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## Social Media and Mental Health

### Abstract

Social media has changed the way people communicate and interact with each other, and has incredibly accelerated access to information, events around us, and the world. With the spread of social media, people's perceptions of one another, relationships, approaches, and the world have undergone significant transformations. Consequently, research on how and in what form this transformation affects individuals' mental health has become increasingly widespread. One of the reasons for the widespread adoption of these networks, which have quickly become an integral part of our daily lives and have millions of users, may be that they provide platforms where young people are less pressured by social and environmental factors and can express themselves more freely. People who carry small worlds in their pockets and bags use social media to signal their presence and alleviate the burden of stress in their daily lives. On the other hand, social media makes individuals feel that life is passing them by. It traps people who live in fear of not being able to keep up with what is happening on their tablet, computer, or smartphone screens, affecting academic performance, work life, sleep, and many other areas. It separates emotions and thoughts from reality by making them virtual, distances individuals from each other, and leads to loneliness, increases mental fatigue, encourages increased use through positive feedback received in a short time, and thus makes the existence of the individual and the virtual self he creates dependent on the presence and existence of other users.

**Keywords:** *mental health, social media, depression, anxiety, psychiatric diseases, personality psychology*

### Introduction

Mental health is an important aspect of human well-being, but it is often neglected and stigmatized. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the prevalence of mental health problems is increasing by 13% per year (Beyari, 2023). Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems, affecting 264 million and 280 million people worldwide, respectively.

In addition, an estimated 269 million people struggled with drug and substance abuse as of the end of 2018 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

These numbers are likely to continue to rise due to a variety of factors. Among these, the increasing use of technology-especially social media-plays a significant role in the rise of mental health problems. Social networking sites are online platforms where individuals can create personalized profiles, manage privacy settings to control who sees their content, and interact with others by sharing and viewing posts.

The first social networking site, SixDegrees, was founded in 1997, inspired by the idea that people are connected through six degrees of separation. This concept, known as the “small world hypothesis,” posits that anyone can be linked to another person in just six steps through their network of acquaintances, even virtually. Social media refers to applications that enable users to interact by creating and exchanging media, text, and making calls within a digital network. Examples of social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. In this study, the primary social media tools examined are private conversations, group chats, advertisements, media sharing, calls, likes, comments, and pages. Research has identified a connection between social media use and poor sleep patterns, depression, and anxiety (Meier & Reinecke, 2020).

Additionally, studies have highlighted the negative impact of excessive social media use on the mental health of young people (Duradoni et al., 2020).

## Methods

Social media, as an alternative communication tool, stands out from traditional media and allows users to freely fulfill their news needs whenever and wherever they want. These platforms allow for quick, objective assessment of news while also creating opportunities for free sharing of news not covered in traditional media. Social media, unlike traditional media, is a low-cost communication channel with a wide reach. Their ease of use and the possibility of rapid change have led to greater use of these platforms among young people. Young people, in particular, can achieve various goals at both societal and individual levels through social media. Therefore, young people have quickly mastered these platforms and used them intensively. Although social media offers various benefits, such as obtaining information, communication, and socialization, it also has negative effects.

We can classify the benefits of social media as follows:

**Rapid communication and information sharing:** Social media allows individuals to communicate with people anywhere in the world within seconds. For example, We Are Social and Hootsuite's Digital 2024 report highlights that social media platforms are among the most widely used tools for communication (Digital 2024 Report, 2024). This feature has important functions, especially in disaster situations, such as emergency response and coordination.

**Access to information and contribution to education:** Social media enables students and teachers to quickly access educational materials. A study by Ellison et al. (2007) highlighted the educational benefits of social networks, stating that they promote information sharing and collaboration among students (Ellison et al., 2007). In addition, these platforms are effective tools for learning about current events worldwide.

**Social assistance and solidarity:** Social media also acts as a platform for mutual assistance and solidarity. UNICEF's report "Children in a Digital World" states that donation campaigns carried out through social media strengthen the sense of mutual assistance among young people (UNICEF, 2025). For example, the rapid provision of urgently needed materials after natural disasters clearly demonstrates social media's role in this function.

**Self-expression and freedom:** Boyd (2014) argues that social media offers young people a space to express themselves more freely. These platforms let users share ideas and artwork, yet this freedom is still limited. Social media, now part of daily life, can positively impact access to information, communication, and socialization. It also supports education and training, especially among youth. Finally, social media can foster empathy, compassion, cooperation, and solidarity.

However, these benefits should be utilized deliberately and responsibly. Although social media provides distinct advantages, improper usage can significantly harm young people. The harms of social media can be categorized as follows: **Adverse effects on personality development:** excessive social media use can stunt personality development in young people. Danah Boyd's study "It's Complicated" observes that young individuals often explore alternate identities on social media, which detracts from authentic personality development (Boyd, 2014).

**Loss of privacy:** One significant disadvantage of social media is the loss of privacy. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) emphasize that young people's tendency to share personal information on social media creates a platform for malicious actors to misuse it (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). This situation poses a threat to both personal safety and psychological health. **Information pollution and misdirection:** The rapid spread of misinformation through social media creates a toxic environment. Reports from the Pew Research Center show that a large proportion of users are exposed to unverified information, which negatively affects people's thinking processes. This can lead to misdirection, especially in young people's decision-making. **Reversal of socialization:** Although social media is seen as a tool for socialization, its excessive use can isolate individuals. Turkle (2011), in his book "Alone Together," states that social media encourages virtual relationships rather than face-to-face ones, which can lead individuals to become antisocial (Turkle, 2011).

Popularity and imitative behavior: young people may distance themselves from themselves to be popular on social media. They may start to doubt their own worth by taking the users they follow as examples. This situation may cause individuals to shape themselves to meet others' expectations. Social media plays an undeniable role in our lives. Its benefits can be maximized, and its harms minimized only through conscious use. This requires parents and educators to take significant responsibility for how young people use social media. To effectively address related challenges, it is crucial to offer comprehensive guidance, provide digital literacy training, and establish time limits for use. The widespread use of social media makes it necessary to consider both its positive and negative aspects. The guidance of parents and educators is very important for young people to use social media consciously. Controlled and balanced use can ensure that young people benefit from its positive aspects while protecting them from its negative effects. Social media, which presents an attractive world for young people who encounter both positive and negative experiences, can have negative effects when used excessively. Social media addiction is also among these harms. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) state that the use of social media can create addiction in individuals, especially during adolescence (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). This addiction is observed in young people with a desire to be constantly online and a tendency to increase the time they spend on social media. Social media addiction can reduce academic performance, disrupt sleep patterns, and distract young people from their daily lives. Dopamine release from instant feedback—such as likes, comments, and shares—encourages young people to stay in this cycle. The design features of social media platforms contribute to this addiction. For example, Boyd (2014) states that social media applications are deliberately created to increase user time spent on them (Boyd, 2014). As a result, young people may disconnect from real-world relationships and create idealized virtual identities. Loneliness, depression, and anxiety are psychological problems that social media addiction can intensify.

Researchers have found that social media influencers significantly harm the mental health of social media users by presenting unrealistic standards and lifestyles (Li et al., 2021). Advertisements are the core of most social networking platforms, and users have to accept them alongside their digital social lives. Advertisements shape young people's psychology and opinions on these platforms because they reach large audiences (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022). An advertisement depicting a muscular person may depress a social media user who lacks similar body features. Similarly, advertisements featuring tall girls may have a negative psychological impact on young girls due to social projection.

## Results

The sharp rise in social media use has contributed to a significant increase in social media addiction and mental health challenges among young people. This strong correlation often diminishes motivation to seek psychological support, causing addiction severity to worsen. Analyses of the psychological and social effects of social media use across various categories have consistently found negative outcomes for young people's mental health. Symptoms such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem have become increasingly prominent. Young people often consult psychologists for academic failure, disrupted relationships with family and friends, and mood instability. Most do not seek help explicitly for "social media addiction." Instead, they present with symptoms that are indirectly related. When asked, "What psychological problems arise in young people who use social media more?", data indicated more than depression and low self-esteem. It also revealed diminished self-perception compared to idealized online portrayals, heightened anxiety, loneliness, social isolation, experiences of peer violence, attention deficit disorder, and sleep disturbances. The question "Does the frequency and duration of social media use affect the psychological health of young people?" shows that as the duration of social media use increases, so do psychological health problems. According to the DSM-5 addiction criteria, the risk of developing addiction increases with the duration of social media use. Attention deficit, stress, depression, and social anxiety disorders are more commonly observed in young people who spend a long time on social media. It has been observed that social media reduces academic performance and causes sleep

disorders. The idealized lives shared on social media platforms lead individuals to inadequately evaluate their own lives and to reduce their self-esteem. Indicators such as the number of likes and followers directly affect people's mood, and depression tendencies increase due to popularity anxiety. Negative comments, isolation, and threats made on social media platforms can cause young individuals to lose self-confidence and psychological trauma. Victims of cyberbullying experience problems such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation due to the pressures they are exposed to on social media. The extended family's involvement significantly shapes recovery for individuals facing mental health challenges in many cultural groups.

In low- and middle-income countries, the lack of family support can lead to the individual being completely neglected, and there may be a lack of social support from the state, which acts as a safety net (Gopalkrishnan & Babacan, 2015). In this case, social media platforms pose a greater risk for adolescents.

### Discussion

Analysis of the data suggests social media offers advantages but also poses risks when used irresponsibly. The rapid flow of information on these platforms makes it difficult to monitor and control misinformation, which can compromise privacy and threaten personal data security. The lack of clear sources for shared content can also lead to the spread of inaccurate information. Research shows a strong link between university students' social media use on phones and increased feelings of loneliness and depression. Habitually checking social media often reduces face-to-face interaction and leads to greater focus on digital devices, encouraging social withdrawal and weakening relationships. This pattern can raise levels of depression and loneliness. It is important to recognize individual differences: no single amount of time, frequency of checking, or number of posts defines unhealthy use. The key factors are how social media affects mood, daily functioning, and the underlying motivations for engagement. For instance, problematic social media use can lead individuals to neglect face-to-face relationships or become distracted from work or academic responsibilities. It may also evoke negative emotions such as jealousy, anger, or depression. It is advisable to reassess social media habits if usage patterns emerge, such as turning to social media when feeling bored or lonely, or posting content with the intent to provoke jealousy or distress in others.

Social media use has been linked to increased rates of anxiety and depression, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The addictive qualities of social media stem from its activation of the brain's reward center through the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasurable activities. Receiving "likes" or positive feedback on posts provides a temporary dopamine boost, reinforcing social media engagement. Conversely, the absence of such approval can negatively impact self-esteem and perceived self-worth. Additionally, social media emphasizes physical appearance. Platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok offer filters that allow users to alter their images. While filters can be entertaining, the ease of modifying physical features can foster unrealistic standards and false perceptions. Prolonged exposure to digitally altered images may contribute to dissatisfaction with one's own appearance.

Checking in on others on social media can give the impression that they are having more fun or living a better life. Social media is often called a "highlight reel," which reflects the best parts of a user's life. However, having access to others' highlight reels can increase feelings of dissatisfaction with our own daily lives. This affects self-esteem, causes anxiety, and makes us want to use social media more. Future research on the potential effects of online social networks on mental health can be expected to face a number of challenges. First, many authors who have investigated this issue so far have used a cross-sectional research design, followed by correlational analysis. Correlation does not necessarily imply causation. For example, Facebook use may be related to lower self-esteem, but it could also mean that people with low self-esteem use Facebook more frequently. In other words, it is very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to conclude which variable is the cause and which is the effect. Finally, data from experimental studies will allow us to draw precise conclusions about this relationship. It should be noted that most research on social networks and mental health has been

conducted with healthy populations (e.g., high school, university, and adolescent students). For example, when it is said that “time spent on social networks is associated with depression,” the authors usually mean that this time is associated with physiological mood (measured by various psychological scales) rather than depression. To our knowledge, no such study has been conducted among psychiatric patients. Therefore, the possible relationship between social networks and mental health problems can only be discussed in terms of normal physiological (psychophysiological) variations in mental functions.

### Conclusion

There are many AI tools available. We know that elementary school children use AI to do their homework. We know a few people's phone numbers by heart. We don't even need to remember the parking space number when we park our car. People write it down in the program, thinking they might forget. In short, all this tells us that we no longer think about even the simplest tasks, that we are not using our brains – a miraculous organ whose secrets are still being discovered - and that our skills are atrophying. All this poses serious risks not only for children and young people, but also for adults.

On the other hand, digital technologies like the internet and social media make life easier. Thus, completely distancing oneself from the digital world is not a feasible solution to avoid risks. Instead, we can learn about the long-term effects of digital technology and social media, and regulate their use so they do not dominate our lives. Families have a key responsibility, especially for young people. If children and young people lack healthy relationships and communication with their families, they cannot meet their needs for belonging and visibility.

However, social media offers very easy ways to meet these needs. Young people may join dangerous groups to which they feel they belong to satisfy emotional needs that cannot be met through family relationships, or they may get involved in meaningless activities to avoid being seen. Considering how planned and organized these dangerous groups are, one can imagine how easily these young people can become their captors. Therefore, families should make their children feel loved and supported, build their children's confidence, talk to them, and help their children engage in meaningful activities.

As digital mental health advances, the broad reach, easy access, and popularity of social media can provide evidence-based treatment and support for those needing mental health services or experiencing mental illness. To close global mental health gaps, researchers and clinical psychologists must work together to weigh the benefits and risks of social media use.

### Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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