

The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

The Double-Edged Interface: Social Media's Impact on Connection, Mental Health, and Vulnerable Youth

Abstract

Social media platforms have become deeply rooted in everyday life across the globe, presenting both significant benefits and notable risks. This article draws on recent research to examine this complex duality. On the positive side, social media helps individuals maintain relationships and build social networks that provide emotional and practical support, fostering greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, and community involvement (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009). However, these platforms are designed around dopamine-driven reward systems and unpredictable feedback mechanisms, such as likes and comments which can promote addictive behaviors and fuel harmful comparisons with others.

The psychological consequences are significant such as; increased rates of anxiety, depression, poor sleep, and cyberbullying (reported by 44% of U.S. users; UC Davis Health, 2024) and negative body image—particularly among adolescents. Emerging evidence links excessive use with greater susceptibility to psychiatric conditions marked by distorted perceptions of reality, including narcissistic traits, paranoia, body dysmorphia and anorexia nervosa (Crespi & Yang, 2025). A recent study of health sciences students showed that those who spent more than three hours a day on social media faced sharply increase risks of anxiety (Adjusted Odds Ratio [AOR] = 22.2), social isolation (AOR = 7.4) and mental exhaustion (AOR = 4.7) (Osman, 2025). These findings highlight the urgent need for full scale strategies ranging from personal boundary-setting to ethical design practices and institutional efforts to support digital well-being, particularly for at-risk youth.

Introduction

From the moment people wake up to their last scroll at night, social media has become a regular and normal part of modern life. These platforms—websites and apps that allow people to share

content and connect using the internet and mobile devices are now everywhere (Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2020). In the United States, about 70% of adults and 81% of teenagers use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2018; McLean Hospital, 2024). Usage around the world is also high. For example, in Saudi Arabia, 82.3% of the population about 29.5 million people actively use social media. Among young people there, usage is even higher—almost 98.43% (Beyari, 2023).

For younger generations, social media is more than just a hobby. It's a major space for entertainment, exploring their identity, connecting with others, and keeping up relationships (Ifinedo, 2016). Supporters of social media believe it helps people stay in touch across long distances and build what's called "social capital"—the trust, help, and support people get through their relationships. This can help make up for less face-to-face contact and may even boost self-esteem and involvement in the community (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009).

However, behind the easy connections and fun of social media, experts are raising serious concerns. More and more studies show that the way these platforms are built and how often people use them can seriously harm mental health. Many features are designed to keep users hooked by triggering the brain's reward system. This causes dopamine to be released, which can lead to compulsive, almost addictive use (McLean Hospital, 2024).

Seeing constant images of "perfect" lives can make people feel bad about themselves. It often leads to unhealthy comparisons, more anxiety and depression and serious body image issues. Even more worrying is the fact that using a lot of social media can increase the risk of mental health conditions that affect how people see reality like body dysmorphia or paranoid thoughts (Crespi & Yang, 2025).

This is particularly troubling in places where mental health problems are already common. For example, in Saudi Arabia, 21% of people suffer from depression and 17.5% from anxiety (AlHadi, 2021). Studies also show that university students who use social media too much are 22 times more likely to have anxiety (Osman, 2025). In the U.S., 44% of internet users have faced online

harassment (UC Davis Health, 2024). All these facts show how serious the risks of heavy social media use can be.

This article brings together recent research to explore the two sides of social media—its positive role in helping people stay connected and get mental health support, and its serious negative effects on mental well-being. It looks closely at how these effects impact teenagers and young adults the most. Understanding this complex mix is important for everyone including individuals, families, teachers, and even those who design these platforms—so they can use social media in a safer and more helpful way while reducing its harmful effects.

Literature Review

The Connecting Power: Building Social Capital and Support

One of the highlighted advantage of social media is its ability to make up for the loss of face-to-face interaction. Without regular in-person contact, people's relationships, health, and even economic progress can suffer (Antoci et al., 2015; Bekalu et al., 2019). Social media helps by connecting people across long distances and different time zones. It allows users to stay in touch with current friends, reconnect with old ones, and even strengthen real-life relationships (Hall et al., 2018; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008).

These connections help build what's known as “social capital.” This means the emotional and practical support we get from our relationships like advice, useful information, or a helping hand (Viswanath, 2008). Strong social networks build trust and cooperation, and they’re linked to better mental and physical health (Ellison et al., 2007; Nabi et al., 2013; Nieminen et al., 2013).

Researchers have identified different types of social capital that are especially relevant when talking about social media:

There are three main types of social capital found in social media use:

Bonding Capital: Close relationships with family or trusted friends that offer deep emotional support.

Bridging Capital: Connections with people from different backgrounds, it helps users access new ideas, opportunities, and resources.

Maintained Capital: Staying connected with friends or relatives over long distances and different time zones.

All three forms of social capital have been linked to higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007; Nabi et al., 2013).

Platforms like Facebook are especially helpful in building and maintaining relationships. Research shows that they help users—such as college students—stay connected with their social groups even after they move away. This type of support, called "maintained capital," is especially helpful for people who start out with lower self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008). People who use social media more often also tend to report higher life satisfaction, greater trust in others, and more involvement in their communities (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Social media also helps users meet a wide range of people, which increases diversity in their social networks (network heterogeneity). This variety can strengthen both social capital and overall well-being (Bekalu et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2017).

Beyond these common benefits, studies reveal that social media can be very helpful for people dealing with mental health issues. It helps them connect with others, find peer support, and even reach mental health services (Naslund et al., 2016). Since social media is available 24/7, it can be a lifeline for people who struggle with face-to-face conversations such as those living with schizophrenia (Miller et al., 2015; Torous & Keshavan, 2016). Online chats offer more control and privacy. There's no need to read body language or respond right away, which can make conversations feel less stressful (Docherty et al., 1996; Indian & Grieve, 2014). As a result, social media can help reduce feelings of loneliness and build stronger social connections (Brusilovskiy et al., 2016; Gowen et al., 2012).

Social media platforms give people spaces to share their personal experiences, talk about their feelings, ask for advice, and learn ways to cope from others going through similar situations. Many people use platforms like YouTube and Twitter to find this kind of peer-to-peer mental health

support, which helps them fight feelings of isolation through shared understanding (Berry et al., 2017; Chang, 2009; Naslund et al., 2014).

Some mental health programs are now including social media features to support users. For example, platforms like HORYZONS and the PRIME app help users set personal goals, track their progress, and feel supported by a community (Alvarez-Jimenez et al., 2013; Schlosser et al., 2016). Another program, PeerFIT, connects real-life support groups with private Facebook groups to help people stay connected and motivated (Aschbrenner et al., 2016a; Naslund et al., 2018). These programs also show promise in helping people feel better and remain engaged in their mental health journey.

Overall, social media has great potential to improve mental health by making it easier for people to connect, get peer support, and access services. However, experts agree that more research is still needed to fully understand its impact (Alvarez-Jimenez et al., 2019; Biagianti et al., 2018).

Teenagers are using internet more and more to look up health information in private. Trusted websites give helpful advice on issues like stress and depression. For teens with long-term illnesses, the internet helps them feel less alone by connecting them with others facing similar challenges (Kaur & Bashir, 2015). Mobile technology also supports them in managing their medicine, understanding their health better, and attending doctor's appointments on time. Social media apps add even more support by helping teens learn about health and even contact doctors (Kaur & Bashir, 2015).

However, it's important for parents to guide their children in using these tools. They can help teens choose reliable sources, understand what they read, and avoid feeling overwhelmed, which encourages healthy conversations (Kaur & Bashir, 2015).

Social media also helps in education. Students use platforms like Facebook to work on homework together, and schools use tools like blogs to help students improve writing skills and express creativity (Kaur & Bashir, 2015).

The Dark Side: Addiction, Comparison, and Mental Health Risks

Even though social media has many benefits, its design also brings serious risks. These platforms are made to be highly engaging, triggering the brain's reward system and releasing dopamine just like what happens with natural rewards. But overusing social media too much is strongly linked to anxiety, depression, and even physical health problems (McLean Hospital, 2024). Dr. Jacqueline Sperling (as cited in McLean Hospital, 2024) explains that the biggest problem is the unpredictable reward system—like getting likes or comments which makes people keep checking their phones, similar to how gambling works. This leads to unhealthy, compulsive habits, even when it causes stress or harm.

A big issue is how people compare themselves to others online. Social media often shows only the best parts of people's lives like: vacations, parties, achievements. Seeing these “highlight reels” can make others feel left out or inadequate. If someone sees a post from an event they weren't invited to, it can cause real emotional pain. People can also feel upset or anxious if their own posts don't get attention (McLean Hospital, 2024). This fear of missing out (FOMO) adds to the problem.

The term “Facebook depression” was mentioned by O’Keeffe et al. (2011) to describe how intense social media use might lead to depressive symptoms in teens. While some experts argue that social media may not directly cause depression (Grohol, 2011), but later studies found a clear link between excessive use and increased risk of depression (Jelenchick et al., 2013; Pantic et al., 2012). Depression is a serious issue—according to a 2011 survey, 30% of U.S. college students experienced depression so severe that it affected their daily lives (American College Health Association, 2012). Depression can hurt academic performance and increase the risk of substance use and suicide (Cranford et al., 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Garlow et al., 2008; Weitzman, 2004).

Social media also affects attention and emotions. Studies show that it can shorten attention span, reduce deep thinking, increase stress and fatigue, and cause emotional numbness (Kaur & Bashir, 2015). Constantly switching between tasks like scrolling, clicking, and responding can make it

harder to focus, and may even lead to ADHD-like symptoms. Over time, this weakens learning ability and causes mental exhaustion. Many users also avoid dealing with their feelings by scrolling through content, which blocks healthy emotional processing (Kaur & Bashir, 2015).

Synthesis of Findings

Documented Mental Health Consequences

Research shows that using social media too much can seriously harm one's mental health. Here are some of the main problems:

Many studies show that social media affects sleep. People who scroll late into the night often get poor-quality or less sleep. This can lead to depression, trouble remembering things, and lower grades. Poor sleep can also cause physical problems like headaches, nausea, and muscle pain (McLean Hospital, 2024).

Social media is full of filtered and edited photos. This makes it hard especially for teenagers to know what's real and what's not. As a result, some people start to feel unhappy with how they look. This can lead to body dysmorphia (when someone sees their body in a distorted way) and false beauty standards. Some adults even get cosmetic surgery to look like their filtered selfies (McLean Hospital, 2024).

Online harassment is also a big concern. In 2020, 44% of internet users in the U.S. said they had been bullied online (UC Davis Health, 2024). Harmful messages, threats, or mean comments can spread quickly on social media and cause serious emotional pain, leading to low self-esteem and sadness.

Heavy social media use is connected to serious mental health conditions. These include narcissistic traits (thinking very highly of oneself), paranoid thoughts (feeling like others are against you), body dysmorphia, and eating disorders like anorexia nervosa. Experts believe this happens because social media focuses so much on appearance, thoughts, and attention—without real-world interaction. This can make it harder for people to stay connected to reality, especially those already at risk (Crespi & Yang, 2025).

A recent study by Osman (2025) looked at health sciences students and found that 84.7% used social media for more than 3 hours every day. The study found they had much higher chances of experiencing serious mental health problems:

Sleep problems: 2.7 times more likely (AOR = 2.7, 95% CI [1.04, 7.04])

Mental exhaustion: 4.7 times more likely (AOR = 4.7, 95% CI [1.80, 12.46])

Social isolation: 7.4 times more likely (AOR = 7.4, 95% CI [1.62, 33.35])

Anxiety: 22.2 times more likely (AOR = 22.2, 95% CI [3.73, 131.70])

These numbers show that using social media excessively can be very dangerous, especially for young people.

Persistent Motivations despite Risks

Even though social media is known to negatively impact mental health in various ways, many people—especially those who already have mental health challenges—continue using it regularly. One of the main reasons is the deep human need for connection and belonging. Social media provides an accessible way for individuals to reach out, find support, and interact with others who are going through similar emotional or psychological struggles. This sense of shared experience can ease feelings of loneliness and make people feel understood and supported (Bucci et al., 2019; Highton-Williamson et al., 2015; Naslund et al., 2016, 2020).

Another important reason people stay on social media is the opportunity for self-expression and identity exploration. Many users feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions online than in real life, especially in spaces where they feel less judged. For young people or those dealing with stigma mind set around mental illness, this can be an empowering outlet. Social media also gives them access to a wide range of mental health resources, such as coping strategies, expert advice, and motivational content that can help them manage symptoms or learn more about their condition (Batterham & Calear, 2017; Highton-Williamson et al., 2015; Naslund et al., 2016, 2017).

Additionally, for some individuals, scrolling through social media acts as a temporary escape, a way to distract themselves from overwhelming emotions, anxiety, or negative thoughts. While this can sometimes lead to overuse, it also explains why people continue engaging with platforms even when they're aware of the risks.

In short, social media meets certain emotional and psychological needs like connection, understanding, comfort, and distraction that many people, especially those with mental health challenges, may not easily find elsewhere. This helps explain why it continues to be used despite its well-documented drawbacks

Teens: Heightened Vulnerability

Teenagers are especially at risk when it comes to the harmful effects of social media, and this vulnerability stems from both psychological and biological factors. During adolescence, the brain is still in a critical stage of development, particularly the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for important functions like decision-making, impulse control, and understanding consequences. Because this area is not fully developed, teenagers are more likely to act impulsively online. This means they may post pictures, comments, or messages without fully thinking through the possible long-term outcomes or the harm they might cause themselves or others (McLean Hospital, 2024).

Emotional sensitivity is also heightened during the teen years, increasing young people's vulnerability to the emotional impact of social media interactions. Girls, especially, often face higher exposure to a form of emotional harm known as relational aggression. This includes being left out of group chats, seeing pictures of social gatherings they weren't invited to, or receiving unkind or mocking comments online. Such incidents can lead to feelings of rejection, embarrassment, and deep emotional distress. What makes this even more difficult is the constant accessibility of social media—teens can see these painful interactions unfold in real time and revisit them over and over, making the emotional wound feel fresh repeatedly (McLean Hospital, 2024).

In some regions, this risk is alarmingly widespread. For instance, in Hong Kong, social media use among teens is nearly universal. Research shows that around 93% of secondary school students in

the region have active profiles on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok. Among these teens, approximately 1 in 5 report being victims of cyberbullying, and nearly 4 in 10 have encountered sexually explicit or inappropriate content they did not want to see (Hall, 2025). These statistics are not only concerning but serve as a strong reminder of how widespread and serious the dangers of social media are for young people.

The adolescent years are a critical time for developing self-esteem, identity, and social belonging. When social media interactions become harmful, the emotional and psychological consequences can be long-lasting. Therefore, understanding and addressing these risks is essential—not just for teenagers themselves, but for parents, teachers, and policymakers responsible for protecting their well-being in the digital age.

Discussion: Navigating the Paradox

Social media presents a striking contradiction: the same tools designed to help us feel connected can also leave us feeling lonely and stressed. This happens because the way these platforms are built interacts with how our minds work. Features like being available all the time, using algorithms to show us certain content, and allowing anonymous use can offer real benefits—such as ongoing support, stronger relationships, and safe spaces for self-expression. But these same features also encourage unhealthy habits like constantly checking for updates, comparing ourselves to others, and even becoming targets of online bullying.

The unpredictability of likes and comments makes social media addictive, much like gambling. While anonymity can help people express themselves freely—especially those in vulnerable groups—it also makes it easier for others to be cruel without facing consequences. Teenagers are particularly at risk because they are still learning how to manage emotions and make decisions, yet they crave peer approval and online attention. This combination makes them more likely to be hurt by social media.

The dangers are real and serious. For example, students who use social media heavily are 22 times more likely to experience anxiety and 7 times more likely to feel isolated (Osman, 2025). There's also growing concern about how heavy use might contribute to mental health disorders, like body dysmorphia or paranoid thinking (Crespi & Yang, 2025). But at the same time, social media helps

many people. Especially those with mental health issues feel less alone, share their experiences, and find helpful information or support (Naslund et al., 2020).

Because of this mix of harm and help, simply telling people to quit social media isn't the solution. Instead, we need thoughtful solutions that take both sides into account. This might include better digital education, platform design changes to reduce harm, and more mental health support both online and offline.

Conclusion

Social media is a double-edged sword. On one side, it helps people stay connected, build strong relationships, and feel supported especially those who might otherwise feel isolated. It can boost self-esteem, offer emotional support, and even improve access to mental health resources. But on the other side, it poses serious threats. Its addictive features, constant comparisons, and round-the-clock access can lead to sleep problems, anxiety, depression, and even more serious mental health conditions. For example, students who use it heavily are over 22 times more likely to suffer from anxiety (Osman, 2025).

These dangers especially for teens cannot be ignored. Small changes to social media platforms are not enough. We must accept that social media has both good and bad sides. Only by recognizing this can we create real solutions. What's needed is a strong, multi-layered response: better education, smarter design choices by tech companies, support from families and schools, and better mental health care. This way, we can enjoy the benefits of social media while protecting ourselves from its harms.

Recommendations

To reduce the mental health risks of social media, action is needed at multiple levels. On an individual level, users—especially students—should actively limit their daily time on social media, choose to follow uplifting and supportive content, use platforms with a clear purpose rather than aimlessly scrolling, and schedule regular breaks (digital detoxes) to protect sleep, mood, and focus (Osman, 2025). In educational institutions, schools and universities should integrate digital literacy and ethics into their curricula. This should include teaching students how to critically evaluate

online content, understand how algorithms work and influence them, behave responsibly online, prevent cyberbullying and recognize the impact of filters on body image (McLean Hospital, 2024). Schools should also establish clear Acceptable Use Policies and hold mandatory workshops on digital wellbeing and time management, especially during student orientation. In addition, mental health support services should be easily accessible and specifically designed to address the effects of social media (Osman, 2025). Lecturers and parents also play an important role. They should have open and non-judgmental conversations with their young children about their online experiences, help them build balanced daily routines that include offline activities like exercise and sleep, and model healthy digital behavior themselves such as avoiding screens during meals or not keeping phones by the bed. Finally, social media companies must step up and redesign platforms more ethically. This includes reducing addictive features by offering tools like user-controlled time limits, session reminders, and chronological (not algorithm-based) feeds, and by limiting unpredictable reward systems that keep users hooked (McLean Hospital, 2024). A combine effort from individuals, educators, families, and companies is necessary to protect mental health while keeping the benefits of digital connection. To further support healthy digital use, social media companies must also provide transparent user dashboards that show time spent online and patterns of interaction, helping users become more aware of their habits. They should mandate clear labeling of altered images, such as those edited with filters or AI enhancements, to reduce body image distortion. Anti-harassment tools must be significantly upgraded, with faster and more effective reporting and response systems to protect users from cyberbullying and abuse (UC Davis Health, 2024). On the research and policy level, governments and institutions should fund long-term and experimental studies that examine the causal links between social media and mental health across different populations. At the same time, regulations must be created to ensure platform transparency, protect user data, and enforce stronger protections for young users, such as age-appropriate design standards. Lastly, targeted interventions are crucial. These should include programs that combine mental health education with practical strategies such as cognitive-behavioral techniques to manage social comparison and FOMO and peer support networks tailored to high-risk groups like adolescents and heavy users. Together, these steps offer a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the harms of social media while preserving its potential to support connection and well-being.

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