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2734 17 Avenue SW,
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+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Weronika Patrycja Wagner (Corresponding Author, Email: wagner.weronika99@gmail.com)
Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Szczecin, Poland

Patryk Bartłomiej Twardy
Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Szczecin, Poland

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has substantially altered communication and social interaction trends, particularly among adolescents and young adults. This review studies the impact of social media use on the mental health of young people by synthesizing existing literature. A narrative literature review methodology was employed, analyzing peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2023, identified through databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. The findings show that the relationship between social media use and mental health is complex. Excessive or passive use is frequently connected to higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and sleep disturbances. Contributing factors include social comparison, cyberbullying, and maladaptive usage patterns. In contrast, social media can also offer benefits through facilitating social support, enhancing connectedness, and improving access to mental health information.

The results suggest that the impact of social media is neither inherently negative nor positive, but relies on factors such as usage patterns, types of engagement, and individual characteristics. This review stresses the importance of encouraging digital skills and responsible social media use. Furthermore, it points out the need for longitudinal research to clarify causal relationships and long-term effects. These outcomes possess significant effects for public health, education, and policy development in the context of increasing digitalization.

KEYWORDS

Social Media; Mental Health; Adolescents; Depression; Anxiety; Digital Behavior

CITATION

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Introduction

Social media has become one of the most influential technological developments of the 21st century, fundamentally transforming the way individuals communicate, interact, and construct their social identities. Adolescents and young adults represent the most active users of social media platforms, engaging daily with applications that enable instant communication, content sharing, and participation in global digital communities. The broad availability of smartphones and widespread internet connectivity have significantly accelerated this trend, embedding social media deeply into everyday routines and reshaping global patterns of social interaction [1].

The increasing integration of social media within daily life has raised key questions regarding its possible impact on mental health. Mental health represents an essential part of general well-being, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social functioning. It influences how individuals think, feel, and behave, as well as how they cope with stress and relate to others. Adolescence and early adulthood are particularly sensitive developmental periods, characterized by identity formation, affective regulation, and greater susceptibility to external influences. During these stages, individuals are more vulnerable to surrounding factors, including those associated with digital technologies and online interactions [2].

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders among young people, including depression, anxiety, and stress-related conditions. According to global health reports, these disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability in this age group [2]. This trend has encouraged researchers and healthcare professionals to investigate potential contributing factors, with particular attention given to the role of social media. While some studies stress the benefits of social media use—for example, enhanced social support, opportunities for self-expression, and greater access to mental health information—others highlight its potential risks. These include exposure to cyberbullying, increased tendencies toward social comparison, and patterns of excessive or compulsive use resembling behavioral addiction [3,4].

The relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and cannot be explained by a single factor. It is affected by a range of variables, including the frequency and duration of use, the type of content consumed, and personal psychological characteristics such as self-esteem and fortitude. For instance, active engagement—such as interacting with others and creating content—may yield different psychological outcomes than passive consumption, such as scrolling through feeds without interaction [5]. Moreover, the context in which social media is used, including the social environment and offline support systems, also has a major role in molding its effects.

Given these considerations, adopting an equitable perspective that recognizes both the possible benefits and risks of social media use is essential. A subtle understanding of the pattern is necessary to inform the development of efficient strategies to advance mental psychological health among young people in the digital era.

This review analyzes the influence of social media on the mental health of young people through systematically reviewing the existing literature. Key patterns, basic mechanisms, and moderating factors shaping this relationship are identified, giving insight into the effects of digital environments on psychological well-being and highlighting directions for future research.

Methodology

A narrative literature review was adopted to synthesize and critically examine existing research on the relationship between social media use and mental health among adolescents and young adults. This approach was deemed appropriate given the varied nature of the available studies, which differ in methodology, population, and measured outcomes. The narrative review enables a flexible yet coherent analysis of current evidence and supports the identification of overarching themes and patterns within the literature [6].

A comprehensive and systematic identification of relevant studies was achieved through a structured search strategy implemented across major scientific databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected for their broad coverage of interdisciplinary research, particularly in psychology, public health, and digital behavior. The search process was performed in multiple stages to maximize the retrieval of relevant publications while decreasing the risk of omission.

Search queries were constructed using combinations of key terms associated with the topic, including “social media,” “mental health,” “adolescents,” “young adults,” “depression,” “anxiety,” “well-being,” and “digital behavior.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were applied to improve search results and improve precision. For example, combinations such as “social media AND mental health” or “adolescents AND anxiety AND digital behavior” were used to capture studies that addressed particular facets of the research question. In addition, reference lists of selected articles were manually screened to identify further relevant publications.

The inclusion criteria were created to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2023 were considered. The time frame was chosen to reflect recent developments in social media use and its changing impact on mental health. Studies were required to focus on populations aged 13-25 years, as this group represents the most active users of social media and is particularly vulnerable to its psychological effects [3]. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included to grant a comprehensive perspective and capture both statistical associations and subjective experiences.

Exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate studies that did not meet the objectives of this review. These included non-peer-reviewed publications, conference abstracts without full texts, studies focusing on populations outside the specified age range, and research that did not directly examine mental health outcomes. Additionally, articles that focused solely on technological aspects without psychological relevance were excluded. Following the initial search, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and full-text versions of potentially eligible studies were subsequently assessed in detail.

Data extraction was conducted in a structured manner to guarantee conformity across studies. Key information collected from each article included study design, sample size and characteristics, measures of social media use, and reported mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, stress, and well-being. Particular attention was paid to how social media use was operationalized, because variations in measurement can influence reported results [5].

The selected studies were analyzed using a thematic approach, which involved identifying recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across findings and grouping results into key thematic categories such as negative effects (e.g., social comparison, cyberbullying), positive effects (e.g., social support), and moderating factors (e.g., usage patterns, individual differences). This method enabled a comprehensive synthesis of the literature while continuing sensitivity to the topic's complexity. As a narrative review, formal meta-analytic techniques or standardized quality assessment tools were not employed, which may limit the ability to draw causal conclusions. Nevertheless, this procedure delivers a broad, integrative overview of current research, rendering it suitable for exploring a multidimensional issue such as the relationship between social media use and mental health.

Results

The analysis of the selected literature revealed consistent and well-documented associations between social media use and a range of mental health outcomes among adolescents and young adults. Across multiple studies, higher levels of social media engagement were associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and overall psychological distress. Individuals who reported prolonged daily use of social media platforms were more likely to experience feelings of loneliness, sadness, and reduced life satisfaction [4]. These data were observed throughout varied populations and research designs, pointing to a strong relationship between excessive use and negative psychological outcomes.

One of the most frequently identified mechanisms underlying this relationship is social comparison. Social media platforms usually promote curated, idealized representations of users' lives that may not accurately reflect reality. As a result, individuals get exposed to unrealistic standards of appearance, success, and lifestyle, leading to upward social comparison. This process has been consistently linked to lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and increased depressive symptoms [3]. The effect appears to be especially pronounced among adolescents, who are in a key phase of identity development and are more susceptible to external validation.

Cyberbullying appeared as another major contributor negatively influencing mental health. Different from traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying can occur continuously and without geographical or temporal limitations. Victims of online harassment report significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation [3]. The anonymity afforded by digital media may intensify the severity of such interactions, while the likelihood of wide audience exposure can worsen emotional distress.

Sleep disturbances were also commonly identified in the reviewed studies. The use of social media, particularly in the evening, has been shown to interfere with sleep hygiene via delaying sleep onset and impairing overall sleep quality. Exposure to screen light and engaging content may increase cognitive and emotional arousal, making it more difficult to disengage and fall asleep. Poor sleep quality, in turn, has been strongly associated with increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and weakened cognitive functioning [7]. This suggests a cyclical relationship in which social media use contributes to sleep problems, which subsequently worsen mental health outcomes.

Another important finding relates to problematic or excessive use of social media. Several studies describe patterns of use that resemble behavioral addiction, including compulsive checking, loss of control, and withdrawal-like symptoms when access is restricted. Such patterns have been associated with increased psychological distress and reduced well-being [1]. Notably, passive use—such as scrolling through content without active engagement—has been found to have more negative effects than active participation, including communication and content creation [5].

Despite substantial evidence of negative effects, the literature additionally emphasizes several possible benefits of social media use. One of the most important positive aspects is the facilitation of social support. Social media platforms allow users to maintain relationships, communicate with peers, and interact with individuals who share similar experiences or challenges. This can be notably useful for those who may feel isolated in their offline environments. Online forums often give emotional support, validation, and a feeling of belonging [8].

Furthermore, social media serves as an accessible source of information about mental health. Many platforms host educational content, information campaigns, and peer-led discussions that can help deepen knowledge of mental health issues and lessen stigma. Access to such resources may encourage help-seeking behavior and promote early intervention [5].

Overall, the results show that the effect of social media on mental health is not inherently positive or negative, but depends on patterns of use, type of engagement, and individual vulnerability factors. This dualistic nature stresses the importance of weighing risks and benefits when assessing the impact of social media on young people's lives.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Factor	Effect on Mental Health
Social comparison	Negative
Cyber bullying	Negative
Excessive use	Negative
Sleep disturbances	Negative
Social support	Positive
Access to information	Positive

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Emotional Management

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as an important psychological construct in understanding the relationship between social media use and mental health among young people. FOMO is generally defined as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. This phenomenon is highly relevant in the context of social media, where users are continuously exposed to updates about others' activities, achievements, and social engagements.

The reviewed literature suggests that FOMO plays an important mediating role between social media use and negative mental health outcomes. Individuals who experience higher levels of FOMO tend to engage more frequently with social media platforms, often in a compulsive or habitual manner. This repeated engagement is able to reinforce feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, as well as dissatisfaction with one's own life [9]. In this way, FOMO not only results from social media use but additionally contributes to its intensification, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

One of the key processes through which FOMO affects mental health is emotional dysregulation. Constant exposure to carefully selected representations of others' lives may prompt viewers to perceive their own experiences as less fulfilling or meaningful. This perception could trigger negative emotional feelings, including envy, frustration, and loneliness. Over time, repeated exposure to such stimuli may impair the ability to control emotions efficiently, heightening vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms [10].

Furthermore, FOMO has been associated with problematic social media use, including excessive checking and difficulty disengaging from social platforms. Many users claim a strong urge to stay constantly connected to avoid missing important social information. This can lead to interruptions in daily activities, reduced productivity, and decreased general well-being. In some cases, these behaviors resemble characteristics of behavioral addiction, including loss of control and persistent usage despite negative consequences [11].

Another important aspect of FOMO is its relationship with sleep disturbances. Individuals who experience high levels of FOMO are more likely to use social media late at night, viewing updates before sleep or even during the night. This behavioral pattern not only delays sleep onset but also impairs sleep quality, thereby negatively affecting mental health. Studies have shown that sleep deprivation is strongly linked to increased emotional reactivity and reduced coping capacity, additionally worsening psychological distress [7].

Despite its predominantly negative associations, FOMO may also reflect underlying social needs, such as a desire for inclusion and social connectedness. In this sense, it can be understood as an extension of normal

developmental processes during adolescence, in which peer relationships have a central role. However, when amplified by constant digital exposure, these needs may become maladaptive, causing emotional imbalance.

Importantly, individual differences have an important role in determining the extent to which FOMO affects mental health. Factors such as self-esteem, resilience, and social support can either buffer or intensify its impact. For example, individuals with higher self-esteem may be less likely to engage in harmful comparison processes, while those with strong offline relationships may undergo reduced levels of FOMO.

Overall, the data show that FOMO is a key psychological mechanism linking social media use to mental health outcomes. Addressing FOMO through interventions that strengthen emotional management, promote mindful social media use, and strengthen offline social connections may help reduce its negative impact. Upcoming research should further explore the longitudinal relationship between FOMO and mental health, as well as the effectiveness of focused interventions in lessening its effects.

Body Image and Appearance Pressure

The influence of social media on body image has become one of the most extensively studied aspects of its impact on mental health, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Social media platforms are highly visual environments where users are frequently exposed to images that emphasize physical appearance, attractiveness, and lifestyle ideals. These images are often deliberately curated, filtered, and edited, presenting unrealistic and unattainable standards of beauty.

The literature consistently indicates that exposure to such content is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, particularly among young women, although similar trends are increasingly observed among young men [12]. Users tend to compare their own appearance with idealized representations seen online, engaging in upward social comparison that can negatively affect self-esteem and body image. Over time, repeated exposure to such comparisons may contribute to the development of negative self-perception and internalization of impractical beauty standards.

One of the critical mechanisms underlying this relationship is internalization. Social media does not simply expose individuals to certain standards but additionally reinforces the perception that these standards are desirable and normative. Influencers, celebrities, and peers often portray idealized lifestyles and appearances that may appear achievable, despite being heavily edited or selectively presented. This can lead to a distorted perception of reality and increased pressure to conform to such ideals.

The effect of social media on body image is further intensified by platform features such as “likes,” comments, and follower counts. These metrics serve as forms of social validation, reinforcing appearance-based self-worth. Individuals may begin to associate their value with external approval, bringing about increased sensitivity to feedback and intensified anxiety related to self-presentation. Studies have shown that receiving fewer likes or negative comments can markedly affect mood and self-esteem, particularly among adolescents [13].

Additionally, the rise of image-centric platforms has contributed to the normalization of appearance-focused behaviors, such as frequent photo editing, filtering, and body monitoring. These practices may increase self-objectification, in which individuals view themselves mainly through others' lenses. Self-objectification has been linked to a series of negative psychological outcomes, including body shame, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Importantly, the relationship between social media use and body image varies across users. Individual factors such as gender, baseline self-esteem, and susceptibility to social comparison all have important roles. For example, individuals with lower self-esteem tend to engage in harmful comparison processes and experience negative emotional outcomes. Conversely, users with higher levels of self-acceptance and critical media literacy may be more resilient to these effects.

Despite the predominantly negative findings, some studies suggest that social media can also have positive effects on body image. Movements supporting body acceptance and diversity have gained visibility on digital media, opposing traditional appearance ideals and encouraging self-acceptance. Exposure to such content may improve body satisfaction and reduce internalization of unrealistic ideals. However, the overall effectiveness of these movements remains mixed, as they often coexist with more dominant appearance-focused content.

Overall, body image constitutes a key domain through which social media influences mental health. The interaction among visual exposure, social comparison, and validation mechanisms creates a complex environment that can either harm or support psychological well-being. Dealing with these issues calls for a multifaceted approach, including education, media literacy, and platform-level interventions to reduce negative content and promote realistic representations.

Discussion

The findings of this review reinforce the notion that social media exerts a complex and multidimensional influence on the mental health of young people. Rather than producing uniform outcomes, its effects are determined by a dynamic relationship of behavioral patterns, individual characteristics, and platform-dependent features. The inclusion of further mechanisms, such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and body image concerns, further accentuates the intricacy and profundity of this relationship.

A central conclusion emerging from the analysis is that negative mental health outcomes are primarily associated with patterns of excessive and passive social media use. Prolonged exposure to carefully selected and idealized content fosters upward social comparison, which has been consistently linked to reduced self-esteem, increased dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms [3]. This effect is amplified by the visual nature of many platforms, where appearance-based content dominates viewer participation.

The introduction of body image as a key factor offers additional understanding of how social media shapes psychological well-being. Constant exposure to idealized beauty standards, combined with mechanisms of social validation such as likes and comments, creates an environment in which self-worth becomes increasingly tied to appearance. This can lead to self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and heightened vulnerability to anxiety and depression. The results correspond with previous research on the role of visual media in reinforcing harmful appearance norms [12].

Similarly, the concept of FOMO provides a valuable framework for understanding compulsive engagement with social media. Individuals experiencing FOMO tend to engage in frequent checking behaviors and experience anxiety when disconnected from online environments. This constant need for connection not only intensifies excessive use but also leads to emotional dysregulation and sleep disturbances. In this context, social media operates as both a cause of psychological strain and a mechanism for coping with that strain, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

Another important observation concerns the distinction between active and passive forms of engagement. Passive consumption, characterized by scrolling and observing without interaction, appears to be particularly harmful, as it increases exposure to comparison triggers without providing the benefits of social interaction. In contrast, active engagement—such as communication, content creation, and participation in supportive communities—may mitigate some of the negative effects and improve well-being [5].

Despite substantial evidence of risks, the possible benefits of social media should not be neglected. Platforms can enable meaningful social connections, provide access to mental wellness resources, and nurture online communities that offer emotional validation and support[8]. These benefits are particularly important for individuals who may experience social isolation or lack access to traditional support systems.

The variation in outcomes across studies underscores the need to adopt a biopsychosocial perspective. Individual differences, including personality traits, resilience, self-esteem, and coping methods, play a key role in moderating the effects of social media. Additionally, contextual factors such as family environment, peer relationships, and cultural impacts further shape how individuals connect with digital media and interpret online experiences.

From a practical perspective, these outcomes show significant effects for public health and education. Interventions must move beyond simplistic recommendations to focus on promoting healthy usage patterns. Digital competence courses should train young people to critically evaluate online content, recognize unrealistic portrayals, and engage with social media mindfully and intentionally.

Moreover, there is an increasing need for partnership among policymakers, educators, and technology developers to create safer virtual environments. Platform design features, such as algorithmic content delivery, engagement metrics, and moderation policies, play an important role in shaping user experiences and should correspond with principles that support psychological well-being.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current body of research. The predominance of cross-sectional studies limits the ability to draw causal conclusions, and subsequent research ought to prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs. Additionally, additional investigation is needed to examine the long-term effects of social media use and the effectiveness of interventions to reduce its negative impact.

To summarize, social media constitutes a powerful and complex influence on the mental health of young people. Its effects are not inherently positive or negative, but are determined by patterns of use, user characteristics, and circumstantial factors. A careful and evidence-based approach is required to comprehend and tackle its role in contemporary mental health challenges.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this review highlights the significant and varied ways social media affects the mental health of adolescents and young adults. Since digital media continue to evolve and become increasingly embedded in daily life, their influence on psychological well-being warrants detailed consideration. The evidence analyzed in this study shows that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful; rather, its effects depend on complex interactions among behavioral, contextual, and individual factors.

On the one hand, social media offers meaningful opportunities for social connection, emotional support, and access to mental health information. These features can positively contribute to well-being, notably for individuals who may lack support in their offline environments. On the other hand, excessive or unregulated use—especially when characterized by passive engagement, exposure to unrealistic content, or negative online interactions—can contribute to adverse psychological outcomes, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem [3,4].

The data points out the importance of adopting a balanced, knowledgeable approach to social media use. Rather than focusing exclusively on controlling screen time, greater emphasis should be placed on the quality of engagement, the type of content consumed, and the development of critical digital skills. Encouraging digital skills and encouraging mindful, purposeful use of social media may help reduce potential dangers while preserving its benefits.

From a wider perspective, the results of this review have important effects for public health, education, and policy. Schools, families, and healthcare professionals should play an active role in supporting young people to manage digital environments safely and responsibly. Concurrently, policymakers and technology developers should collaborate to design platforms that prioritize user well-being, reduce exposure to negative content, and provide access to psychological health support tools.

Finally, additional research is needed to better understand the relationship between social media and mental health. In particular, longitudinal studies are essential for clarifying causal mechanisms and assessing long-term effects. Subsequent research should also examine the effectiveness of interventions to promote healthy digital behaviors and boost mental health outcomes among young people.

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