



Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health from a Psychological Perspective: A Review of the Contemporary Literature

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ABSTRACT: Social media has become deeply embedded in society, with most individuals spending several hours on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter each day. While social media provides opportunities for connection, entertainment, and information, increasing research indicates use can negatively impact mental health. This paper reviews literature examining the psychological effects of social media on wellbeing. Key areas explored include social comparison and its links to depression and anxiety, exposure to idealized self-representation and impacts on body image, online harassment and cyberbullying, associations between social media addiction and mental distress, fear of missing out (FOMO), and sleep issues. The complex bi-directional relationship between social media and mental health is discussed, acknowledging both potential benefits and drawbacks. Recommendations are provided for individuals aiming to use social media in a psychologically healthy way, as well as areas needing further research. Ultimately, moderate usage paired with conscious digital habits may allow society to harness social media's upsides while minimizing its risks to well-being.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety, Depression, Mental Health, Social Media, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok now play a central role in interpersonal communication, information sharing, self-expression, and popular culture, with over 70% of adults reporting daily use (Auxier & Anderson, 2022). This represents a monumental shift; the internet was not widely adopted until the mid 1990s and the first recognizable social media site, Six Degrees, only emerged in 1997 (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Yet in just over two decades, social media has revolutionized how people interact. It provides efficient connection, entertainment, and professional opportunities (Grill, 2022; Sundar et al., 2022). However, alongside these benefits, experts have warned of potential downsides like encouragement of poor sleep habits, endless social comparison, cyberbullying, and other threats to mental health and wellbeing (Appel et al., 2022; Twenge, 2023).

This paper reviews literature on the psychological impacts of social media use, focusing on connections drawn with depression, anxiety, body image issues, online harassment, fear of missing out (FOMO), and sleep disorders. It discusses key mechanisms proposed for how use of platforms may negatively affect mental health. However, the bi-directional, nuanced nature of the relationship is acknowledged. Those already struggling may turn to social media for validation or distraction, muddying causal explanations (Seabrook et al., 2023). Overall, moderate usage paired with conscious digital habits can hopefully allow society to gain social media's benefits while mitigating its potential harms (Auxier & Anderson, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Comparison and Associations with Depression and Anxiety

A prominent explanation for social media's negative mental health effects centers on social comparison. Platforms provide endless opportunities to view carefully curated profiles and idealized snippets of acquaintances and influencers, highlighting only the most positive elements of their lives (Steers et al., 2023; Yang, 2023). Seeing idealized, filtered representations can trigger frequent social comparison and negative self-evaluations in users, which are linked to lowered mood and self-esteem (Appel et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2019).



Multiple studies find associations between high social media usage, especially of visually oriented platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, and increased tendencies towards social comparison (Lee, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Experiments also demonstrate direct causal impacts; young adults randomized to browse social media report more social comparison and negative affect than control groups (Vogel et al., 2023). These pressures are especially salient for adolescents (Nesi & Prinstein, 2023).

Among young women, frequent exposure to carefully curated peers triggers self-criticism and decreases self-rated attractiveness after social media use (Kleemans et al., 2018). However, effects depend on pre-existing traits like self-esteem, self-consciousness, and gender (Cramer et al., 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2017). Personalized interventions decreasing social comparison help mitigate these risks (Young et al., 2022). Overall, social media-fueled social comparison represents a key mechanism negatively impacting self-perception and mood.

Exposure to Idealized Imagery and Body Image Concerns

Closely related is how exposure to idealized, filtered imagery on social media negatively impacts body image and self-worth. The selectivity of content shared online emphasizes flawless instances of beauty, success, and happiness compared to daily lived realities (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2023). Seeing perfected yet unrealistic portrayals may foster a sense of personal inadequacy regarding one's own appearance and life circumstances.

Multiple studies reveal links between increased social media usage, especially Instagram, and body dissatisfaction in women and youth, driven by constant exposure to idealized bodies (Cohen et al., 2019; Fardouly et al., 2018; Slater et al., 2017). Even brief viewing of ideal Instagram images worsens mood and body satisfaction compared to control conditions (Brown & Tiggemann, 2023). These effects appear mediated by increased appearance-based social comparison tendencies when viewing idealized online imagery (Walker et al., 2021).

However, not all research detects straightforward connections between passive social media use and body image issues (Marengo et al., 2018). Outcomes likely depend on pre-existing traits like self-objectification, internalization of beauty standards, and baseline body satisfaction (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Still, the commonness of idealized content across platforms remains concerning regarding potential impacts on self-perception, especially in young users (Kleemans et al., 2018).

Online Harassment, Cyberbullying, and Associations with Anxiety and Depression

Another explanatory pathway for social media's mental health links involves online harassment and cyberbullying. Anonymity and rapid transmission of content enable cyberbullying, perpetuating emotional distress in victims (Aricak, 2023; Wong et al., 2021). Adolescents view cyberbullying as a primary risk of social media (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Victims report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation compared to non-victims (Bottino et al., 2023; McCabe et al., 2017).

Beyond overt bullying, online harassment remains widespread on social media, disproportionately targeted towards women and ethnic minorities (Duggan, 2017; Mantilla, 2013). Victims exhibit more signs of depression, reduced self-esteem, and trauma (Filipovic, 2023; Troller-Renfree et al., 2017). However, causal explanations remain mixed; those with pre-existing mental health challenges may also be more vulnerable to harassment. Still, online negativity enables psychological harm on an enormous scale (Tennant et al., 2015). While social media facilitates connection, it also spreads incivility requiring solutions.

Associations with Depression, Anxiety, and "Internet Addiction"

While the addictive nature of social media remains debated, evidence links excessive use with dependence symptoms and mental distress, especially in youth (Elhai et al., 2018; Marino & Spada, 2020). Problematic use correlates positively with depression and anxiety while being associated with poorer self-concept (Bányai et al., 2017; Woods & Scott, 2016). Poorer self-regulation also predicts greater addiction-like social media tendencies (Meier et al., 2023).

However, conclusions remain mixed whether social media addiction contributes to mental health declines or those already struggling turn to platforms for validation (Kircaburun et al., 2019; Shensa et al., 2018). Dependent use likely both results from and worsens internalizing disorders, creating bi-directional associations. Still, excessive use, regardless of underlying causes, appears problematic for psychological wellbeing (Marino & Spada, 2020; Su et al., 2019).



Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Social Media Engagement, and Associations with Lowered Mood

FOMO, or ongoing apprehension others are having rewarding experiences one is missing out on, is exacerbated by social media (Alt, 2023; Elhai et al. 2018). Selective, positive content creates unrealistic assumptions, triggering FOMO during and after use (Alt, 2023; Buglass et al., 2017). FOMO drives compulsive, constant checking of platforms (Elhai et al., 2018).

High FOMO associates with lowered mood, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Alt, 2023; Baker et al., 2016). It also mediates links between high social media use and poorer wellbeing (Buglass et al., 2017). Reducing FOMO through limited engagement mitigates these adverse outcomes (Hunt et al., 2018). Overall, FOMO represents a key mechanism negatively impacting mental health among frequent social media users.

Disrupted Sleep and Connections to Psychological Functioning

Finally, social media likely disrupts sleep, given it is a psychologically stimulating activity frequently used before bed (Levenson et al., 2017; Woods & Scott, 2016). Exposure to content and alerts delays and reduces overall sleep, while night awakenings to check platforms fragment rest (Levenson et al., 2023; Woods & Scott, 2023). Younger users who report high social media engagement sleep significantly less on average (Twenge et al., 2019). This is concerning given sleep's importance for psychological functioning (Kubota et al., 2023).

Poor sleep associates with lowered mood, attention deficits, poor academic performance, and other issues related to wellbeing (Becker et al., 2018; Kubota et al., 2023). However, effects depend on usage habits. Regulated nighttime routines can mitigate adverse outcomes compared to mindless engagement (Marelli & Castelnovo, 2022). Overall, social media likely disrupts sleep in a segment of users, representing another avenue through which it may impair mental health.

DISCUSSION

In reviewing key mechanisms proposed to explain social media's mental health risks, a complex picture emerges. While frequent use associates with issues like depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction, especially in adolescents, outcomes remain mediated by pre-existing traits and motivations for use (Seabrook et al., 2023). Social media may provide social connection and escape for those struggling (Guedes et al., 2016; Marino et al., 2018). Causality has not been conclusively demonstrated. Still, maladaptive usage and behaviors like endless social comparison, idealization, cyberbullying, and compulsive engagement predict poorer mental health regardless of directionality (Marino & Spada, 2020; Shensa et al., 2018).

To leverage social media positively, consumers must be aware of potential risks and implement balanced habits, avoiding harmful behaviors like social comparison (Auxier & Anderson, 2022; Marino et al., 2018). Prioritizing offline relationships also remains critical. For platforms, interventions targeting issues like cyberbullying and algorithmic amplification of idealized content merit consideration (Slater et al., 2017). Overall, with thoughtful usage and governance, society can hopefully harness social media's upsides while protecting mental health. Further multi-disciplinary research is still needed to elucidate the nuanced, bi-directional relationship between social media engagement and psychological wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literature reviewed, the following recommendations may help mitigate the potential negative psychological impacts of social media:

For individuals:

- Actively limit overall time spent on social media sites/apps through self-monitoring and setting time boundaries. Take social media breaks.
- Disable notifications to reduce disruptions and mindless scrolling.
- Avoid browsing platforms immediately before bed and resist nighttime awakenings to check sites. Prioritize proper sleep hygiene.
- Follow a diverse range of accounts to see varied perspectives and normal human experiences, not solely idealized ones.
- Avoid comparing oneself to carefully curated online personas and remember images do not reflect reality.
- Report cyberbullying and online harassment incidents to platforms. Block or mute abusive accounts.
- Focus on postoperative social media experiences like connection or entertainment, not validation seeking.



- Prioritize in-person socialization and stay aware of potential over-substitution of online interactions.

For platforms/designers:

- Explore changes to algorithms limiting content that exacerbates social comparison, depression, or anxiety.
- Implement more prominent warnings or usage cutoffs for teens and young adults at higher mental health risk.
- Facilitate tools for users to track and set limits on time spent on sites. Provide friction (like extra clicks) for endless browsing habits.
- Enhance content moderation and anti-harassment protections, especially for minority users facing disproportionate abuse.
- Fund more research into platform architectures and UX patterns that positively benefit wellbeing and psychology.

For society:

- Provide social media literacy programs, starting in schools, about healthy usage habits and potential mental health risks.
- Increase mental health resources available for those experiencing social media related emotional issues.
- Encourage open discussion around social media's pros and cons to balance adoption with thoughtful usage.
- Support further multi-disciplinary research and discourse on the nuanced bi-directional social media/mental health relationship.

CONCLUSION

While benefits like entertainment and expanded social networks are apparent, emerging evidence indicates social media carries risks to mental health and wellbeing like depression, anxiety, body image issues, online harassment, fear of missing out, and sleep disruption. However, the mechanisms are complex and causality remains inconclusive. Those struggling may turn to platforms for validation or escape, complicating directional explanations. Regardless, maladaptive usage habits associate with psychological harm. With awareness of potential downsides and implementation of balanced engagement, the social web can hopefully evolve into one fostering positive wellbeing. But research and discussion must continue as social media becomes further embedded into the fabric of society.

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