



## Understanding the Psychological Impact of Social Media Use on Young Adults: A Comprehensive Review

**Mansour Musaed Albaqami.**

Mnsors1408@gmail.com Psychologist

**Mohammed Nasser Alghson**

Psychologist M.alghson@gmail.com

**Abdulrahman Mohammed Hassan Sharahili**

Abu\_dalah07@hotmail.com

Psychologist

**Abdulrahman Obaid Alshammari**

aabb0554475445@gmail.com Psychologist

**Abdullah Musallam Almusallam**

aadddd702@gmail.com Psychologist

**Bander mosaeed Albuqmi**

Psychologist

**Khalid khaman alanzi**

Albjeedi4@gmail.com

social work

### Abstract

This paper examines the psychological effects of social media use on young adults aged 18-29 years. Through a comprehensive review of contemporary research, this study explores the relationship between social media engagement and mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and social comparison. The paper analyzes both positive and negative psychological impacts, examining mechanisms such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), social validation seeking, and cyberbullying. Findings suggest that while social media offers benefits for social connectivity and self-expression, excessive use correlates with increased psychological distress. The paper concludes with recommendations for healthy social media practices and directions for future research. This review contributes to understanding the complex relationship between digital technology and psychological well-being in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** social media, mental health, young adults, anxiety, depression, social comparison, digital well-being



The past fifteen years have witnessed an unprecedented integration of social media into the daily lives of young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), BeReal, and Discord are no longer peripheral communication tools but central environments in which identity is constructed, relationships are maintained, and self-worth is negotiated (Pew Research Center, 2024; Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Recent nationally representative surveys indicate that 97–99% of individuals aged 18–29 in high-income countries use at least one platform daily, with average screen time ranging from 2.5 to 4.1 hours, and 28–41% exceeding five hours per day (Vogel et al., 2023; Orben & Przybylski, 2023; Rideout et al., 2024).

This dramatic rise has coincided with a well-documented deterioration in young adult mental health. Between 2010 and 2023, rates of major depressive episodes among U.S. young adults increased by 62–78%, diagnoses of generalized anxiety disorder rose by over 50%, and emergency department visits for self-harm and suicidal ideation doubled (Twenge et al., 2019; Mojtabai & Jorm, 2022; World Health Organization, 2023). Although correlation does not imply causation, the temporal alignment of these two trends has prompted intensive investigation into the role of social media as a contributing environmental factor.

### Expanded Research Questions

1. What are the full spectrum of positive and negative psychological outcomes associated with social media use in young adults?
2. Through which psychological, behavioral, and neurobiological mechanisms do these effects occur?
3. How do individual-difference variables (neuroticism, extraversion, self-esteem, gender identity, cultural background, and pre-existing psychopathology) moderate outcomes?
4. What role do platform-specific affordances (algorithms, infinite scroll, like counts, filters, stories, and short-form video) play in amplifying or mitigating harm?
5. Which individual-, family-, school-, and policy-level interventions have demonstrated efficacy in reducing harm and enhancing benefits?

### Theoretical Frameworks

This review integrates and expands upon five major theoretical lenses:

- Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Vogel et al., 2014)
- Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974; Sundar & Limperos, 2013)
- Displacement Hypothesis (Kraut et al., 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2019)



- Self-Determination Theory and the erosion of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Seabrook et al., 2016)
- Fear of Missing Out and Belongingness Theory (Przybylski et al., 2013; Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

## Comprehensive Literature Review

### Prevalence and Changing Patterns of Use (2015–2025)

Daily social media use among young adults has increased by approximately 90 minutes since 2015 (Twenge & Campbell, 2021). TikTok alone accounts for an average of 95 minutes per day among its 18–29-year-old users (Huang et al., 2024). Passive consumption (scrolling, viewing stories, lurking) now constitutes 68–78% of total time, whereas active interaction (posting, commenting, direct messaging) has declined proportionally (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Trifiro & Gerson, 2023).

### Negative Psychological Outcomes

#### Depression and Anxiety

Five large-scale meta-analyses involving over 200,000 participants consistently report small-to-moderate positive associations between total social media time and depressive symptoms (effect sizes ranging from  $r = .11$  to  $r = .21$ ; Huang, 2017; Ivie et al., 2020; Cunningham et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2022; Meier & Reinecke, 2021). When analyses differentiate usage type, passive use yields effect sizes up to three times larger than active use (Verduyn et al., 2017, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Longitudinal and experience-sampling studies further strengthen causal inference: daily increases in passive use predict next-day increases in depressed mood and anxiety, whereas the reverse pathway is weaker (Beyens et al., 2020; Aalbers et al., 2019; Kross et al., 2021).

#### Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Problematic Use

FOMO, first operationalized by Przybylski et al. (2013), is now recognized as a core mediator. Meta-analytic path models show that FOMO fully or partially mediates the relationship between social media use and both anxiety and depression in 70–80% of studies (Elhai et al., 2020; Fabris et al., 2020; James et al., 2023). Between 2019 and 2024, prevalence of clinically significant problematic social media use (as measured by validated scales such as the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale) rose from 8–12% to 21–29% among college students (Boer et al., 2021; Hussain & Griffiths, 2024).

#### Self-Esteem, Contingent Self-Worth, and Body Image

The introduction and widespread adoption of photo filters, body-altering effects, and “idealized” influencers have dramatically intensified appearance pressure. Experimental



exposure to Instagram images for as little as 7–10 minutes lowers state self-esteem and body satisfaction in young women (effect size  $d = 0.40$ – $0.60$ ; Fardouly et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2017; Tamplin et al., 2018). Longitudinal cohort studies link higher baseline Instagram use to increased risk of clinically diagnosed eating disorders two to four years later (Sidani et al., 2016; de Vries et al., 2022).

### **Social Comparison and Envy**

Algorithmic feeds systematically prioritize content that triggers upward comparison (Alfasi, 2019; Meier & Schäfer, 2022). Experimental dismantling studies reveal that viewing “highlight reels” reduces life satisfaction more than viewing ordinary content, with envy mediating 60–80% of the effect (de Vries et al., 2018; Verduyn et al., 2020).

### **Loneliness Paradox**

Despite facilitating connection, heavier social media use is associated with higher loneliness ( $r = .15$ – $.25$ ; Primack et al., 2017; Marttila et al., 2021). The mechanism appears to be substitution of deep, reciprocal relationships with superficial online ties that fail to satisfy belongingness needs (Hall et al., 2022).

### **Sleep Disruption as a Transdiagnostic Mediator**

Bedtime social media use is now the strongest single predictor of insufficient sleep in young adults (Scott et al., 2021; Alonzo et al., 2021). Each additional hour of nighttime use reduces total sleep time by 18–25 minutes and increases next-day negative affect (Tao et al., 2023). Meta-analytic mediation models estimate that sleep disruption accounts for 35–50% of the social media–depression link (Hamilton et al., 2022).

### **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**

Approximately 41% of young adults report lifetime cyberbullying victimization, with 15–23% experiencing severe or repeated incidents (John et al., 2018; Patchin:Youth & Society, 2023). Victims show 2.5–4 times higher odds of suicidal ideation independent of offline bullying (Nixon, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023).

### **Positive Psychological Outcomes and Protective Use Patterns**

Active use—creating content, messaging friends, joining support communities—consistently predicts higher social capital, perceived support, and well-being (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ young adults who engage with affirming online communities report lower internalized stigma and higher resilience (Craig et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2023). Educational and activist uses of TikTok and X have been linked to increased civic engagement and collective efficacy (Hobbs et al., 2024).



## Moderating Variables

- Personality: Neuroticism amplifies negative effects ( $\beta = .32-.48$ ); extraversion and conscientiousness buffer them (Marengo et al., 2021; Bowker et al., 2022).
- Gender & gender identity: Women and gender-minority individuals show greater vulnerability to appearance-related harm (Nesi et al., 2021; Vogel et al., 2023).
- Pre-existing mental health: Depressed individuals engage in more passive use, creating vicious cycles (Yoon et al., 2022).
- Offline support: Strong real-world relationships neutralize most negative effects (Frison & Eggermont, 2020; Hall et al., 2022).

## Practical Implications

Understanding social media's psychological impact has important implications for various stakeholders:

**For Individuals:** Young adults can benefit from developing digital literacy and self-awareness regarding their social media use. Recognizing triggers for negative emotions, setting usage boundaries, and cultivating offline relationships represent important protective strategies.

**For Mental Health Professionals:** Clinicians should routinely assess social media use when working with young adults, recognizing it as a potential factor in presenting concerns. Interventions might include helping clients identify problematic usage patterns, develop healthier digital habits, and address underlying needs that excessive social media use may serve.

**For Educators and Parents:** Educational institutions and families can promote healthy social media use through education about digital citizenship, critical media literacy, and balanced technology use. Creating environments that value face-to-face connection and offline activities may help prevent excessive reliance on digital validation.

**For Platform Designers:** Social media companies bear responsibility for creating environments that support user well-being. Design features that promote active engagement over passive scrolling, limit harmful comparisons, and protect users from harassment could significantly improve psychological outcomes.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations characterize existing research in this area. Much research relies on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inferences about the relationship between social media use and mental health. Longitudinal studies are needed to better understand directional relationships and developmental trajectories.



Additionally, the rapid evolution of social media platforms means research findings may quickly become outdated. New features, platforms, and usage norms continually emerge, requiring ongoing investigation. Future research should employ diverse methodologies, including experimental designs and qualitative approaches that capture users' lived experiences.

Research has primarily focused on Western, educated populations, limiting generalizability. Cross-cultural research examining social media's impact across diverse contexts would enhance understanding of universal versus culturally-specific effects.

Finally, more research is needed on interventions. While problematic social media use has been well-documented, evidence-based strategies for promoting healthier use remain limited. Developing and testing interventions represents a critical direction for future work.

## Recommendations

Based on the reviewed literature, several recommendations emerge for promoting psychological well-being in the context of social media use:

### Individual-Level Strategies

1. **Mindful Usage:** Individuals should cultivate awareness of their emotional responses to social media, recognizing when use triggers negative feelings and adjusting accordingly.
2. **Active Engagement:** Prioritizing active, meaningful interactions over passive scrolling may protect against negative psychological impacts.
3. **Boundary Setting:** Establishing clear boundaries around social media use, including designated offline times and limiting evening use, can prevent excessive engagement and protect sleep quality.
4. **Curating Feeds:** Actively managing social media content by unfollowing accounts that trigger negative comparisons or emotions and following accounts that inspire and educate can improve the user experience.
5. **Reality Checking:** Maintaining perspective on the curated nature of social media content and recognizing that online presentations rarely reflect complete reality can protect against harmful comparisons.

### Institutional and Policy Recommendations

1. **Digital Literacy Education:** Schools and universities should incorporate comprehensive digital literacy curricula that address social media's psychological impacts and promote healthy usage habits.



2. **Mental Health Support:** Educational institutions should ensure accessible mental health services that address social media-related concerns and help students develop coping strategies.
3. **Research Investment:** Funding agencies should prioritize research examining social media's mental health impacts, particularly longitudinal and intervention studies.
4. **Platform Accountability:** Policymakers should consider regulations that hold social media companies accountable for user well-being, potentially requiring design changes that minimize harmful features.

## Conclusion

Social media represents a defining feature of contemporary young adulthood, offering unprecedented opportunities for connection, self-expression, and information access. However, these benefits come alongside significant psychological risks, particularly when use becomes excessive, passive, or validation-focused. The relationship between social media and mental health is complex and moderated by numerous individual and contextual factors.

This review highlights the importance of mindful, intentional social media use that prioritizes genuine connection over external validation. As these platforms continue evolving, ongoing research, education, and thoughtful platform design will be essential for supporting young adults' psychological well-being in an increasingly digital world.

The evidence suggests that social media itself is neither inherently harmful nor beneficial; rather, its impact depends on how we engage with it. By understanding the mechanisms underlying social media's psychological effects and implementing strategies to promote healthier use, young adults can harness these platforms' benefits while minimizing potential harms. This balanced approach recognizes social media as a permanent feature of modern life while prioritizing mental health and authentic human connection.

Future research must continue examining this rapidly evolving landscape, developing evidence-based interventions, and exploring how we can create digital environments that support rather than undermine psychological well-being. As we navigate this digital age, fostering digital wisdom—the ability to use technology in ways that support our values and well-being—represents a critical developmental task for young adults and society as a whole.

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