

Influence of Social Media on Anxiety, Depression, and Loneliness: A Review

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Abstract

Social media is a daily tool for communication, entertainment, and information exchange for millions of individuals worldwide. However, worries regarding its possible detrimental effects on mental health have surfaced, especially about despair, anxiety, and loneliness. This study's goal was to examine the connection between mental health issues and social media use. It highlights the clear connection between elevated psychological discomfort—such as anxiety, depression symptoms, loneliness, and overuse of social media—and elevated levels of psychological discomfort. The study also examines significant factors including social comparison, FOMO, and online abuse that may aggravate feelings of anxiety and depression. A thorough search of the literature was conducted using a variety of resources, such as specialist academic databases, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Research has shown that social media usage among teenagers and young adults increases their vulnerability to mental health problems including cyberbullying and harassment, which worsens their psychological pain. In addition, prolonged use of screens disrupts sleep patterns, leading to mental fatigue, and the compulsive qualities of social media can diminish face-to-face interactions and intensify emotions of isolation. To successfully address the harmful effects of social media on mental health, it is important to understand usage patterns, individual differences, and the social media ecosystem. Fostering a balanced connection with social media requires interventions that enhance digital literacy, good usage practices, and psychological support.

Keywords: Anxiety, cyberbullying, depression, digital literacy, loneliness, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have grown rapidly in the last 10 years. As of 2023, there were over 4.9 billion active users of social media, and that figure is continually rising. The majority of social media users are teens and young adults (75% of teenagers report using Twitter every day). However, elderly populations are also exhibiting higher levels of participation. Usage Patterns: Individuals utilize social media platforms for 2.5 hours on average a day, engaging in variety of activities such as messaging, sharing media, and reading news and influencer content.

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Mental Health Concern

Overuse of social media promotes social comparison, distorted representations, and a decline in meaningful connections, all of which worsen anxiety, sadness, and loneliness. Table 1 lists the factors which contribute to loneliness, depression, and anxiety in relation to their use of social media.

Anxiety

Social media's popularity has been associated with higher anxiety levels, mostly because of people's

Table 1. Factors contributing to anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Anxiety	Cyberbullying, social comparison, and the fear of missing out
Depression	Negative societal association, body image concerns, low self-esteem
Loneliness	Lack of meaningful connections, excessive screen time

continual social comparison and FOMO of things. Przybylski et al., (2013) explored that stress and increased self-consciousness are caused by these circumstances [1].

Depression

A negative communal analogy fostered by social media is linked to rise in depression symptoms. Cyberbullying and exposure to utopian portrayals of other people's lives might exacerbate depression.

Loneliness

Even though social media is meant to foster connection, overuse of the site has been connected to an increase in loneliness. as users participate in fewer meaningful in-person contacts and more surface-level online interactions [2].

Aim of the Review

This review aims to explore the complex link between social media use and mental health outcomes such as anxiety, dejection, and loneliness. To ascertain which aspects of social media usage are most strongly linked to negative psychological consequences and if these effects may be mitigated by regulated use or digital well-being treatments, the review will examine current empirical studies [3]. Furthermore, the review will focus on experimental and longitudinal studies that track changes in mental health over time, since young people and teens are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of excessive social media usage [4].

METHODOLOGY

This review included papers published throughout the last ten years. The search strategy comprised electronic resources including PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Shodhganga. Key findings on prevalence, management strategies, outcomes, and treatments presented in selected systematic reviews and meta-analyses served as the main focus for data extraction procedure.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Vannucci et al. (2017) found significant correlation between higher levels of generalized anxiety and frequent use of social media among sample of teenagers [5]. Social media users reported more negative emotional experiences than non-users. According to Dhir et al.'s (2018) investigation on connection between social media overload and anxiety, prolonged connectivity can exacerbate anxiety disorders and increase stress levels [6]. Additionally, social comparison is exacerbated by people's habit of comparing their lives to carefully selected highlights of others on social media platforms. On websites like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, users are urged to compare themselves to other users, which can cause anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. According to a study by Vogel et al., 2014 frequent social comparison on social media significantly lowers self-esteem and increases anxiety [2].

Extreme use of social media can cause cognitive and emotional exhaustion in users, which can result in worry. The users sometimes experience overload from the need to always be online, reply to alerts, and stay informed. An investigation by Dhir et al. (2018) revealed that this exhaustion is factor in stress and anxiety. Anxiety symptoms are triggered by feeling overwhelmed, which is connected to overload [6].

Social networking addiction and anxiety are significantly influenced by FOMO. People who suffer from FOMO, or the fear of missing out on enjoyable events that others enjoy, are more likely to watch and worry excessively. Higher FOMO sufferers frequently have compulsive social media checking tendencies, which exacerbates anxiety symptoms [7].

Excessive social media use has several harmful effects that contribute to anxiety:

1. *Sleep disturbance*: Prolonged usage of social media, especially at night, has been connected to sleep disturbances, which in turn increase worry.
2. *Cognitive failures*: Studies reveal that prolonged usage of social media can result in cognitive failures like poor concentration, shorter attention spans, and forgetfulness. Stress and anxiety are worsened by these setbacks.
3. *Isolation*: Ironically, although social media is meant to bring people together, overuse of it may contribute to anxiety by fostering feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Social Media Habits with Depressive Symptoms

According to Primack et al. (2017), there may be a connection between rise in depression symptoms among regular social media users and elements like social comparison, exposure to idealized portrayals of peers, and a decrease in in-person social engagement [8].

In closer examination of potential relationships between social media use and users' mental health, Bessière et al. (2010) made the argument that how social media is used is more important than whether it is used at all. Using social media to keep up offline relationships, for example, may help reduce depressed symptoms; using it to look for new relationships or to passively read through posts, on other hand, may make depression worse [9].

Shensa et al. (2018) found that social media use can raise depression levels, particularly when it's connected to social comparison and FOMO (or fear of missing out). This was found in research that looked at young adults' use of social media and depressed symptoms. The researchers identified one practice that raised the risk of depressed symptoms: passive scrolling or perusing other people's posts without commenting [10].

Social media cyberbullying is a major factor in escalation of depression symptoms, particularly in young people and adolescents. Online harassment victims frequently feel more anxious, alone, and unworthy than they should. Due to its widespread and persistent character, which can induce psychological suffering beyond that of in-person bullying, research suggests that cyberbullying greatly raises likelihood of depression [11].

RESULTS

Several studies indicate that using social media might increase feelings of loneliness, especially when users engage in passive consumption, which is the practice of browsing through other people's information without interacting. According to Kross et al. (2013), passive use frequently exacerbates sentiments of social isolation and unfavorable social comparison. Extreme use in the absence of deep ties may boost feelings of isolation and loneliness [12]. Mitigation of Solitude on the other hand, social media can reduce loneliness when utilized actively for social interaction (sharing, messaging, and comments) as it offers chances for deep connections and keeps long-distance relationships alive.

Previous research shows that people who are driven to compare their lives to those of others frequently experience greater degrees of depression and loneliness. For instance, Vogel et al. (2014) discovered that people were more likely to feel lonely the more they engaged in upward social comparisons on websites like Instagram [2].

The "Connectivity Paradox" is the idea that emotions of loneliness result from more options for online contact not materializing into meaningful relationships. Social media gives users the appearance of connection, but it frequently lacks the depth and intimacy of in-person communication, making them feel even more alone even if they are supposed to be "connected" [13]. Social media makes it possible to interact instantly with people anywhere in the world, which makes it easier to maintain long-distance friendships and social support systems. But these virtual exchanges could be shallow emotionally, and

they don't always replace in-person connections, which are crucial for emotional health [14]. While online platforms facilitate communication, when users place a higher value on virtual interactions than in-person relationships, they may also result in real-world isolation. An excessive dependence on social media could degrade offline interactions and heighten emotions of loneliness and isolation [15].

DISCUSSION

There are variations in the impact of social media on mental health according to age. Twienge et al. (2019) suggest that social comparison, peer pressure, and FOMO are significant elements that augment the vulnerability of adolescents and young adults to adverse outcomes such as anxiety and depression [3].

On the other hand, older persons might be less negatively impacted by social media, and in certain situations, it gives them a sense of community, which lessens social isolation [16]. Regular usage of social media by younger users is associated with a higher risk of mental health disorders because they are still developing their sense of self and are more vulnerable to peer pressure as shown in Table 2.

Research shows that social media has different effects on men and women. Women are more prone to have negative mental health consequences, such as greater levels of depression and body image concerns, since they engage in more visual social comparison and are frequently exposed to idealized notions of beauty.

Social media use for mental health issues is more common among certain personality types. For example, those with neuroticism may be more emotional because they are more sensitive to negative social interactions and comparisons. According to Brailovskaia and Margraf (2016), individuals who exhibit high levels of neuroticism may find it easier to experience negative emotions such as melancholy and anxiety due to their increased sensitivity to negative social events and comparisons [17]. On the other hand, extroverts may find that using social media to communicate yields better outcomes [18].

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Most studies on social media and mental health are cross-sectional, meaning they look at behaviors and mental health effects in the short term. Nevertheless, there is insufficient data from this research to conclude the long-term effects or causal relationships between social media usage and mental health issues including depression and anxiety.

Longitudinal studies are necessary to track changes in social media usage habits and mental health effects across time. It is difficult to determine without information if excessive social media usage contributes to the development of mental health issues or whether people with mental health issues are more inclined to use social media. Additionally, it's important to evaluate how technological advancements—such as platform algorithms or trends—affect user behavior and mental health at various phases of life.

A large portion of research is based on correlational data, which indicates relationships but not causes. For example, while social media use has been associated with anxiety and depression in several studies, it is still unclear if social media use causes these conditions or whether those who are experiencing these

Table 2. Self-esteem, offline relationships, and social support.

Mediator	Social media-mental health relationship
Self-esteem	Through unfavorable comparisons, low self-esteem makes one more susceptible to sadness and anxiety, whereas strong self-esteem acts as a buffer.
Offline relationships	Weak offline ties increase internet dependence and the risk of loneliness; strong offline relationships mitigate negative consequences.
Social support	Lack of support makes depression and loneliness worse; perceived social support prevents mental health deterioration.

symptoms use it as a distraction or a source of consolation [19]. Experimental studies may be able to show causal relationships by adjusting factors such as personality characteristics, preexisting mental health conditions, and environmental conditions. These studies can assess ideas on the direct impacts on mental health outcomes of certain social media behaviors (e.g., time spent, material consumed) [20].

RESEARCH GAPS

1. There is a knowledge vacuum about non-Western contexts because the majority of research to far has focused on Western people, especially those in the US and Europe.
2. Research has not done a sufficient job of examining how social support networks, cultural norms, and online behavior vary among varied communities, especially in non-Western nations.
3. The majority of research concentrates on youth and young adults, excluding other age groups that can be affected by social media use in different ways in terms of mental health.
4. There is a lack of research on the impact of social media on mental health in different ethnic groups, which hinders the development of thorough worldwide knowledge.
5. There is a lack of comparative research on the effects of social media on mental health in various cultural, racial, and geographic contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need to create initiatives that promote social media usage which is fair and thoughtful, particularly for young people and other vulnerable populations.
2. To combat negative effects of social media, especially FOMO and social comparison, put into practice strategies that enhance resilience, foster offline relationships, and improve self-esteem.
3. Promote legislative actions that shield users from damaging content and cyberbullying, guaranteeing secure online spaces for people of all ages.
4. There should be focus on educating the public about good digital habits while drawing attention to dangers excessive social media use poses to one's mental health.

CONCLUSION

This investigation highlights complex relationships that exist between social media use and mental health, particularly anxiety, despair, and loneliness. Social media may facilitate interpersonal connections, but because of issues like cyberbullying, social comparison, and FOMO, it can also be harmful to mental health. Consequences are affected by age, gender, and personality factors; women and younger individuals seem to be more vulnerable. Furthermore, important roles in mitigating these impacts are played by elements including social support, offline interactions, and self-esteem.

It's critical to increase knowledge about possible hazards associated with social media use, particularly among susceptible populations like teens, to lessen negative consequences on mental health. Reducing anxiety, despair, and loneliness can be achieved by promoting digital literacy and balanced social media use that emphasizes moderation and thoughtful involvement. Additionally, policymakers and mental health professionals should collaborate on developing interventions that promote offline relationships and self-esteem building, while creating supportive, healthy online environments.

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