxiety, body image dissatisfaction, and suicide among youth.

Methods

This review was based on articles sourced from PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases, with particular emphasis on recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses investigating how social media use affects adolescents' mental health and well-being. The themes presented in this review emerged from recurring trends, foundational concepts, and significant insights consistently documented in studies conducted over the past decade. The themes identified primarily concern negative psychological outcomes. The literature search was conducted using the following keywords: social media, adolescents, problematic social media use, social media addiction, body dissatisfaction, depression, and mental health.

Social Media and Addiction

Social media use is widespread among adolescents and often spans multiple areas of their lives, including community involvement, education, and personal-identity development. However, this high level of engagement has raised concerns about problematic social media use, which involves maladaptive usage patterns and consequences such as mood alteration, increased tolerance, and disruptions to daily functioning (Bányai et al., 2017). The Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health highlights these risks and calls for urgent action, noting a sharp rise in adolescent social media use in 2024, with 95% of youth aged 13 to 17 using social media and one-third reporting that they are online almost constantly (Murthy V, 2023) (Faverid & Sidoti Olivia, 2024). Additionally, a recent study found that 65% of participants believed they were addicted to the internet, 61% to gaming, and 92% to Facebook/Meta (Khalil et al., 2022). Consequently, understanding the impact of problematic social media use on adolescents' psychosocial functioning and well-being remains a critical research priority.

Evidence indicates that social media use can be harmful to some adolescents while neutral or even beneficial for others, suggesting that its effects are highly individualized. Each adolescent's experience is shaped by a unique combination of personal traits, social conditions, and situational factors that influence how they engage with social media and how it affects them (Nagata, Otmar, et al., 2025).

A significant challenge in the existing literature is that many studies do not distinguish between general social media use and problematic social media use. Because total time spent online and problematic social media use symptoms represent related but distinct constructs, they must be examined together to avoid confounding effects and inaccurate conclusions (Valkenburg et al., 2022) (van den Eijnden et al., 2021). Problematic social media use is typically evaluated using addiction-related indicators such as loss of control, excessive preoccupation, heightened salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, relapse, and interpersonal or functional impairment when access is restricted (Arrivillaga et al., 2022a). Two widely used self-report instruments for assessing these addictive tendencies are the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, based on Griffiths' components model of addiction (Andreassen et al., 2012), and the Social Media Disorder Scale, which is derived from the nine DSM-5 criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder (Boer et al., 2022). Several systematic reviews have documented associations between problematic social media use and a range of adolescent mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Cataldo et al., 2021) (Shannon et al., 2022).

In addition, a relatively recent construct in the literature, the fear of missing out (FOMO), has been linked to the development of social media addiction (Oberst et al., 2017). Evidence further suggests that FOMO is also associated with greater social media use and reduced quality of life, particularly in contexts involving peer rejection (Dam et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals who experience negative consequences of excessive, FOMO-driven social media use may exhibit symptoms consistent with what has been described as Internet communication disorder (Wegmann et al., 2017).

Social media use generally increases during adolescence and contributes to the formation of persistent habits and behaviors. Consequently, effective interventions targeting problematic social media use in this age group are essential for reducing both short-term and long-term negative outcomes. Studies show that programs that equip adolescents with cognitive or behavioral skills to navigate social media in healthier ways are more effective in promoting long-term well-being than approaches that rely on strict restrictions or warnings about its negative effects (Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2019) (Nagata, Hur, et al., 2025).

Social Media and Body Image Concerns

Research findings on the relationship between social media use and mental health remain inconsistent, yet there is increasing consensus that adolescent girls engage with social media differently than boys (Azhari et al., 2022). Highly visual platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, TikTok, and Facebook are used more frequently by adolescent girls. These platforms frequently expose users to heavily edited images of peers, celebrities, and influencers. Such content often depicts thin, fit women promoting exercise and healthy eating (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018) or extremely thin, sexually suggestive portrayals that encourage weight loss (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). The images encountered online may include offline peers, unfamiliar same-age peers, individuals known only online, celebrities, or influencers - users who attract large followings based on their social media presence (De Veirman et al., 2019).

Exposure to these images can influence girls' body image and mental health through social comparison, as adolescents judge their appearance against others. It can also affect them through the internalization of appearance ideals, in which sociocultural standards of attractiveness are conveyed and reinforced. These

standards are further strengthened by quantifiable feedback (e.g., “likes”) and comments posted by other users (McLean et al., 2019). The combination of peer and media influences, along with continuous exposure to curated and edited images, likely heightens adolescent girls’ focus on others’ physical appearance.

Furthermore, appearance-related social media consciousness refers to an ongoing preoccupation with appearing attractive to a social media audience, which is a common experience among adolescents and young adults, particularly girls and women. Appearance-related social media consciousness involves imagining how posted photos will be judged by others and extensively editing or curating images before sharing them online. Even after accounting for frequency of social media use, appearance-related social media consciousness has been cross-sectionally associated with elevated depressive symptoms among adolescents (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). A growing body of research has also identified links between adolescents’ social media use and increased body image concerns (Rodgers et al., 2020). Consistently, studies show that girls report higher levels of social media-related appearance concerns than boys (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). Although body image concerns can emerge in childhood, they intensify substantially during adolescence (Rodgers et al., 2014). In the United States, an estimated 81% of adolescent girls and 55-67% of boys report some degree of body dissatisfaction (Lawler & Nixon, 2011). This rise is thought to reflect various developmental transitions, including biological, social, and psychological changes. For girls, in particular, body image tends to decline as they progress through puberty (Klump, 2013).

Research further indicates that focusing on others’ photos is associated with body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls and young women, which may contribute to depressive symptoms and disordered eating (Meier & Gray, 2014). Eating disorders arise from an interplay of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors whose influence varies throughout the life course and whose interactions intensify the complexity of eating disorders. These disorders typically manifest as persistent, unhealthy eating behaviors that impair daily social and psychological functioning and are often accompanied by a distorted self-image (Jaruga-Sękowska et al., 2025). During both high school and college, young people encounter developmental challenges alongside environmental pressures, strained family relationships, social media exposure, and peer influences, all of which may contribute to the onset of eating disorders (Saul et al., 2022). When untreated, they can persist for long periods and lead to significant physical and psychological consequences (Lonergan et al., 2020).

Disordered eating behaviors also increase during adolescence, with nearly half of adolescent girls engaging in such behaviors compared to fewer than one-third of boys (Holm-Denoma et al., 2014). A perceived discrepancy between one’s body and the idealized appearance promoted by peers, parents, and the media has been linked to elevated depressive symptoms and disordered eating. Media frequently promote unrealistic standards of beauty and body shape, fostering unattainable expectations about appearance and negatively affecting self-esteem. Young people may feel strong pressure to conform to the slim ideal portrayed on social media, increasing their desire to attain an idealized appearance. The findings of the Romanian study demonstrated a clear association between social networking site use and levels of loneliness, self-esteem, and body esteem, with notable gender differences. Moreover, the results suggest that the social platforms use should be carefully considered in clinical practice, as these platforms offer valuable opportunities for reaching patients and delivering psychological or medical interventions (Pop et al., 2022).

Social media often places users in a continuous cycle of comparing their bodies to others. Frequent exposure to digitally altered images can distort body perception and heighten preoccupation with weight control. Social media platforms have also been associated with negative body image outcomes, including dissatisfaction with one’s facial appearance, increased self-objectification, and feelings of shame (Skowronski et al., 2021). Fear of negative evaluation may prompt attempts to alter one’s appearance, ultimately contributing to harmful behaviors that undermine both physical and mental well-being. The rapid growth of social media has become a powerful source of appearance-related pressure and social norms, posing a significant health risk by promoting feelings of inadequacy regarding attractiveness and physical fitness. Furthermore, social media addiction has been shown to influence health-related behaviors, including eating (Sharif et al., 2021) (Yurtdaş-Depboylu et al., 2022). Users are frequently exposed to diet and health messages that lack scientific validity, and constant exposure to food-related content and advertisements may alter eating patterns and increase cravings for unhealthy foods (Keser et al., 2020).

Social Media, Anxiety and Depression

A growing body of evidence indicates that rates of psychological symptoms among children and adolescents, including depressed mood, anxiety, negative self-perceptions, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors, have risen since the early 2010s and reached unprecedented level (Collishaw, 2015) (Mojtabai & Olfson, 2020) (Twenge et al., 2019). Depression has now become the fourth leading cause of illness worldwide among individuals aged 15-19, according to the World Health Organization. In the United States, the prevalence of depression among adolescents increased from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2014 (Vidal et al., 2020), reaching 15.8% by 2019 (Wilson & Dumornay, 2022). Because initial episodes of depression often emerge during adolescence, this trend is especially concerning, as mental health conditions arising during this developmental period frequently persist into adulthood (Ma et al., 2021). Notably, this rise has occurred alongside a substantial increase in social media use.

Several cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies have identified associations between psychological symptoms and excessive social media use. Findings from a large cross-sectional study in Norway showed that 31.7% of adolescent girls and 12.3% of adolescent boys experienced depression, and that regular physical activity was associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms (Kleppang et al., 2021). Conversely, increased screen time contributes to greater sedentary behavior (Ma et al., 2021). Additionally, a cohort study of children aged 9-10 found that higher social media use in early adolescence predicted greater depressive symptoms in later years, indicating a potential longitudinal contribution of early adolescent social media engagement to depressive symptom trajectories (Nagata, Otmar, et al., 2025).

Prior meta-analyses have provided comprehensive evaluations of this literature. The association appears to be particularly strong in cases of problematic or addictive social media use, where individuals neglect important social and academic responsibilities in favor of online interactions and exhibit cravings or withdrawal symptoms when they cannot access these platforms (Cheng et al., 2021). Moreover, adolescents with low self-esteem may experience heightened loneliness and perceive less social support, which can lead to increased social media use and, in turn, greater depressive symptoms (Durante & Lau, 2022). Likewise, depression may not only contribute to problematic social media use but also reduce adolescents' sense of support from others (Hilty et al., 2023). Adolescents who report feeling disconnected from their parents also demonstrate higher levels of social media use and depressive symptoms (Stein et al., 2018). Those most vulnerable to this form of psychological distress include adolescents with low emotional intelligence (Arrivillaga et al., 2022b). Individuals with low self-esteem have been shown to be more likely to engage in frequent use of social networking sites. This pattern of use is associated with outcomes such as social withdrawal, neglect of offline relationships, and heightened vulnerability to psychological difficulties (Gong et al., 2021). In contrast, other research indicates that social networking site use within clinical settings can meaningfully support patient recovery, particularly among individuals with mental health conditions, provided they are not experiencing social media addiction (Jelenchick et al., 2013).

What is concerning is that findings from the international Health Behavior in School-aged Children survey, conducted between 2001 and 2018, indicate that the prevalence of more serious psychological symptoms among adolescents has risen over the past two decades. This upward trend was particularly evident among girls older than 15, who are the most frequent users of social media and the group most susceptible to problematic use. Furthermore, research suggests that without problematic social media use, adolescents would have exhibited fewer psychological symptoms in 2017–2018 than they did in 2001–2002. This interpretation aligns with prior studies showing that social media use is a risk factor for elevated psychological symptoms. An alternative explanation is that rising psychological symptoms have led children and adolescents toward problematic social media use. Social media use may influence subsequent mood while simultaneously being shaped by existing depressive symptoms, potentially resulting in mutually reinforcing cycles of use and emotional distress. It is also possible that another underlying factor contributed to both the recent increase in severe psychological problems and the development of problematic social media use among the same group of young people (Mojtabai, 2024). In some instances, the relationship may be bidirectional, as indicated by previous research (Frison & Eggermont, 2017) (Tian et al., 2021).

It merits attention that suicide rates have also escalated, rising by 47.5% since 2000 and becoming the second leading cause of death among U.S. adolescents before 2020, and the leading cause of death during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bridget et al., 2023). However, the mechanisms through which social media may affect suicide risk remain poorly understood. A 2019 systematic review identified an association between heavy social media or internet use and suicide attempts, but also found that youth who engaged in some level of social media exhibited lower suicide risk than those who did not use these platforms at all (Sedgwick et al.,

2019). Another study examining time spent on websites featuring suicidal content (such as self-harm forums) reported mixed findings regarding the association between increased exposure and self-harm or suicide attempts (Marchant et al., 2017). These inconsistencies are likely due to variation in how screen time is measured. More importantly, this simple metric does not capture individual differences in the types of content adolescents encounter, their motivations for using social media, their online social experiences, or the algorithmic and interactive features of social platforms that may either increase vulnerability or promote resilience to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Besides, social media may exacerbate established suicide risk factors in youth, such as sleep disturbances or insomnia, psychological distress, depression, hopelessness, social withdrawal or isolation, interpersonal stressors, experiences of bullying, and exposure to suicidal behaviors displayed by influential role models. Several studies relying on adolescents' self-reports note the possibility of a contagion effect. This occurs when adolescents exposed to depressive, anxiety-provoking, and suicide-related content mistakenly conclude that they themselves exhibit suicidal thoughts or behaviors (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Those with less stable or developing identities are especially vulnerable to this effect, which is also referred to as cluster suicide.

The association may also interact with individual risk factors, including sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, history of suicidal behavior, and prior adverse experiences. A 2024 study provides support for this perspective, showing that online racial discrimination was linked to suicidal ideation among Black adolescents (Tynes et al., 2024). Further, social media use has also been linked to an increased risk of cyberbullying, particularly among girls who spend more than two hours per day on these platforms (Ma et al., 2021). Cybervictimization, also known as cyberbullying, refers to behaviors that harm, threaten, or intimidate individuals through digital or electronic communication. It affects an estimated 20%–40% of adolescents globally and is associated with heightened risks of suicidal thoughts and behaviors, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Duarte et al., 2018).

Social connections developed online, ranging from close friendships to interactions with acquaintances or strangers, may influence suicide risk. Given the potential impact of these digital networks on adolescents' mental health, they are increasingly regarded as important targets for suicide prevention efforts (Cero et al., 2024).

Table 1 provides a comprehensive synthesis of the key themes identified in the literature, outlining the specific impacts of social media on mental health domains, the underlying mechanisms, and the populations most at risk.

Future Directions: The Necessity of Precision Clinical Trials

The findings of this review highlight the complex relationship between social media use and adolescents' mental health and well-being. Of particular concern is problematic social media use, which poses substantial risks to psychological functioning. Although some youth benefit from online connection and support, others, particularly those with vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem, poor emotion regulation, experience heightened depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction. Adolescents with low self-esteem, low emotional intelligence, or strained parent-child relationships appear particularly vulnerable. Importantly, the evidence shows that addiction-like symptoms, rather than total time spent online, are more strongly linked to negative outcomes, underscoring the need to distinguish general use from problematic social media use. Emerging mechanisms such as the fear of missing out (FOMO) further contribute to compulsive engagement and reduced well-being. Because adolescence is a critical period for forming long-term digital habits, interventions that build cognitive and behavioral skills for healthy online engagement appear are essential, and give better results than restrictive approaches. Adapting interventions to the specific contextual factors relevant to an individual or group may further strengthen their effectiveness and lasting influence in reducing problematic social media use and promoting overall well-being. Overall, these findings emphasize the need for developmentally informed, targeted strategies to mitigate problematic social media use and its psychological consequences.

The findings reviewed illustrate a multifaceted relationship between social media use and adolescent girls' mental health, with body image emerging as a central vulnerability. Highly visual platforms expose girls to idealized and heavily edited portrayals of beauty, reinforcing sociocultural appearance standards through social comparison processes and quantifiable feedback such as "likes." These influences contribute to increased appearance-related social media consciousness, which is consistently associated with depressive symptoms and heightened body image concerns. Evidence also indicates that adolescence is a particularly sensitive developmental period, marked by rising body dissatisfaction and increased susceptibility to disordered eating-patterns exacerbated by online appearance pressures. Furthermore, studies underscore that social networking site use is linked to loneliness, lower self-esteem, and reduced body esteem, with notable

gender differences, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions (Pop et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that social media functions not only as a source of unrealistic beauty norms but also as an amplifier of existing psychosocial vulnerabilities. Prevention and intervention efforts must account for the unique risks faced by adolescent girls, incorporate media-literacy and body-image-resilience strategies, and consider the potential for social communication platforms to serve as delivery systems for clinical support when used in controlled, non-addictive ways.

Table 1. Summary of Key Impacts, Mechanisms, and Vulnerabilities Associated with Adolescent Social Media Use

Domain of Impact	Key Findings & Associations	Mechanisms & Risk Factors	Vulnerable Populations
Addiction & Problematic Use	Problematic Social Media Use is distinct from high screen time and resembles behavioral addiction	FOMO: fear of missing out drives compulsive checking	Adolescents with low emotional intelligence
	Problematic Social Media is linked to mood alteration, tolerance, and withdrawal	Design: algorithms and interactive features encourage habit formation	Those with low self-esteem or strained family relationships
Body Image & Eating Disorders	High usage is linked to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating	Social Comparison: judging oneself against heavily edited images of peers/celebrities	Adolescent girls report higher appearance concerns and are more susceptible to negative effects
	Visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok) pose higher risks than text-based ones	Feedback: 'Likes' and comments reinforce appearance standards	Youth going through puberty
Depression & Anxiety	Heavy use correlates with rising rates of depression and anxiety	Sleep disruption: screen time displaces sleep and healthy activities	Girls older than 15 years old (most frequent users)
	Relationship is likely bidirectional: depression drives use, and use worsens depression	Cybervictimization: increases risk of PTSD and depression	Youth with existing depressive symptoms or social isolation
Suicidality & Self-harm	Suicide rates have risen alongside social media use, though direct causality is complex	Contagion Effect: exposure to self-harm content may trigger similar behaviors in vulnerable youth	Youth with unstable or developing identities
	Online networks can be both a risk (contagion effect) and a form of support	Cyberbullying; associated with heightened suicide risk	Marginalized groups facing online discrimination

The growing prevalence of severe psychological symptoms among adolescents, who represent one of the most active user groups on social communication platforms, highlights the possibility that social media may intensify existing developmental vulnerabilities. The relationship, however, is likely complex and potentially bidirectional, with depressive symptoms both contributing to and resulting from problematic engagement. Suicidality has also increased dramatically, yet the mechanisms connecting social media use to suicide risk remain unclear. Existing research shows mixed associations, in part because screen-time measures fail to capture the nuances of content exposure, online interactions, and algorithmic influence. Social media may amplify established risk factors, such as sleep disruption, psychological distress, hopelessness, bullying, and exposure to suicidal behavior. Moreover, it may contribute to contagion effects whereby adolescents identify with suicide-related content. Cybervictimization and online discrimination further elevate risk for certain groups. Importantly, online social networks themselves can influence vulnerability or resilience, making them critical targets for future suicide-prevention strategies.

Future progress in the field requires moving from correlational evidence to well-designed Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) that can clarify causal mechanisms and guide more effective interventions. Rather than relying solely on broad “abstinence” approaches, upcoming clinical work should test targeted harm-reduction strategies. For example, a study (Hunt et al., 2018) showed that capping social media use at 30 minutes per day leads to notable reductions in depression and loneliness, whereas other research (Lambert et al., 2022) reported that a full week without social media improved anxiety and overall well-being, highlighting the importance of intervention length. Yet, simple time limits may not be adequate for at-risk groups. Recent cluster RCTs evaluating the social media literacy program suggest that cognitive-based interventions, which help adolescents navigate and interpret online content, are especially effective in reducing body dissatisfaction among girls. Therefore, upcoming precision-focused trials should directly compare these different approaches, assessing whether strategies such as algorithmic content filtering outperform strict time-restriction methods in reducing symptoms of body dysmorphia and depression.

Conclusions

Social media use plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping adolescents’ mental health, with problematic social media use emerging as a particularly harmful pattern linked to depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, and disordered eating. Although social media offers opportunities for connection and support, its risks appear heightened among adolescents who exhibit developmental vulnerabilities, such as low self-esteem, low emotional intelligence, peer rejection, or strained family relationships. For adolescent girls, in particular, exposure to idealized and digitally modified images on highly visual platforms intensifies body dissatisfaction, increases appearance-related social media consciousness, and contributes to disordered eating behaviors. In addition, rising rates of loneliness, internalizing symptoms, and suicidality among youth coincide with increasing social media engagement, suggesting that online environments may exacerbate pre-existing risk factors, including sleep disruption, hopelessness, bullying, and exposure to self-harm content. Despite strong associations between problematic social media use and adverse outcomes, the mechanisms driving these relationships remain insufficiently understood. Many studies rely on simple screen-time metrics, which fail to capture the complexity of adolescents’ online experiences, motivations, or the influence of algorithmic content delivery. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the relationship between social media use and mental health may be bidirectional, with psychological distress both predicting and resulting from problematic use. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify causal pathways and identify specific online experiences that heighten or buffer against mental health risks. More nuanced measures of social media engagement, such as content type, emotional responses, peer interactions, and platform algorithms, are also essential. Additionally, research should explore gender-specific risk processes, given the disproportionate impact on adolescent girls. Finally, intervention studies are needed to determine how digital literacy training, emotion-regulation skill-building, parental guidance, and clinical use of social networking platforms can mitigate problematic social media use and support adolescent well-being.

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