

# Effects of Social Media on Mental Health and Emotional Well-being: A Review

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**Abstract**—Global communication and social interaction have changed as a result of the quick growth of social media platforms and online networking sites. Growing research indicates that excessive and compulsive social media use may have detrimental effects on mental health, despite the fact that these platforms offer many advantages, such as improved connectedness, information sharing, and social support. This review looks at the several ways that social media affects mental health. Exposure to idealized online representations, social comparison, mindless scrolling, and dependency-forming behaviours are important contributing factors. By constantly tailoring material, stimulating reward circuits in the brain, and possibly encouraging addictive behaviours, AI-driven algorithms further increase user engagement. Furthermore, social media platforms have the potential to exacerbate FOMO, skew perceptions of social connectivity, and promote the association of online validation with self-worth. Particularly among teenagers and young adults, emerging issues like excessive screen usage, compulsive scrolling, cyberbullying, online harassment, and insufficient social validation have been connected to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social disengagement, and diminished emotional well-being. Preventative measures, digital well-being interventions, and appropriate social media habits depend on an understanding of these intricate relationships. In order to encourage healthy social media use while reducing its psychological hazards, future studies should concentrate on finding protective variables and evidence-based strategies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms and online networking sites have drastically changed how people interact with one another, bringing friends, family, and even complete strangers closer together online. Even if there is no denying the advantages of this technological revolution, it is crucial to consider the complex

connection between social media and mental health (1).

Influencers on social media share more achievements and accomplishments than setbacks in an effort to gain more followers. This creates a feed where wealthy models and extremely successful people seem to be the norm, which may subtly put pressure on users to alter and filter their posts in order to blend in or rise in social acceptance and increase their followers (2).

AI-driven social media algorithms emphasize profit over ethical considerations, content individualization, and increasing user engagement through constant feed customization. By optimizing screen duration, these adaptive algorithms deepen the activation of the brain's reward regions. The development of addictive behaviours is accelerated by this cycle of tailored material and increased engagement (3).

By distorting views of real-life needs fulfilment and encouraging comparisons with others, generating illusions of connection, equating online validation with self-worth, and setting false social norms, social media appears to both foster and exacerbate pre-existing FOMO. For instance, individuals reported experiencing FOMO for events and activities they observed others participating, even while they could justify that they weren't actually missing out by recalling similar experiences from the past (4).

In the digital age, mindless scrolling is an apparently innocent ubiquitous practice that entails endlessly perusing internet content with little awareness, active participation, or benefit. Due to the popularity of shorts and reels on all major social media platforms, this issue has become more widespread. The user's brain structure, attention span, memory, productivity, sleep, physical health, mood, self-esteem, relationships in real life, life satisfaction, and general well-being are all negatively impacted, which can lead

to the development and exacerbation of psychological illnesses. These ramifications make it necessary to quantify appropriate screen time and usage, recognize mindless scrolling as harmful behaviour, and develop efficient techniques for digital detox and awareness (5).

Studies have reported that spending a lot of time on social media, constantly checking messages and notifications, and experiencing anxiety or worry while separated from social media as examples of how social media dependency manifests itself. Cyberbullying and online harassment are some of the mental health issues linked to social media use (6). Even in the absence of active, intentional social rejection or exclusion, such cyberbullying or peer harassment and inadequate social validation could jeopardize adolescents' demand for status and acceptability and be a risk factor for the development of internalizing symptoms, resulting in social withdrawal, depression and suicidal tendencies. Additionally, a common medium used by millions of young people may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and decreased emotional well-being among vulnerable adolescents. As a result, adolescents who are most sensitive to threats to their status, like those who are experiencing ongoing peer victimization, may be most adversely affected (7).

Concern over excessive social media use is on the rise, especially among teenagers who are lured to these sites for age-appropriate social connections. Excessive, compulsive use that adversely impacts social, professional, and personal aspects is an indicator of dependence on social media (8).

## II. HIGH PREVALENCE OF USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS

A cross-sectional study done on the mental health of young teenagers and youth between 18 to 30 years has reported that symptoms of depression are directly proportional to the use of screen time and use of social media with 37.9% of the participants suffering from depression, 33.3% from stress, and 25.3% from low self-esteem (9). The study advocated the promotion of healthy online content and digital detox in order to receive emotional counselling and mitigate negative effects of social media exposure. India has one of the world's largest social media user bases, with hundreds of millions of users and particularly high engagement

among adolescents and young adults. Nearly every major social media platform registers massive youth participation, and access to smartphones and social media is widespread in the 15–29 age group, leading to extensive daily use. Recent studies in Karnataka on addiction of screen time and social media reported 3.9% of rural population of adolescents had screen addiction which in turn affected parental relationship, compensated for participation in sports, and were at risk for depression especially in school-going children (10). An article published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry on whether India should follow the example of other countries like Australia and United Kingdom and set age limits for the use of social media, examines the challenges of imposing age restrictions related to social media use in India (11). The article explores the complex issues surrounding the implementation of social media age restrictions in India, considering the differences in socio-cultural factors, the diversity in digital literacy and the differences in infrastructure in rural and urban areas. In order to foster responsible online engagement, the article highlights the significance of establishing a digital environment that is both safe and empowering and thereby foster a generation of resilient and knowledgeable digital citizens. The Government of Karnataka plans to ban social media for children below 16, a move which has been welcomed by parents and academicians, though the ban has not yet been passed in the legislature (12). Activities like late-night scrolling and compulsive engagement in social media observed among adolescents, has been linked to sleep disruption and emotional distress. A study conducted among adolescents, young and older adults in India indicate that the key factors contributing to higher rates of depression, stress, anxiety, negative body image and reduced academic performance among adolescents in India are cyber bullying, fear of other people's opinion, fear of missing out (FOMO) and comparison among peers (13).

While multiple studies have examined social media and its complex relationship with mental health and well-being, including qualitative and quantitative surveys among adolescents and young adults showing correlations with anxiety, depression, and sleep issues much of this research has been urban-centric. Approximately 67.5% of adults in India are active in at least one social media network, according to a study conducted in 2023, while this percentage may have

steadily increased in 2026 with growing number of netizens every year. It is very important to develop a balanced relationships with at home and at work through a digital detox every now and then to ensure that the advantage of digitally being connected with people the world over does not come at the expense of a negative impact on the mental health of its users (1). A study conducted on 204 adolescents aged between 14 to 23 years listed self-esteem and support networks as positive impact while online harassment, increased impulsivity, decreased attention span, behavioural shifts, social comparisons and issues related to body image as some of the impacts on mental health due to excessive social media use (14).

The rapid rise in digital addiction and screen-related mental health issues has been identified by the Economic Survey 2025–2026 as a significant healthcare concern, especially for children and adolescents. A number of initiatives, including age-appropriate digital access policies, screen time management training for parents, physical education in schools, and cyber safety education, have been suggested by the survey (15).

Social media use is significantly linked to negative mental health outcomes like anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sleep disturbance among youth worldwide, according to systematic reviews and meta-analyses synthesizing large numbers of studies like 24–57 studies spanning multiple countries (16). In order to comprehend the complex relationship between use of social media and mental health among adolescents, a review of research done after 2019 has made use of theoretical frameworks including the personal model and social comparison theory. The results showed that each user's unique usage patterns had a substantial impact on their mental health and sleep disruptions and low self-esteem were noted among young adults. The study concluded that future research should concentrate on studies over extended periods, analysis across cultures, and digital therapies to fill in the gaps regarding the impact of social media on mental health.

While a majority of international research reports negative associations between high social media engagement and issues related to mental health, some studies also highlight complex or mixed outcomes including evidence that certain patterns of use (such as positive interactions, support networks, or moderate

engagement) can reduce feelings of isolation or enhance connectivity.

Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) standards, a narrative synthesis without meta-analysis was conducted to examine three databases from January 1, 2004, to July 31, 2022 (17). The study included some evidence that social media use therapies are beneficial for enhancing mental health, particularly in cases of depression and when combined with therapy-based interventions. To find out who would gain the most from social media use interventions, the study did indicate that more experimental and longitudinal research with representative samples is required.

Several global studies focus on mechanisms like social comparison, cyberbullying, sleep disturbances, and psychological stress to frame negative outcomes related to effect of use of social media on the mental health and well-being. Exposure to social networking sites is associated with negative body image issues and low self-esteem, especially among female adolescents, according to studies on social comparison on social media that reported negative moods, desire to change their appearance, and decreased self-worth (18). The results of the study showed that women who make more comparisons about their looks are more likely to feel the need to change features linked to their face, hair, complexion and external appearance, especially when they spend time on social media platforms.

Several countries (e.g., Australia, France, Denmark, UK) have implemented policy responses aimed at protecting children and adolescents from harmful social media exposures, signalling global concern about mental health risks associated with digital platforms. Australia has banned social media for children under 16 years of age (19).

Despite extensive research across Europe, North America, Asia and Africa, important gaps remain, particularly in how nuanced cognitive mechanisms interact with social media use across diverse socio-cultural settings.

### III. CONCLUSION

Existing studies also vary widely in design, measurement approaches, and contexts, contributing to heterogeneity in findings and underscoring the need for more targeted, context-specific research. There had been limited focus on integrated studies highlighting

effect of social media on burnout, work life balance, cognitive distortion, suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression due to social media addiction. Comparative studies examining social media usage and its psychological effects across rural and urban populations, Tier I and Tier II cities is also limited. The impact of social media on the mental health of teenagers and young adults is a major global concern among researchers and psychiatrists worldwide because numerous systematic reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated strong correlations between social media use and detrimental psychological consequences. The role of cognitive distortions like negative thinking patterns, overgeneralization, social comparison biases as a consequence of excessive social media use remains insufficiently examined. Future studies should keep examining the long-term psychological repercussions of social media use and find practical solutions that optimize its positive effects while reducing its negative ones. In addition to individual psychological and social characteristics, the duration, frequency, purpose, and pattern of social media use have an impact on mental health. Although social media is not intrinsically dangerous, excessive and uncontrolled use of it can encourage negative thought patterns that have a detrimental impact on one's emotional well-being and quality of life. Thus, it is crucial to encourage digital literacy, ethical social media use, and understanding of potential psychological dangers. In the present AI driven digital age, promoting psychological well-being requires a thoughtful and balanced approach to social media use. Educational institutions, families, mental health practitioners, legislators, and social media businesses must collaborate in order to promote healthy online behaviours psychological well-being.

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