



Unravelling the influence: Exploring the impact of social media on mental health

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Abstract

Social media has a significant influence on various aspects of society, including politics, marketing, entertainment, and activism. It has transformed the way people communicate, share information, and consume content. Social media is not just about connecting with friends anymore. It's a diverse landscape where users engage with various types of content, including text, images, videos, live streams, stories, and more. But just as a coin has two sides, social media also has certain limitations associated with it. Social media has been criticized for its role in spreading misinformation and fake news. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement sometimes prioritize sensational or false content, leading to the proliferation of misinformation. Excessive use of social media has been linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The constant comparison to others, cyberbullying, and fear of missing out (FOMO) are some of the factors contributing to these issues. Governments and regulatory bodies are increasingly looking into regulating social media platforms to address concerns about privacy, misinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content. This research paper investigates the intricate relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes. In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media platforms has garnered significant attention, raising concerns about their potential impact on individuals' psychological well-being. By critically analyzing the existing body of evidence, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the impact of social media on mental health and inform future research directions and interventions aimed at promoting healthier online behaviours.

Keywords: Social media, FOMO, mental health

Introduction

In contemporary society, social media has become an integral aspect of daily life, profoundly shaping interpersonal interactions, communication patterns, and individual behaviors. Despite its widespread use and undeniable benefits, there is growing concern about the potential adverse effects of social media on mental health. On one hand, social media facilitates social connections, fosters self-expression, and provides access to valuable support networks, which can enhance individuals' psychological resilience and promote mental health. On the other hand, excessive use, cyberbullying, social comparison, and unrealistic portrayals of life can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Yigiter *et al.*, 2023) ^[2]. It emphasizes the importance of promoting digital well-being and empowering individuals to navigate social media in a manner that enhances their mental health and overall quality of life.

The effect of social media on mental health is a complicated concern with many moving parts. According to a countrywide survey carried out in India, as of 2023, approximately 67.5% of adults in the country utilize at least one social networking site; this percentage may be steadily increasing over time (Malle *et al.*, 2024) ^[1].

Concept of Social Media

Social media refers to online platforms and websites that enable users to create and share content, as well as engage in social networking. These platforms facilitate various forms of interaction, such as sharing text, images, videos, and links, as well as liking, commenting, and messaging other users. Some of the most popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest, and YouTube.

Social media has become an integral part of modern communication and has a significant impact on society, culture, politics, business, and more. It has revolutionized how people connect with one another, share information, express themselves, and consume news and entertainment. Additionally, social media has provided new opportunities for businesses and brands to reach and engage with their target audiences through targeted advertising and influencer marketing. However, social media also comes with challenges and concerns, including issues related to privacy, misinformation, cyberbullying, and the spread of hate speech and extremist content. As a result, there is ongoing debate and discussion about how to regulate and moderate social media platforms effectively while preserving freedom of expression and promoting a healthy online environment.

Positive impacts of social media on mental health

While social media often receives criticism for its potential negative effects on mental health, it's important to recognize that it can also have positive impacts, especially when used mindfully and in moderation. Some ways in which social media can benefit mental health are mentioned below:

- **Social support:** Social media platforms can provide a sense of community and connection, especially for individuals who may feel isolated or marginalized in their offline lives. Being able to connect with like-minded individuals or find support groups for various issues can offer emotional support and validation.
- **Reduced isolation:** For people who may be physically isolated due to various reasons such as disability, illness, or geographical location, social media can offer a way to connect with others and alleviate feelings of loneliness.

- **Access to information and resources:** Social media platforms are rich sources of information on mental health topics, self-care techniques, coping strategies, and access to professional resources (Garg, 2023) ^[6]. This can empower individuals to take charge of their mental health and seek appropriate help when needed.
- **Positive affirmation and validation:** Receiving positive feedback, likes, comments, and messages of support on social media can boost self-esteem and provide validation, particularly for individuals who may struggle with low self-esteem or self-doubt.
- **Inspiration and motivation:** Social media can serve as a platform for sharing inspirational stories, motivational quotes, and success stories of individuals overcoming mental health challenges. Seeing others' journeys can provide hope and encouragement to those facing similar struggles.
- **Creative expression:** Platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube offer opportunities for creative expression through photography, art, writing, and video content creation. Engaging in creative activities can be therapeutic and serve as a positive outlet for emotions.
- **Awareness and advocacy:** Social media campaigns and movements focused on mental health awareness and advocacy have helped reduce stigma, promote understanding, and encourage conversations about mental health in society.
- **Peer support networks:** Many social media platforms host online communities and support groups where individuals can share their experiences, offer advice, and provide support to one another, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding.
- **Education and skill development:** Social media platforms offer access to educational resources, online courses, and workshops on topics related to mental health, mindfulness, stress management, and personal development, enabling individuals to acquire new skills and coping strategies.
- **Crisis intervention:** Some social media platforms have features and resources for crisis intervention and suicide prevention, providing immediate support and connecting individuals in distress with mental health professionals or support services (Tepe and Eker, 2023) ^[5].

It's important to note that while social media can have positive impacts on mental health, it's essential to use it mindfully and in moderation. Setting boundaries, curating a positive online environment, and prioritizing real-life interactions are crucial for maintaining a healthy balance. Additionally, seeking professional help from mental health professionals is important for addressing more serious mental health concerns.

Negative impacts of social media on mental health

Social media has become an integral part of modern society. But privacy issues have become a growing concern with

social media platforms due to data breaches, tracking, and targeted advertising. This has led to increased scrutiny from regulators and calls for better privacy protections. Also influence of social media on mental health is a topic of significant concern. Some of the negative impacts of social media on mental health are discussed below:

- **Social comparison:** Social media often portrays idealized versions of people's lives, leading to social comparison and feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. Constantly comparing oneself to others' curated images and lifestyles can fuel feelings of inferiority and anxiety.
- **Cyberbullying:** Social media platforms provide a platform for cyberbullying, where individuals can experience harassment, humiliation, or intimidation online. Cyberbullying can have devastating effects on mental health, causing depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation.
- **Fear of missing out (FOMO):** Social media feeds are filled with highlight reels of others' lives, which can amplify the fear of missing out on experiences (Astleitner *et al.*, 2023) ^[3]. This fear can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of social isolation.
- **Negative body image:** Exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and constant scrutiny of physical appearance on social media can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and poor self-image, particularly among adolescents and young adults.
- **Addiction and distraction:** The addictive nature of social media, with its endless scrolling and notifications, can lead to excessive use and distraction from real-life activities. Excessive social media use has been linked to poor sleep quality, decreased productivity, and impaired attention span (Beyari, 2023) ^[4].
- **Validation seeking:** Seeking validation through likes, comments, and shares on social media can create a dependency on external approval for self-worth. This constant need for validation can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety when expectations are not met.
- **Filter bubbles and echo chambers:** Social media algorithms often personalize content based on users' preferences, leading to filter bubbles and echo chambers where individuals are only exposed to information and viewpoints that align with their own beliefs. This can hinder critical thinking, increase polarization, and contribute to feelings of social division and isolation.
- **Privacy concerns:** Social media platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, raising concerns about privacy and security. The fear of privacy breaches, identity theft, or unauthorized use of personal information can contribute to stress and anxiety.
- **Comparison to unrealistic standards:** Influencers and celebrities often present an unrealistic portrayal of life on social media, showcasing luxurious lifestyles and

perfect moments. Constant exposure to these unrealistic standards can distort perceptions of reality and lead to feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction with one's own life.

- **Reduced face-to-face interaction:** Excessive use of social media can reduce face-to-face interactions and interpersonal communication skills. This can lead to feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and a decline in overall well-being.

While social media can have many positive aspects, such as connecting people and sharing information, it's essential to recognize and address these negative impacts on mental health to promote a healthier relationship with technology and social networks.

Recommendations for healthy social media use

Access to technology can be a boon if used wisely. Healthy social media use is crucial for maintaining well-being in today's digitally connected world. Some recommendations to help an individual for utilizing social media in a balanced and beneficial way are mentioned below:

- **Limit time:** Users should set boundaries on how much time they spend on social media each day. Aiming for a specific time limit and sticking to it could be a solution. Apps and tools are available to help track and manage user's screen time.
- **Curating feed:** Users should be mindful of who they follow and what content they get engaged with. Accounts that make users feel negative emotions or trigger unhealthy comparisons should be unfollowed.
- **Take breaks:** Users should schedule regular breaks from social media to recharge and focus on other activities. This time can be used to pursue hobbies, spend time with loved ones, or engage in self-care practices that nourish well-being of an individual.
- **Be mindful of your mental health:** Users should pay attention to how social media affects their mood and mental health. If user notice feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, or low self-esteem, he/she needs to take a step back and reassess their usage patterns.
- **Balancing online and offline life:** Users need to ensure that social media use complements rather than dominating real-world interactions and activities. Users should cultivate a healthy balance between online and offline life to foster overall well-being.
- **Seek support when needed:** If user is struggling to maintain healthy social media habits or experiencing negative effects on his/her well-being, they should not hesitate to seek support from friends, family, or mental health professionals.

By implementing these recommendations, an individual can foster a healthier relationship with social media and reap its benefits while minimizing its potential drawbacks. It is important to remember that moderation, mindfulness, and self-awareness are key to using social media in a way that enhances your overall quality of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and continued research efforts to better understand the complex interplay between social media and mental health. While social media can provide avenues for connectivity, entertainment, and information sharing, research suggests that excessive or negative use of social media can have detrimental effects on mental health. Studies have linked heavy use of social media to increased feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem. Social media platforms can be breeding grounds for cyberbullying, which can have severe psychological effects on victims. Constant exposure to curated and often idealized portrayals of others' lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and fear of missing out among users. By unraveling the influence of social media on mental well-being, we can develop informed policies, interventions, and practices to promote a healthier digital ecosystem and empower individuals to harness the benefits of social media while safeguarding their mental health.

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