

A Study of the Impact of Social Media on Psychological Well-being and Mental Health of Young Adults

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Abstract: *The rapid expansion of social media has transformed communication, learning, entertainment, and social interaction among young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, TikTok, and LinkedIn have become integral to daily life, offering opportunities for self-expression, information sharing, and relationship building. Despite these benefits, growing evidence suggests that excessive and unhealthy social media use may adversely affect psychological well-being and mental health. This study examines the relationship between social media usage and the psychological well-being of young adults by exploring both its positive and negative influences. Existing research indicates that moderate and purposeful social media use enhances social connectedness, emotional support, knowledge acquisition, and civic engagement, whereas problematic usage is associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear of missing out (FoMO), sleep disturbances, reduced self-esteem, and social comparison (Keles et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The article adopts a conceptual approach based on recent empirical studies to explain how the frequency, duration, purpose, and quality of social media engagement influence mental health outcomes. It also discusses the importance of digital literacy, responsible online behaviour, and balanced technology use in promoting psychological resilience among young adults. The study concludes that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful; rather, its effects depend largely on individual patterns of use, personal characteristics, and the surrounding social environment. The findings may assist educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and families in developing effective strategies for fostering healthy digital engagement and safeguarding the mental well-being of young adults.*

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Introduction: Social media has emerged as one of the most influential technological developments of the twenty-first century, fundamentally changing the ways individuals communicate, learn, and establish social relationships. Young adults represent the most active users of digital platforms because of widespread smartphone ownership, affordable internet access, and the increasing integration of digital technologies into education and everyday life (Pew Research Center, 2024). These platforms facilitate instant communication, collaboration, academic learning, professional networking, and entertainment, making them indispensable tools in contemporary society.

The growing popularity of social networking sites has generated considerable academic interest regarding their influence on psychological well-being and mental health. Psychological well-being refers to an individual's positive emotional functioning, life satisfaction, resilience, and ability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, whereas mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being that enables individuals to cope effectively with life's challenges (World Health Organization, 2022). While social media can strengthen social connectedness and provide emotional support, excessive or problematic use has been linked with depression, anxiety, loneliness, cyberbullying, body image dissatisfaction, and diminished self-esteem (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity formation, emotional growth, career preparation, and social exploration. During this period, online interactions significantly shape self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Continuous exposure to idealized lifestyles, curated images, and social comparison may negatively influence self-worth and emotional stability (Vogel et al., 2014). Conversely, digital communities can provide valuable peer support, access to mental health resources, and opportunities for self-expression, particularly for individuals experiencing social isolation or stigma (Naslund et al., 2020).

Given these contrasting perspectives, understanding the psychological consequences of social media use has become an important area of interdisciplinary research involving psychology, education, sociology, communication studies, and public health. This article synthesizes current evidence to examine how social media influences the mental health and psychological well-being of young adults while identifying factors that promote healthy and responsible digital engagement.

Review of Literature: Research on social media and mental health has expanded rapidly during the past decade. A systematic review by Keles et al. (2020) concluded that excessive social media use is consistently associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among adolescents and young adults, although causal relationships require further investigation. Similarly, Odgers and Jensen (2020) argued that the effects of digital technology are complex and vary depending on individual differences, online experiences, and patterns of use.

Valkenburg et al. (2022) proposed the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model, suggesting that the psychological impact of social media differs across individuals based on personality, emotional vulnerability, and social context. Their findings indicate that while some users experience increased loneliness and stress, others benefit from enhanced social support and connectedness.

Naslund et al. (2020) emphasized that social media platforms can serve as valuable tools for mental health awareness, peer support, and stigma reduction by enabling individuals to share experiences and access psychological resources. However, prolonged exposure to cyberbullying, online harassment, misinformation, and unrealistic beauty standards may contribute to emotional distress and lower self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014).

The World Health Organization (2022) recognizes digital well-being as an emerging public health concern and advocates balanced technology use alongside digital literacy initiatives. Recent evidence also highlights the importance of moderating screen time, promoting healthy online habits, and strengthening psychological resilience to maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Overall, the literature indicates that social media is not inherently harmful; rather, its psychological outcomes depend on the frequency, purpose, quality, and context of use. These findings justify continued research into the mechanisms linking digital engagement with young adults' psychological well-being.

Objectives of the Study: The study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being among young adults.
2. Assess the impact of social media on mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem.
3. Identify the positive and negative psychological consequences of social media use.
4. Explore factors influencing healthy and problematic social media engagement.
5. Suggest measures for promoting responsible social media use and digital well-being.

Research Questions

1. How does social media use influence the psychological well-being of young adults?
2. What are the major positive and negative mental health outcomes associated with social media use?
3. Which factors moderate the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being?

Social Media and Young Adults: Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of young adults, fundamentally transforming the ways they communicate, learn, socialize, and express themselves. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn enable users to exchange information instantly, maintain relationships, participate in online communities, and access educational and professional opportunities. The widespread availability of smartphones and affordable internet services has significantly increased social media usage among individuals aged 18–30 years, making this age group the most active digital population worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity formation, career planning, emotional maturity, and expanding social relationships. During this period, social media serves multiple functions, including entertainment, academic collaboration, professional networking, civic engagement, and emotional support. It also provides opportunities for self-expression through photographs, videos, blogs, and interactive content, enabling young people to construct and communicate their identities in digital environments (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

However, the increasing dependence on social networking platforms has generated concerns regarding excessive screen time, digital addiction, online validation, and reduced face-to-face interaction. The impact of social media is therefore multidimensional, influencing cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social aspects of young adults' lives. Contemporary research suggests that the outcomes depend not merely on the amount of time spent online but also on the quality, purpose, and nature of digital engagement (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Psychological Well-being: Psychological well-being refers to an individual's ability to experience positive emotions, maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships, achieve personal growth, and effectively cope with everyday challenges. It encompasses emotional stability, self-esteem, resilience, life satisfaction, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Ryff, 1989). In the digital era, psychological well-being is increasingly influenced by online interactions, virtual communities, and patterns of social media use.

Social media can contribute positively to psychological well-being by strengthening social connectedness and reducing feelings of isolation. Online communities provide opportunities for emotional expression, peer

encouragement, and access to supportive networks, particularly for individuals facing geographical, social, or psychological barriers (Naslund et al., 2020). Educational groups, professional forums, and interest-based communities also facilitate knowledge sharing and skill development, contributing to greater confidence and self-efficacy.

Nevertheless, excessive engagement with social media may undermine psychological well-being. Constant exposure to carefully curated lifestyles and unrealistic standards often encourages upward social comparison, resulting in dissatisfaction with one's appearance, achievements, or social status. Dependence on online approval through "likes," comments, and followers may further increase emotional vulnerability and reduce intrinsic self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014). Consequently, maintaining balanced and mindful social media use is essential for preserving psychological well-being.

Mental Health: Mental health is a fundamental component of overall well-being and includes emotional, psychological, and social functioning. According to the World Health Organization (2022), good mental health enables individuals to realize their abilities, manage normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to society. Mental health among young adults is influenced by biological, psychological, environmental, and technological factors, with social media emerging as one of the most significant contemporary influences.

Research has demonstrated that problematic social media use is associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion (Keles et al., 2020). Frequent exposure to cyberbullying, misinformation, online harassment, and unrealistic portrayals of success may contribute to emotional distress and psychological instability. Furthermore, excessive nighttime social media use disrupts sleep quality, which is strongly associated with poor emotional regulation and impaired cognitive functioning (WHO, 2022).

At the same time, digital platforms have become valuable resources for promoting mental health awareness. Many organizations, healthcare professionals, and support groups utilize social media to disseminate information about stress management, suicide prevention, emotional resilience, and psychological counselling. Online peer-support communities enable individuals to seek help anonymously, reduce stigma surrounding mental illness, and encourage timely intervention (Naslund et al., 2020). Therefore, social media functions as both a potential risk factor and a valuable resource for mental health, depending on patterns of usage.

Positive Impact of Social Media: When used responsibly, social media offers numerous psychological, educational, and social benefits for young adults. One of its most significant contributions is the promotion of social connectedness. Digital communication enables individuals to maintain relationships with family, friends, classmates, and professional networks regardless of geographical distance. Such interactions foster emotional support, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and reduce feelings of social isolation (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Social media also facilitates access to educational resources, online courses, webinars, research materials, and collaborative learning opportunities. Students increasingly utilize digital platforms for academic discussions, project coordination, and professional development, thereby enhancing learning outcomes and digital competencies (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Another important benefit is increased awareness regarding mental health issues. Campaigns promoting psychological well-being, stress management, mindfulness, and emotional resilience have become more accessible through social media, encouraging early help-seeking behaviour and reducing societal stigma associated with mental illness (Naslund et al., 2020).

Furthermore, social media provides opportunities for creativity, entrepreneurship, and career advancement. Young adults use digital platforms to showcase talents, establish businesses, create educational content, and develop professional identities. These experiences contribute positively to self-confidence, motivation, and economic opportunities. During periods of social disruption, including the COVID-19 pandemic, social media also served as a vital medium for maintaining social relationships, educational continuity, and emotional support (WHO, 2022).

Negative Impact of Social Media: Despite its numerous advantages, excessive and uncontrolled social media use has raised serious concerns regarding the psychological well-being of young adults. One of the most frequently reported consequences is increased anxiety and depression. Continuous exposure to idealized images, unrealistic lifestyles, and carefully curated online identities often promotes unhealthy social comparison, resulting in diminished self-esteem and negative body image (Vogel et al., 2014).

Problematic social media use has also been associated with the **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**, a psychological condition characterized by persistent concern that others are experiencing rewarding events without one's participation. FoMO encourages compulsive checking of social networking platforms, increasing stress, distraction, and emotional dependency (Keles et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying, online harassment, hate speech, and digital discrimination constitute additional threats to young adults' mental health. Victims frequently experience emotional distress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and, in severe cases, self-harm or suicidal ideation (WHO, 2022). Excessive screen time may further contribute to reduced physical activity, impaired concentration, poor academic performance, and disrupted sleep patterns, all of which negatively affect psychological functioning.

Moreover, excessive reliance on virtual communication may weaken face-to-face interpersonal relationships and reduce opportunities for meaningful social interaction. As a result, many researchers emphasize the importance of promoting digital literacy, responsible technology use, and healthy online habits to maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its psychological risks (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Social Media Addiction: Social media addiction refers to the excessive, compulsive, and uncontrollable use of social networking platforms that interferes with an individual's daily functioning, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. Although it is not formally recognized as a separate psychiatric disorder, researchers have identified problematic social media use as a form of behavioural addiction characterized by excessive preoccupation with online activities, withdrawal symptoms, mood modification, tolerance, and difficulty reducing usage despite negative consequences (Andreassen, 2015; Griffiths, 2013). Young adults are particularly vulnerable because social media platforms are intentionally designed to encourage continuous engagement through notifications, personalized content, and reward-based mechanisms.

Excessive social media use often leads to procrastination, reduced productivity, impaired concentration, and decreased face-to-face social interaction. Individuals who spend several hours daily on social networking platforms are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, loneliness, and diminished life satisfaction (Keles et al., 2020). Moreover, problematic use may interfere with academic achievement and occupational performance by reducing attention span and increasing digital distraction (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). These findings suggest that balanced and mindful use of social media is essential for maintaining psychological well-being.

Sleep Disturbance and Mental Health: Sleep is a fundamental determinant of physical health, emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and psychological resilience. However, excessive social media use,

particularly during late-night hours, has emerged as a significant contributor to sleep disturbances among young adults. Many individuals continue browsing social networking platforms before bedtime, resulting in delayed sleep onset, shortened sleep duration, and poor sleep quality (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Several mechanisms explain this relationship. Exposure to blue light emitted from smartphone and tablet screens suppresses melatonin secretion, disrupting the body's natural sleep–wake cycle. Simultaneously, emotionally stimulating online content and continuous notifications increase cognitive arousal, making it difficult for users to relax and fall asleep (Levenson et al., 2017). Sleep deprivation subsequently affects attention, memory, emotional regulation, and decision-making while increasing vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and chronic stress (Keles et al., 2020).

Poor sleep quality also contributes to reduced academic performance, daytime fatigue, irritability, and lower overall life satisfaction. Consequently, mental health professionals increasingly recommend limiting screen time before bedtime, disabling unnecessary notifications, and adopting healthy digital habits to improve both sleep quality and psychological well-being (WHO, 2022).

Anxiety, Depression, Self-esteem, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO): A growing body of research indicates that problematic social media use is associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem among young adults. Constant exposure to carefully curated images, achievements, and lifestyles often encourages unrealistic social comparison, leading individuals to perceive themselves as less successful, attractive, or socially accepted than their peers (Vogel et al., 2014). Such perceptions may gradually reduce self-confidence and increase emotional distress.

One of the most widely studied psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship is the **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**. FoMO refers to the persistent apprehension that others are experiencing rewarding events or social interactions without one's participation (Przybylski et al., 2013). Individuals experiencing FoMO frequently monitor social media platforms to remain informed about peers' activities, resulting in compulsive checking behaviours, distraction, and emotional dependence on digital interactions.

Furthermore, frequent exposure to negative news, online conflicts, and misinformation may heighten feelings of uncertainty and stress. Individuals seeking validation through likes, comments, and followers may become emotionally dependent on online approval, making them vulnerable to disappointment and reduced self-worth when expectations are not met (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Although moderate social media use can provide emotional support and social connectedness, excessive dependence may increase the risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms, particularly among psychologically vulnerable individuals (Naslund et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment: Cyberbullying has become one of the most serious psychological risks associated with social media use. It involves repeated hostile or harmful behaviour carried out through digital platforms, including abusive messages, threats, rumours, public humiliation, identity theft, and the sharing of embarrassing photographs or videos without consent. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and reach a wide audience almost instantly, intensifying its psychological impact (UNESCO, 2023).

Victims of cyberbullying frequently experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear, emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and social withdrawal. Prolonged exposure to online harassment may also impair academic performance, reduce life satisfaction, and increase the risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation (WHO, 2022). The anonymity provided by digital platforms often encourages aggressive online behaviour while making it difficult to identify perpetrators.

To address these challenges, educational institutions, policymakers, technology companies, and families should promote digital citizenship, online safety education, effective reporting mechanisms, and psychological support services. Strengthening digital literacy and encouraging respectful online communication can substantially reduce the harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Body Image and Social Comparison: Social media platforms have significantly influenced young adults' perceptions of physical appearance and personal identity. Continuous exposure to edited photographs, beauty filters, fitness influencers, and idealized lifestyles often creates unrealistic standards of attractiveness. According to **Social Comparison Theory**, individuals naturally compare themselves with others, and repeated exposure to idealized online images frequently results in body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

Young adults, particularly adolescents and young women, may internalize unrealistic beauty ideals promoted on social media, leading to negative body image, unhealthy dieting behaviours, excessive exercise, or disordered eating patterns. Similarly, young men may experience pressure to achieve unrealistic muscular physiques and financial success portrayed through digital content (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Nevertheless, social media also has the potential to promote positive body image through campaigns advocating body positivity, diversity, self-acceptance, and mental health awareness. When users engage with supportive and authentic online communities rather than idealized content, social media can enhance self-confidence and encourage healthy attitudes toward physical appearance (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

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