

The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

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1 Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become a fundamental part of everyday life, influencing how individuals connect, share, and consume information. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok enable users to engage in social networking, self-expression, and virtual communities. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as keeping people connected across distances, providing a platform for marginalized voices, and fostering professional networking, there is growing concern about its impact on mental health. This article explores the complex relationship between social media use and mental health, focusing on both the potential benefits and adverse effects, while also considering the underlying mechanisms and moderating factors that influence this relationship.

2 The Growth of Social Media Use

Social media has experienced exponential growth since the early 2000s, with billions of active users worldwide. According to recent statistics, as of 2023, there are approximately 4.9 billion active social media users, accounting for more than half of the global population [1]. The rise of smartphones and ubiquitous internet access has fueled this growth, making social media accessible at any time and from anywhere. Adolescents and young adults, in particular, are heavy users, with studies showing that 90% of teens use social media regularly [2].

This widespread use has led to the integration of social media into nearly all aspects of life, including education, entertainment, politics, and social interaction. While these platforms provide opportunities for connection and communication, they also expose users to a variety of psychological and emotional experiences, both positive and negative.

3 The Positive Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health

Social media is not inherently harmful; it offers a range of positive mental health benefits for many users. For example, these platforms can foster social connectedness, provide support networks, and enable self-expression, all of which contribute to improved mental well-being.

3.1 Social Support and Connection

One of the primary benefits of social media is its ability to foster social connection. Studies have shown that social support is a critical factor in promoting mental health and well-being. Social media provides a platform for individuals to maintain relationships, especially when face-to-face interaction is not possible [3]. It allows users to communicate with family and friends, build new relationships, and join online communities centered around shared interests or identities.

Online support groups, particularly for individuals dealing with mental health issues, chronic illnesses, or marginalized identities, have proven to be highly beneficial. These platforms can offer a sense of belonging, reduce feelings of isolation, and provide a space to share personal experiences and seek advice from others who are facing similar challenges [4].

3.2 Self-Expression and Identity Exploration

Social media also provides users with a space for self-expression and identity exploration, particularly for adolescents and young adults. Research suggests that social media can be a valuable tool for exploring identity, developing a sense of self, and finding one's voice in a supportive community [10]. By sharing personal stories, photos, and thoughts, users can engage in creative self-expression and build their online persona, which may contribute to a greater sense of self-esteem and empowerment.

For marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals or people with disabilities, social media can serve as a safe space to express their identities without fear of judgment. Online communities offer validation, support, and representation that may be lacking in their offline environments, helping to bolster mental health and resilience [4].

3.3 Mental Health Awareness and Advocacy

Another positive impact of social media is its role in raising awareness about mental health issues. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become powerful tools for mental health advocacy, providing a space for individuals and organizations to share information, break stigmas, and promote mental health resources [2]. Mental health professionals, influencers, and advocacy groups use these platforms to disseminate information on coping strategies, self-care tips, and crisis intervention resources, helping users to better understand and manage their mental health. The #MentalHealthAwareness movement, for instance, has gained significant traction on social media, encouraging open dialogue about mental health issues and helping to normalize discussions around depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. This greater visibility can lead to earlier recognition of symptoms, increased help-seeking behavior, and reduced stigma, which are critical factors in addressing mental health concerns [2].

4 Negative Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health

While social media can have positive effects, growing evidence suggests that it can also negatively impact mental health, particularly when used excessively or in ways that promote

harmful social comparisons, cyberbullying, or exposure to harmful content.

4.1 Social Comparison and Envy

One of the most commonly discussed negative effects of social media is the phenomenon of social comparison, where users compare their lives to the curated, often idealized images of others [5]. Social media platforms, particularly image-based ones like Instagram, are rife with opportunities for comparison, as users are constantly exposed to pictures of others' successes, beauty, and lifestyles. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and low self-esteem.

Research has shown that social comparison on social media is associated with negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction [5]. Individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to engage in upward social comparisons (comparing themselves to those they perceive as better off), which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and negatively impact their self-worth [5].

4.2 Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying and online harassment are significant concerns related to social media use, particularly for adolescents and young adults. The anonymity provided by the internet can embolden individuals to engage in harmful behaviors that they might not exhibit in face-to-face interactions [6]. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including name-calling, spreading rumors, and sharing harmful or private content about someone without their consent.

The mental health consequences of cyberbullying are severe and well-documented. Victims of cyberbullying often experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation [6]. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time, following the victim into their home through their digital devices, which can make it even more pervasive and damaging [6].

4.3 Addiction and Problematic Use

Another negative impact of social media on mental health is the potential for addiction and problematic use. Social media platforms are designed to be engaging, using algorithms that promote constant interaction and keep users hooked through notifications, likes, and shares [7]. This design can lead to compulsive behaviors and excessive use, which has been linked to poor mental health outcomes.

Studies have shown that excessive social media use is associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances [7]. Individuals who spend an inordinate amount of time on social media may experience a sense of disconnection from their offline lives, contributing to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Additionally, social media addiction can interfere with daily responsibilities, academic performance, and real-world social relationships, further exacerbating mental health problems [7].

4.4 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

The fear of missing out (FOMO) is another negative consequence of social media use, particularly among younger users. FOMO refers to the anxiety or stress that arises from the belief that others are having more rewarding experiences than oneself [8]. Social media amplifies FOMO by providing constant updates on friends' activities, vacations, social gatherings, and achievements, creating a sense of exclusion or inferiority for those who feel left out.

Research has found that FOMO is associated with negative mental health outcomes, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress [8]. Individuals who experience FOMO are more likely to engage in unhealthy social media habits, such as checking their accounts frequently or comparing themselves to others, further exacerbating feelings of inadequacy [8].

5 Mechanisms Linking Social Media Use and Mental Health

The relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and influenced by a variety of moderating factors, including the nature of social media use, individual differences, and the social context in which the platforms are used.

5.1 Passive vs. Active Use

One important factor is the distinction between passive and active social media use. Passive use involves scrolling through feeds, consuming content without interacting, and engaging in social comparisons. Research suggests that passive use is more strongly associated with negative mental health outcomes, as it can lead to feelings of envy, inadequacy, and isolation [9].

In contrast, active use involves engaging with others by commenting, sharing, and participating in conversations. Active social media use is generally linked to more positive outcomes, such as increased social connectedness and perceived social support [9]. This suggests that how individuals use social media—whether passively or actively—plays a significant role in determining its impact on mental health.

5.2 Individual Differences

Not everyone experiences social media in the same way, and individual differences play a key role in moderating its effects on mental health. For example, individuals with preexisting mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, such as cyberbullying or social comparison [3]. Conversely, individuals with high levels of self-esteem or emotional resilience may be better equipped to navigate the challenges of social media without experiencing significant mental health consequences.

Age and developmental stage also influence how social media affects mental health. Adolescents, who are in the process of developing their identities and are more susceptible to

peer influence, may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison and cyberbullying [4].

5.3 Cultural and Social Context

Cultural and social factors also shape the relationship between social media use and mental health. For example, cultural norms around body image, success, and self-presentation can influence the degree to which individuals engage in social comparison on platforms like Instagram [10]. Additionally, the presence or absence of supportive online communities can affect how social media impacts mental health. In cultures where mental health stigma is high, online communities may provide a valuable source of support and validation, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting help-seeking behavior [10].

6 Interventions and Strategies for Mitigating the Negative Impact of Social Media

Given the potential risks associated with social media use, it is important to explore interventions and strategies to mitigate its negative impact on mental health. These strategies can be implemented at both the individual and societal levels.

6.1 Digital Literacy and Healthy Social Media Use

One of the most effective ways to reduce the negative impact of social media is through education and digital literacy. Teaching individuals, especially adolescents and young adults, how to use social media in a healthy and mindful way can help mitigate its negative effects [9]. This includes educating users about the dangers of social comparison, the importance of curating a positive online environment, and strategies for managing time spent on social media.

6.2 Social Media Platforms' Responsibility

Social media companies also have a responsibility to address the mental health impact of their platforms. This can include developing features that promote positive mental health, such as tools for limiting screen time, providing resources for individuals experiencing mental health crises, and implementing algorithms that prioritize well-being over engagement [1].

For example, Instagram has introduced features that allow users to hide likes, reducing the emphasis on social validation and comparison. Similarly, platforms can implement stricter measures to combat cyberbullying and harassment, including better reporting systems and algorithms that detect harmful content [1].

6.3 Professional Mental Health Support

For individuals who experience significant mental health challenges related to social media use, seeking professional help may be necessary. Therapists and mental health professionals

can work with individuals to develop coping strategies for managing social media use, address underlying issues such as low self-esteem or anxiety, and provide support for those dealing with cyberbullying or online harassment [2].

7 Conclusion

Social media is a double-edged sword when it comes to mental health. While it offers numerous benefits, such as fostering social connection, providing support networks, and raising awareness about mental health issues, it also poses risks, including social comparison, cyberbullying, and addiction. The relationship between social media use and mental health is complex, influenced by individual differences, the nature of social media use, and the social context in which it occurs.

To mitigate the negative impact of social media, individuals must be educated about healthy social media habits, social media platforms must take responsibility for promoting well-being, and mental health professionals must be prepared to support those who are adversely affected. As social media continues to evolve, it is crucial to strike a balance between leveraging its positive aspects and addressing its potential harms, ultimately promoting a healthier digital environment for all users.

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8 Methodolgy

I chose **ChatGPT 4o** as the model by which I would generate the academic article.

To decide on the topic I prompted ChatGPT for suggestions;

‘Suggest topics for an academic article.’

From the topics ChatGPT suggested, I chose ‘The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health’.

In a new context I would prompt ChatGPT with the following,

‘Write a 2000 word long academic article on the topic of The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health.’

ChatGPT produced the article, but it had neglected to provide me with citations, so I asked for them to be added.

‘Add references to your claims.’

The article now complete, I began to read through it using its citations as a guide.

9 Discussion

Though not without error, the article is coherent and void of egregious inaccuracies.

ChatGPT appears to have struggled with proper citation. E.g., it confusing Statista’s statistics with Pew Research’s ‘Social Media use in 2018’ and vice versa. This issue seems to be limited to those two references, which I think is interesting.

A more egregious error can be found in its imprecise language, though this only occurred once in the article.

I spent a lot of time vetting its sources and reading the studies. With many of these studies being quite large, it’s likely I will have missed something – but I’m quite content with what I managed to find.

Overall, I’m impressed with ChatGPT’s ability to generate an article. It’s convincing and I wouldn’t bat an eye were this presented to me as the work of any other person in the field.

10 Corrections & Clarifications

10.1 Erroneous Citation of Adolescents' Social Media Usage

The statement, “Adolescents and young adults, in particular, are heavy users, with studies showing that 90% of teens use social media regularly.” incorrectly refers to ‘teens’ and ‘adolescents’. The cited study did not include individuals below 18 years of age, making this attribution erroneous. The report accurately states that 88% of ‘young adults’, aged 18-29, use social media, so the claim is not entirely fictitious, but the language is imprecise and misleading.

There is also a more recent version of this study: Pew Research’s 2021 study on social media usage: Social Media Use in 2021.

10.2 Incorrect Attribution Regarding Social Media’s Role in Relationships

The claim, “Social media provides a platform for individuals to maintain relationships, especially when face-to-face interaction is not possible”, misrepresents the cited study. The report focuses on the ‘cost of caring’, examining how social media exposes users to stressors from friends’ lives. However, a relevant earlier study does discuss the ability of Facebook to maintain and revive relationships: Rainie, L., Purcell, K., Goulet, L. S., & Hampton, K. N. (2011). *Social networking sites and our lives*.

The study “Teens, Technologies and Friends” would have been a more appropriate citation, as it covers these topics in greater detail.

10.3 Misattributed Report on Mental Health Advocacy

The sentence, “Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become powerful tools for mental health advocacy, providing a space for individuals and organizations to share information, break stigmas, and promote mental health resources ...” incorrectly cites the report. The cited work only describes social media usage demographics, not its role in mental health advocacy.

A more fitting reference would be the report “Teens, Technologies and Friends”, which aligns better with the claim about advocacy on social platforms.

10.4 Exaggeration of Mental Health Professionals’ Role on Social Media

In the statement, “Mental health professionals, influencers, and advocacy groups use these platforms to disseminate information on coping strategies, self-care tips, and crisis intervention resources, helping users to better understand and manage their mental health ...”, there is an overstatement regarding mental health professionals involvement. Many professionals are cautious about interacting on social media due to concerns about maintaining appropriate boundaries with non-patients. While the claim is not incorrect, it may overstate their role.

10.5 Incorrect Inference About Vulnerability to Social Media’s Negative Effects

The statement, “Individuals with preexisting mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, such as cyberbullying or social comparison”, is not explicitly supported by the cited study. While this may be inferred, the report primarily focuses on the awareness of major life events among social ties rather than the impact on individuals with preexisting mental health conditions.

10.6 Misattributions in Section 6.2

All citations in Section 6.2 are misattributed. For example, the statistics from Statista do not describe how algorithms can mitigate mental health crises. Furthermore, the discussion of Instagram’s features to hide likes is not found in the cited reports. Nevertheless, the statement about Instagram implementing such features in the app’s privacy settings is accurate.

10.7 Incorrect Citation in Section 6.3

The final citation in Section 6.3 is also erroneous, as the referenced report does not discuss strategies for addressing mental health issues.s