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SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RISKS AND BENEFITS

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ABSTRACT

Social media have become an integral part of everyday life, particularly among young adults, influencing patterns of communication, social interaction, and access to information. At the same time, mental health difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, represent important public health challenges in this population. This narrative review aimed to summarize and critically discuss current evidence regarding the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults, with particular attention to psychological risks, potential benefits, and underlying mechanisms.

Relevant literature was identified through searches of PubMed/MEDLINE and reference screening. The reviewed evidence indicates that the association between social media use and mental health is complex and depends on patterns of engagement, individual characteristics, motivations, and social context. Problematic social media use and passive consumption of online content are associated with increased depressive symptoms, anxiety, psychological distress, social comparison, and reduced well-being. Conversely, active engagement, online social support, and participation in digital communities may contribute to social connectedness and psychological benefits.

Overall, social media should not be considered inherently harmful or beneficial; rather, its impact depends on how and why individuals engage with digital platforms. Further longitudinal and experimental research is needed to clarify causal mechanisms, identify individual differences in susceptibility, and support the development of evidence-based approaches promoting healthier patterns of digital engagement.

KEYWORDS

Social Media; Young Adults; Mental Health; Psychological Well-Being; Problematic Social Media Use; Digital Communication

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has profoundly transformed patterns of communication, information exchange, and social interaction. Over the past decade, social media platforms have become an integral component of everyday life, particularly among younger populations, who represent some of the most active users of digital communication technologies (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Current global trends indicate that billions of individuals worldwide engage with social media platforms, making online environments an increasingly important context for contemporary social interaction and psychological development (DataReportal, 2025). Social networking sites enable individuals to maintain interpersonal relationships, establish new social connections, participate in online communities, express personal identity, and access various forms of information, including health-related resources (Liu et al., 2019; Naslund et al., 2016).

Young adulthood represents a particularly important developmental period in the context of digital technology use. According to Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood, individuals between approximately 18 and 29 years of age experience significant psychological and social transitions, including identity exploration, changes in interpersonal relationships, educational and occupational transitions, and increasing independence (Arnett, 2000). This developmental stage is characterized by increased autonomy, the formation of personal identity, and the restructuring of social relationships. However, it is also associated with various psychosocial stressors, including academic pressure, employment uncertainty, financial challenges, and changes in interpersonal roles, which may increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties. These developmental processes occur alongside widespread engagement with digital environments, suggesting that social media may represent an important contextual factor influencing psychological functioning during this stage of life. Although much of the existing research has focused on adolescents, young adults remain an important

population due to their high levels of social media engagement and the increasing role of online environments in contemporary social interaction (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Mental health among young adults has become a major public health concern worldwide. Mental disorders contribute substantially to global disability, with depressive and anxiety disorders representing some of the most prevalent conditions affecting younger populations (GBD 2019 Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). In addition, social connectedness and the quality of interpersonal relationships represent important determinants of psychological well-being, highlighting the central role of social relationships in maintaining mental health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). As social media increasingly mediates interpersonal communication, researchers have investigated whether digital interactions may strengthen social connectedness or contribute to psychological difficulties.

A growing body of research has examined associations between social media use and various mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, psychological distress, loneliness, and reduced subjective well-being. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses suggest that problematic social media use is associated with increased psychological distress among adolescents and young adults (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022). However, current evidence indicates that the relationship between social media engagement and mental health is complex and cannot be explained solely by the amount of time spent online. Instead, psychological outcomes appear to depend on multiple factors, including patterns of engagement, individual characteristics, motivations for use, and the quality of online interactions (Liu et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2017).

One important distinction in understanding the psychological impact of social media concerns active and passive forms of engagement. Active use, involving direct communication and meaningful interaction with others, may contribute to increased social support and perceived connectedness. In contrast, passive consumption of online content has been associated with unfavorable social comparison processes and reduced well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017). Furthermore, psychological mechanisms such as social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and problematic patterns of use have been proposed as potential pathways linking social media engagement with mental health outcomes (Appel et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013; Wegmann et al., 2017).

At the same time, social media should not be viewed exclusively as a potential risk factor for mental health. Online platforms may facilitate social support, provide opportunities for self-expression, strengthen peer connections, and increase access to health-related information (Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017). For individuals experiencing loneliness, geographical separation, or limited access to traditional support networks, online communities may provide valuable sources of belonging and emotional support.

Despite the growing number of publications investigating the relationship between social media use and mental health, current evidence remains heterogeneous. Differences in study populations, definitions of social media engagement, measurement instruments, and assessed psychological outcomes limit direct comparisons between studies. Moreover, many available studies rely on cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to determine the directionality and causality of observed associations (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022). Further synthesis is therefore needed to better understand which patterns of social media use may represent potential risks or benefits for psychological well-being among young adults.

Therefore, the aim of this narrative review is to summarize and critically discuss current evidence regarding the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults. Particular attention will be given to potential negative psychological outcomes, possible beneficial effects of social media engagement, and psychological mechanisms that may influence individual susceptibility to these effects, including social comparison, fear of missing out, problematic social media use, and online social support.

2. Methods

2.1. Literature search strategy

A narrative literature review was conducted to identify and summarize current evidence regarding the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes among young adults. A targeted literature search of the PubMed/MEDLINE database was conducted to identify relevant peer-reviewed publications. PubMed/MEDLINE was selected due to its extensive coverage of biomedical and psychological research related to mental health outcomes. Additional studies were identified through manual screening of reference lists from included publications and previously published reviews.

The search strategy focused on three main concepts: social media use, mental health outcomes, and young adult populations. The following combination of keywords was applied:

("social media" OR "social networking sites" OR Facebook OR Instagram OR TikTok) AND ("mental health" OR depression OR anxiety OR psychological distress OR psychological well-being OR stress OR loneliness) AND ("young adults" OR "emerging adults" OR youth).

The literature search included peer-reviewed publications and selected authoritative reports in English from database inception to December 2025. This timeframe was selected to capture both foundational theoretical perspectives on emerging adulthood and social media use, as well as recent empirical evidence regarding the relationship between digital engagement and mental health outcomes.

Although the primary focus of this review was young adults, selected studies involving adolescent populations were included when their findings were considered theoretically relevant to emerging adulthood or when they examined psychological mechanisms applicable to young adult populations. This approach allowed consideration of broader developmental processes while maintaining the primary focus on young adulthood.

2.2. Eligibility criteria

Studies were considered eligible if they met the following criteria:

- (1) the study population included young adults, primarily individuals aged approximately 18–30 years, or provided findings applicable to this developmental period;
- (2) the study investigated social media use, social networking site engagement, or problematic social media use;
- (3) mental health-related outcomes were assessed, including depression, anxiety, psychological distress, stress, loneliness, self-esteem, body image concerns, or subjective well-being;
- (4) the publication was available in English and published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

2.3. Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- (1) focused exclusively on general internet use without distinguishing social media-specific behaviors;
- (2) investigated populations outside the young adult age range without providing relevant subgroup analyses;
- (3) did not evaluate psychological or mental health-related outcomes;
- (4) were editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts, or non-peer-reviewed publications.

2.4. Study selection and narrative synthesis

Titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify publications relevant to the objectives of this narrative synthesis. Due to substantial methodological heterogeneity among available studies, including differences in study populations, definitions of social media engagement, assessment instruments, and evaluated psychological outcomes, a narrative synthesis approach was applied.

The included literature was thematically analyzed and organized into major domains, including associations between social media use and depressive and anxiety symptoms, psychological well-being, problematic social media use, social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying, body image concerns, and potential beneficial effects of online social interactions.

3. Results

3.1. Patterns of Social Media Use Among Young Adults

The reviewed literature indicates that social media use among young adults represents a heterogeneous and multidimensional behavior that cannot be adequately characterized solely by the amount of time spent online. Current evidence suggests that psychological outcomes associated with social media engagement depend on multiple factors, including the type of interaction, motivations for use, individual characteristics, and the broader social context in which online activities occur (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Verduyn et al., 2017).

One of the most important distinctions identified in the literature concerns active and passive patterns of social media engagement. Active use, including direct communication, commenting, sharing personal experiences, and maintaining interpersonal relationships, has been associated with increased perceived social support and social connectedness (Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017). In contrast, passive use, characterized by browsing and observing others' content without direct interaction, has been linked to increased social comparison, envy, and reduced subjective well-being (Appel et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2015).

The intensity of social media engagement has also been investigated as a potential factor influencing psychological outcomes. Although frequent use alone does not necessarily predict negative consequences, problematic social media use, characterized by compulsive engagement, impaired control over usage, and interference with daily functioning, has been consistently associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Andreassen, 2015; Shannon et al., 2022; Wegmann et al., 2017). Importantly, individual differences, including personality traits, emotional vulnerability, and motivations for online engagement, may moderate the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being (Blackwell et al., 2017; Wegmann et al., 2017).

3.2. Negative Associations Between Social Media Use and Mental Health

3.2.1. Depression and Psychological Distress

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults. Systematic reviews and meta-analytic findings suggest that higher levels of problematic social media use are associated with increased depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and reduced emotional well-being (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

However, the relationship between social media engagement and depression appears to be complex and potentially bidirectional. Individuals experiencing depressive symptoms may be more likely to engage in maladaptive patterns of social media use, while certain forms of online engagement may contribute to emotional difficulties through mechanisms such as social comparison, reduced self-esteem, and decreased well-being (Liu et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Passive exposure to highly curated online content may represent one important pathway linking social media use with depressive symptoms. Viewing idealized representations of others' achievements, appearance, or lifestyles may promote upward social comparison and contribute to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and lower self-worth (Appel et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2015).

3.2.2. Anxiety and Emotional Distress

Social media use has also been associated with anxiety symptoms and increased psychological distress. Research suggests that frequent engagement with social platforms may contribute to heightened concerns regarding social evaluation, online self-presentation, and the need to maintain continuous interpersonal availability (Baker et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013).

The constant accessibility of online social information may create pressure to remain connected and responsive, potentially contributing to stress and emotional exhaustion. Fear of negative evaluation, concerns about social acceptance, and uncertainty regarding online interactions may further intensify anxiety-related experiences among vulnerable individuals (Blackwell et al., 2017; Wegmann et al., 2017).

3.2.3. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as an important psychological mechanism explaining the association between social media engagement and mental health outcomes. FOMO refers to a persistent concern that others may be experiencing rewarding events or social opportunities in one's absence (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Because social media platforms provide continuous access to information about others' activities, relationships, and experiences, they may intensify feelings of social exclusion and inadequacy. Individuals with higher levels of FOMO tend to engage with social media more frequently and may demonstrate patterns of compulsive checking behavior (Baker et al., 2016; Blackwell et al., 2017).

Research suggests that FOMO may function as a mediating factor linking social media use with depressive and anxiety symptoms, particularly when online engagement is motivated by the need for reassurance, social validation, or fear of exclusion (Baker et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013).

3.2.4. Social Comparison, Self-Esteem, and Body Image Concerns

Social comparison represents one of the most frequently discussed psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between social media use and mental health. Online platforms often expose users to carefully selected and idealized portrayals of appearance, achievements, and lifestyles, which may encourage unfavorable comparisons with others (Appel et al., 2016).

This mechanism appears particularly relevant for image-based platforms, where appearance-focused content may influence body image perceptions and self-evaluation. Systematic review evidence indicates that social networking site use may contribute to body dissatisfaction and concerns related to appearance, especially when users frequently compare themselves with idealized online images (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

3.2.5. Problematic Social Media Use and Addictive Patterns

Problematic social media use has been increasingly recognized as a behavioral pattern associated with negative psychological outcomes. Although social media engagement itself is not considered inherently harmful, excessive and poorly controlled use may resemble addictive behavioral patterns characterized by preoccupation, loss of control, and functional impairment (Andreassen, 2015).

The development of problematic social media use appears to result from interactions between individual vulnerabilities, psychological needs, internet-related expectations, and existing mental health difficulties (Wegmann et al., 2017). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that problematic social media use is associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among younger populations, including young adults (Shannon et al., 2022).

3.2.6. Cyberbullying and Negative Online Experiences

Negative online interactions represent another pathway through which social media may influence psychological well-being. Cyberbullying, including online harassment, social exclusion, and hostile communication, has been associated with increased risk of emotional distress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (Kowalski et al., 2014). The persistent and potentially public nature of online negative experiences may intensify their psychological impact compared with traditional interpersonal conflicts. Therefore, the quality of online interactions may be an important determinant of whether social media contributes to supportive or harmful experiences.

3.2.7. Sleep Disturbances and Displacement of Offline Activities

Beyond direct psychological mechanisms, social media use may influence mental health through behavioral pathways, including sleep disruption and displacement of offline activities. Sleep represents a fundamental determinant of emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and psychological well-being; therefore, behaviors that negatively affect sleep patterns may indirectly contribute to poorer mental health outcomes.

One of the proposed mechanisms linking social media engagement with reduced well-being is the displacement of restorative activities. Excessive time spent on social media platforms may reduce opportunities for sleep, physical activity, face-to-face social interactions, and other behaviors that support psychological health (Huang, 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This effect may be particularly relevant among young adults, for whom digital communication frequently extends into evening and nighttime hours.

Social media use before bedtime may additionally contribute to sleep-related difficulties through prolonged screen exposure, cognitive stimulation, and emotional arousal associated with online interactions. Notifications, ongoing conversations, and the perceived need to remain continuously available may interfere with the transition to sleep and contribute to irregular sleep patterns (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). These effects may be amplified among individuals with problematic social media use, who experience difficulties controlling engagement despite negative consequences for daily functioning (Shannon et al., 2022; Wegmann et al., 2017).

Importantly, the relationship between social media use, sleep, and mental health is likely bidirectional. Individuals experiencing stress, loneliness, or psychological distress may use social media more frequently, including during nighttime hours, as a form of distraction, emotional regulation, or social connection. In turn, reduced sleep quality and displacement of protective offline activities may further increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Therefore, sleep disruption and reduced engagement in offline activities represent important pathways through which social media may influence psychological well-being. These findings further support the view

that the consequences of social media use depend not only on the amount of time spent online but also on the broader behavioral context in which digital engagement occurs.

3.2.8. Emotional Regulation and Coping Mechanisms

Social media may also influence mental health through their role in emotional regulation and coping processes. For some individuals, online platforms serve as a source of distraction, mood modification, and temporary relief from negative emotions. However, reliance on social media as a primary coping strategy may contribute to maladaptive patterns of engagement, particularly when online activity replaces more adaptive forms of emotion regulation or offline support seeking.

Research on problematic social media use suggests that individuals experiencing psychological distress may be more likely to engage with digital platforms to regulate mood, reduce loneliness, or obtain social reassurance (Andreassen, 2015; Wegmann et al., 2017). Although such engagement may provide short-term emotional benefits, repeated reliance on social media for mood regulation may reinforce compulsive patterns of use and increase vulnerability to negative psychological outcomes (Shannon et al., 2022).

Conversely, social media may facilitate adaptive coping when used to seek information, communicate with supportive individuals, or participate in communities based on shared experiences. Online peer support has been particularly relevant for individuals experiencing isolation or barriers to accessing traditional mental health services (Naslund et al., 2016). Therefore, the psychological consequences of social media use may depend not only on the presence of emotional regulation motives but also on whether digital engagement supports adaptive coping strategies or reinforces avoidance-based behaviors.

3.3. Potential Benefits of Social Media Use for Mental Health

3.3.1. Social Support and Connectedness

Despite concerns regarding potential risks, social media platforms may provide important psychological benefits, particularly through facilitating social connection and peer support. Online communication enables individuals to maintain relationships, develop communities, and access emotional support, which may be particularly valuable during transitional periods of young adulthood (Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Social connectedness represents an important determinant of psychological health, and digital platforms may serve as additional environments in which individuals can establish and maintain meaningful relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Evidence suggests that active forms of engagement are more consistently associated with positive outcomes compared with passive consumption of online content (Verduyn et al., 2015, 2017).

3.3.2. Self-Expression and Identity Formation

Social media may also contribute to identity exploration and self-expression, which are central developmental processes during young adulthood. Through content creation, personal storytelling, and participation in online communities, individuals may explore personal values, social identities, and interpersonal roles (Arnett, 2000; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

The psychological benefits of online self-expression appear to depend on authenticity and the degree to which digital self-presentation reflects the individual's offline identity. Supportive online interactions may promote self-awareness and emotional expression, whereas excessive concern with external validation may contribute to psychological difficulties (Verduyn et al., 2017).

3.3.3. Access to Mental Health Information and Peer Support

Social media platforms have become increasingly important sources of health-related information and peer-based support. Online communities may provide psychoeducation, personal experiences, coping strategies, and opportunities for individuals to discuss mental health concerns in less stigmatizing environments (Naslund et al., 2016).

Such digital spaces may improve mental health literacy and encourage help-seeking behaviors. However, the quality and accuracy of online information vary considerably, and exposure to misleading or harmful content remains an important limitation of digital mental health environments (Naslund et al., 2016).

3.3.4. Community Building and Belonging

Online communities based on shared experiences, interests, or identities may provide individuals with a sense of belonging and social acceptance. These communities can be particularly meaningful for individuals experiencing loneliness, geographical isolation, or limited access to traditional support systems (Naslund et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the psychological benefits of online communities appear to depend strongly on the quality of interactions, perceived support, and the presence of constructive communication patterns. Therefore, social media may function either as a protective or a potentially harmful environment depending on how and why individuals engage with these platforms.

4. Discussion

4.1. Principal findings

The present narrative review examined the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults, with particular attention to patterns of engagement, associated psychological outcomes, underlying mechanisms, and potential benefits. Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that the relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and cannot be characterized as uniformly harmful or beneficial. Instead, psychological outcomes appear to depend on the type of engagement, individual characteristics, motivations for use, and broader social context (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Young adulthood represents a particularly relevant developmental period in this context, as individuals experience identity exploration, changes in social relationships, and increasing independence while simultaneously engaging extensively with digital environments (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, social media may represent an important component of contemporary psychosocial development rather than merely an external technological influence.

The findings indicate that passive patterns of use and problematic engagement are more consistently associated with adverse mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and psychological distress (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022). In contrast, active and socially oriented forms of engagement appear more frequently associated with positive outcomes, including enhanced perceived social support, connectedness, and opportunities for meaningful interaction (Liu et al., 2019; Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Overall, current evidence supports the view that the quality and context of social media engagement may be more important determinants of psychological outcomes than the amount of time spent online alone (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Verduyn et al., 2017). The findings of this review further suggest that the relationship between social media use and mental health should be understood as a dynamic interaction between digital behaviors and individual psychological processes. Rather than functioning as an independent cause of psychological difficulties, social media may influence mental health through multiple pathways, including social comparison, emotional regulation, interpersonal connection, and exposure to supportive or harmful online experiences. This perspective helps explain why the same digital environment may produce different outcomes among different individuals.

Furthermore, the present review emphasizes that young adults represent a particularly important population for examining these relationships. During this developmental period, individuals increasingly rely on digital platforms for maintaining relationships, exploring identity, and accessing information. Consequently, social media may become integrated into important aspects of psychological and social functioning rather than representing a separate domain of life. Therefore, understanding its impact requires consideration of both potential vulnerabilities and adaptive functions of online engagement.

Importantly, these findings challenge simplified interpretations suggesting that social media use is either inherently damaging or universally beneficial. A more balanced perspective recognizes that digital environments can simultaneously represent sources of psychological risk and opportunities for social support, depending on how individuals interact with them.

4.2. Interpretation of findings

The association between passive social media use and poorer psychological outcomes may be explained by several interconnected mechanisms. One of the most frequently discussed pathways is social comparison. Exposure to carefully curated and idealized representations of others' lives may promote upward comparison, leading individuals to evaluate themselves unfavorably and experience reduced self-esteem, envy, and lower mood (Appel et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2015).

This mechanism may be particularly relevant for appearance-focused platforms, where repeated exposure to idealized body images and appearance-related content may contribute to body dissatisfaction and concerns regarding self-evaluation (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). However, these effects are not universal and may depend on individual vulnerability, motivations for use, and the extent to which users engage in appearance-based comparison.

Another important explanation concerns problematic social media use. Current evidence suggests that excessive engagement should not be defined solely by the amount of time spent online but rather by behavioral patterns characterized by preoccupation, reduced control, compulsive checking, and interference with daily functioning (Andreassen, 2015; Wegmann et al., 2017). Individuals experiencing loneliness, stress, or depressive symptoms may use social media as a strategy for distraction, emotional regulation, or seeking social

validation, which may reinforce maladaptive patterns of engagement (Shannon et al., 2022; Wegmann et al., 2017). This bidirectional relationship complicates interpretation of causality and highlights the need for cautious conclusions when examining associations between social media use and mental health outcomes (Keles et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) represents another important psychological mechanism linking social media engagement with mental health outcomes. Continuous exposure to information about others' activities may intensify feelings of exclusion and social inadequacy, contributing to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Baker et al., 2016; Blackwell et al., 2017). Importantly, FOMO may function both as a consequence of social media exposure and as a motivational factor that encourages repeated engagement and compulsive checking behaviors (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The displacement of sleep, physical activity, and offline social interactions represents another potential pathway linking excessive social media engagement with reduced psychological well-being. Excessive time spent on social networking sites may interfere with behaviors that support psychological health, although the directionality and causal mechanisms of these associations remain unclear (Huang, 2017; Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Despite these potential risks, social media may also serve adaptive psychological functions. Active communication, participation in supportive online communities, and access to mental health-related information may enhance social connectedness and reduce feelings of isolation (Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017). These findings are consistent with broader evidence emphasizing the importance of social relationships and connectedness as protective factors for mental health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

4.3. Individual Differences and Susceptibility to Social Media Effects

An important consideration emerging from the literature is that social media use does not affect all individuals in the same way. The variability of psychological outcomes suggests that individual characteristics may play a significant role in determining whether digital engagement functions as a source of support or a potential risk factor for mental health. Therefore, the impact of social media should be understood within a broader biopsychosocial context rather than as a direct consequence of exposure alone (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Personality characteristics represent one important factor influencing responses to social media environments. Research indicates that traits such as neuroticism, extraversion, and attachment style may influence both patterns of social media use and susceptibility to negative psychological outcomes. Individuals with higher levels of neuroticism or greater emotional vulnerability may be more likely to engage in reassurance-seeking behaviors, experience stronger reactions to social evaluation, and develop problematic patterns of use (Blackwell et al., 2017). Similarly, individuals with specific attachment-related vulnerabilities may rely more heavily on online interactions to fulfil social and emotional needs, potentially increasing the risk of excessive engagement (Blackwell et al., 2017).

Motivations underlying social media use may also explain why similar levels of engagement produce different psychological consequences. Using social media to maintain relationships, communicate with others, or access supportive communities may be associated with more positive outcomes. In contrast, using platforms primarily for social comparison, validation seeking, or mood regulation may increase vulnerability to psychological distress (Liu et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2017). This suggests that the function of social media use may be more important than frequency or duration of use alone.

Furthermore, problematic social media use appears to emerge from interactions between individual vulnerabilities, psychological needs, and platform-related characteristics. Wegmann et al. (2017) proposed that addictive patterns of social networking site use may develop when internet-related expectancies and psychological difficulties interact with specific patterns of online behavior. Thus, individuals experiencing loneliness, anxiety, or depressive symptoms may be more likely to engage with social media in ways that temporarily alleviate distress but may maintain maladaptive behavioral cycles over time.

The role of individual differences also highlights the importance of avoiding generalized assumptions about the effects of social media. For some young adults, digital platforms may provide valuable opportunities for connection, self-expression, and emotional support, whereas for others they may reinforce negative self-evaluation, compulsive behaviors, or psychological distress. Future research should therefore focus not only on measuring the amount of social media use but also on identifying which individuals are most vulnerable or most likely to benefit from digital engagement.

4.4. Comparison with previous literature

The findings of this review are consistent with previous research demonstrating a nuanced association between social media use and mental health outcomes. Earlier systematic reviews have reported relationships between problematic social media use and depressive symptoms, anxiety, and psychological distress while emphasizing considerable heterogeneity between studies (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

In accordance with previous literature, the present review highlights the importance of distinguishing between active and passive forms of engagement. This distinction has become central to understanding why similar levels of social media exposure may produce different psychological outcomes among users (Verduyn et al., 2017). Rather than conceptualizing social media use as a uniform behavior, recent research increasingly emphasizes that the psychological consequences of digital engagement depend on the purpose, quality, and context of online interactions.

Compared with earlier approaches that frequently focused on the amount of time spent using social media, contemporary perspectives suggest that duration of use alone may provide limited information regarding psychological outcomes. Previous studies have demonstrated that two individuals with similar levels of social media exposure may experience substantially different effects depending on their motivations for use, emotional state, personality characteristics, and the type of content they encounter (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Therefore, the present review supports a shift from a quantity-based perspective toward a more contextual understanding of digital engagement.

At the same time, some studies have reported relatively weak or inconsistent associations between digital technology use and well-being, suggesting that the psychological impact of social media may often be smaller and more variable than commonly assumed (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Differences in study methodology, including variations in measurement of social media use, platform type, participant characteristics, and assessment of mental health outcomes, may contribute to these inconsistencies (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Another important difference between earlier and more recent research concerns the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms. Many earlier studies examined platforms such as Facebook, whereas current social media environments increasingly involve image- and video-based platforms characterized by algorithmically curated content and continuous engagement features. These changes highlight the need for ongoing research that considers not only individual patterns of use but also the technological characteristics of contemporary platforms.

Overall, the findings of this review extend previous literature by emphasizing that social media effects are unlikely to be explained by exposure alone. Instead, psychological outcomes appear to emerge from interactions between individual vulnerabilities, motivations, social experiences, and characteristics of digital environments.

4.5. Strengths and limitations

This review has several strengths. First, it provides a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence regarding the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults, integrating findings across multiple domains, including patterns of engagement, psychological outcomes, underlying mechanisms, and potential benefits of digital interactions. By considering both potential risks and protective aspects of social media use, this review offers a balanced perspective rather than focusing exclusively on negative consequences.

Furthermore, the review highlights important psychological mechanisms that may explain individual differences in responses to social media, including social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), problematic engagement, and online social support. This multidimensional approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital environments may influence psychological functioning among young adults.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, as a narrative review, this study does not follow the formal methodology of systematic reviews or meta-analyses. Although this approach allows broader conceptual synthesis and critical interpretation of heterogeneous evidence, it may increase the risk of selection bias and limits the reproducibility of the findings.

Second, conclusions regarding causal relationships remain limited due to the methodological characteristics of the existing literature. A substantial proportion of studies investigating social media use and mental health rely on cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to determine whether social media engagement contributes to psychological difficulties, whether individuals with poorer mental health are more

likely to engage in problematic patterns of use, or whether bidirectional relationships exist (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

Third, considerable heterogeneity exists across studies regarding definitions of social media use, assessed platforms, duration and intensity of engagement, measurement instruments, and evaluated mental health outcomes. These methodological differences limit direct comparisons and may contribute to inconsistencies in reported findings (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

Finally, although the primary focus of this review was young adulthood, some included evidence originated from adolescent or mixed-age populations. Therefore, findings should be interpreted with caution when generalized specifically to young adults.

Therefore, the generalizability of findings specifically to young adulthood should be interpreted with caution. In addition, the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms means that findings based on earlier platforms, such as Facebook, may not fully represent current patterns of engagement with newer image- and video-based platforms.

4.6. Implications for practice and future research

The findings of this review suggest that interventions aimed at improving mental health among young adults should focus not only on reducing social media use but primarily on promoting healthier patterns of engagement. Encouraging active, meaningful interactions while reducing passive consumption and comparison-based behaviors may represent a more effective approach than simple limitation of screen time (Verduyn et al., 2017).

From a clinical perspective, assessment of digital behaviors may provide valuable information regarding coping strategies, social functioning, and potential psychological vulnerabilities. Incorporating discussions about social media habits into mental health assessment may therefore support more individualized interventions (Naslund et al., 2016). Healthcare professionals may particularly benefit from considering social media behaviors when evaluating sleep difficulties, loneliness, anxiety symptoms, or maladaptive coping strategies. Understanding the function that social media serves for an individual may provide more clinically meaningful information than assessing frequency of use alone.

Interventions should also address negative online experiences, including cyberbullying, harmful social interactions, and exposure to distressing content, which may contribute to psychological difficulties among young adults (Kowalski et al., 2014). Importantly, prevention strategies should not assume that reducing social media exposure alone will necessarily improve mental health outcomes. Given the heterogeneous effects of digital engagement, interventions should focus on improving the quality of online experiences rather than exclusively limiting usage time.

Digital literacy programs may represent an important component of prevention strategies by helping young adults recognize maladaptive patterns of engagement, understand psychological mechanisms such as social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO), and develop more intentional approaches to social media use.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to better clarify causal relationships between social media engagement and mental health outcomes (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Further work is also needed to establish standardized measures of social media use, differentiate between specific platforms and behaviors, and examine how individual differences influence psychological responses to digital environments (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Shannon et al., 2022). In addition, future research should increasingly consider technological characteristics of digital platforms, including algorithmic content delivery, recommendation systems, and engagement-oriented design features. As online environments continue to evolve, understanding the interaction between individual characteristics, patterns of use, and platform-level factors will be essential for developing more accurate models of how social media influences psychological well-being.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults is complex, dynamic, and influenced by multiple interacting factors. Current evidence suggests that social media should not be considered inherently harmful or universally beneficial; rather, its psychological impact depends on patterns of engagement, individual characteristics, motivations, and broader social context (Liu et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Verduyn et al., 2017). Passive consumption of social media content and problematic patterns of use appear to represent important risk factors associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, psychological distress, and reduced well-being. In contrast, active engagement involving meaningful communication, social support, participation in online communities, and access to mental health-related resources may provide important psychosocial benefits (Appel et al., 2016; Naslund et al., 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Therefore, future approaches should move beyond the simple reduction of screen time and focus instead on promoting healthier, more intentional patterns of digital engagement. Enhancing digital literacy, supporting adaptive online behaviors, and identifying problematic patterns of use may contribute to improving mental health outcomes among young adults. Further longitudinal and experimental research is needed to clarify causal mechanisms and determine which specific aspects of social media engagement function as risk factors or protective factors for psychological well-being (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

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