



## IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE ON SELF-ESTEEM AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF YOUNG ADULTS

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### **Abstract**

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has significantly transformed the social, emotional, and psychological experiences of young adults. Over the past decade, social media has become an integral part of daily life, shaping identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception. This review paper critically examines existing empirical and theoretical literature on the impact of social media usage on self-esteem and mental well-being among young adults. Drawing upon studies from psychology, sociology, and media research, the review analyzes both positive and negative psychological outcomes associated with social media engagement. On the one hand, social media offers opportunities for self-expression, social support, community building, and identity exploration, which may enhance self-esteem and psychological well-being. On the other hand, excessive use, social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FoMO), and appearance-based feedback mechanisms have been consistently linked with low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness. The review also highlights moderating factors such as frequency and type of use, individual personality traits, gender differences, and cultural context. By synthesizing findings from recent national and international studies, this paper identifies key research trends, methodological limitations, and gaps in the existing literature. The review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences young adults' self-esteem and mental health, and to suggest directions for future research and psychological interventions.

### **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary digital era, social media has emerged as a dominant mode of communication, self-expression, and social interaction, particularly among young adults. Platforms such as social networking sites, photo-sharing applications, and instant messaging services have become deeply embedded in everyday life, reshaping how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. Young adulthood, a critical developmental phase characterized by identity formation, emotional regulation, and the establishment of social relationships, coincides with the highest levels of social media engagement. Consequently, psychologists and social scientists have shown growing interest in understanding the psychological implications of social media use during this sensitive life stage.

Self-esteem and mental well-being are central constructs in psychological research, as they significantly influence motivation, behavior, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life. Self-esteem reflects an individual's subjective evaluation of self-worth, while mental well-being encompasses

emotional, psychological, and social functioning. The interactive and feedback-driven nature of social media platforms—through likes, comments, shares, and follower counts—has introduced new dimensions to self-evaluation and social comparison. These digital mechanisms can reinforce positive self-concepts but may also intensify self-doubt, insecurity, and emotional distress.

Existing literature presents a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of social media's impact on psychological health. Several studies highlight the positive aspects of social media, including enhanced social connectivity, emotional support, identity exploration, and access to mental health resources. For young adults who experience social isolation or marginalization, online communities may provide a sense of belonging and validation. Conversely, a substantial body of research associates excessive or problematic social media use with adverse psychological outcomes such as reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbances, and stress. Phenomena such as upward social comparison, fear of missing out (FoMO), cyberbullying, and unrealistic portrayals of success and beauty are frequently cited as key contributors to these negative effects.

Despite the growing volume of empirical research, the relationship between social media usage, self-esteem, and mental well-being remains nuanced and context-dependent. Variations in platform type, usage patterns, content exposure, individual personality traits, gender, and cultural background complicate generalizations. Moreover, methodological limitations such as reliance on cross-sectional designs and self-reported data pose challenges to establishing causal relationships. In this context, a systematic review of existing studies is essential to synthesize current knowledge, identify consistent patterns, and highlight gaps in the literature.

This review paper aims to critically examine scholarly research on the impact of social media usage on self-esteem and mental well-being among young adults. By integrating findings from diverse studies, the paper seeks to provide a balanced understanding of both the beneficial and detrimental psychological consequences of social media engagement, thereby contributing to informed academic discourse, future research directions, and evidence-based psychological interventions.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this review is grounded in the interaction between social media usage, self-esteem, and mental well-being, mediated by psychological and contextual factors. Social media usage is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing frequency of use, duration, platform type, and mode of engagement (active versus passive). These dimensions influence how individuals process online information and social feedback.

Self-esteem functions as a central psychological outcome variable and, in many studies, also acts as a mediating factor between social media use and mental well-being. Features such as likes, comments, follower counts, and peer feedback serve as external validation cues that may reinforce or undermine self-worth. Social comparison processes, fear of missing out, and identity validation further shape self-evaluative judgments.

Mental well-being is viewed as a broad construct that includes emotional states (such as happiness, anxiety, and depression), psychological functioning (self-acceptance and autonomy), and social well-being (sense of belonging and connectedness). The framework recognizes that the impact of social media is not uniform; it is moderated by individual differences (gender, personality, resilience), socio-cultural context, and offline support systems.

Thus, the conceptual framework highlights a dynamic and reciprocal relationship in which social media usage influences self-esteem and mental well-being, while pre-existing psychological states also shape how social media is used and interpreted. This integrative framework guides the organization and interpretation of the reviewed literature.

## 3. Chronological Review of Literature

Early research on social media and psychological well-being, primarily conducted in the late 2000s and early 2010s, focused on general internet use and its effects on social relationships and self-esteem. Initial studies often emphasized the potential benefits of online interaction, suggesting that social networking platforms could enhance social capital, reduce loneliness, and support identity exploration among young adults.

As social media platforms became more visually oriented and popularity-driven, research during the mid-2010s shifted toward examining negative psychological outcomes. Studies increasingly reported associations between high social media usage and lower self-esteem, increased depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress. Researchers

began to emphasize mechanisms such as upward social comparison, appearance-based evaluation, and cyberbullying as key contributors to declining mental well-being.

From the late 2010s onward, the literature became more nuanced and differentiated. Scholars started distinguishing between active and passive social media use, recognizing that not all engagement leads to negative outcomes. Longitudinal and experimental studies provided evidence that meaningful interaction and supportive online relationships could enhance well-being, while passive consumption and excessive comparison were linked to psychological distress. This period also saw increased attention to gender differences, cultural variability, and personality traits.

Recent studies in the 2020s have further expanded the scope by examining social media use in the context of global crises, digital dependency, and mental health awareness. Researchers have explored issues such as social media addiction, digital burnout, and the role of platforms in promoting mental health literacy. At the same time, methodological rigor has improved, with greater use of mixed-method approaches, longitudinal designs, and cross-cultural samples.

Overall, the chronological development of research reflects a transition from simplistic interpretations to a more complex understanding of social media as a double-edged phenomenon. This evolution underscores the need for continued critical review and integrative analysis, particularly in relation to young adults' self-esteem and mental well-being.

#### **4. Research Gaps and Future Directions**

Despite the growing body of literature on social media usage and its psychological implications, several conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps remain. Identifying these gaps is essential for advancing research that can more accurately capture the complex relationship between social media, self-esteem, and mental well-being among young adults.

##### **Research Gaps**

One significant gap in existing research is the predominance of cross-sectional study designs. A large proportion of studies rely on self-reported data collected at a single point in time, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between social media usage and psychological outcomes. Consequently, it remains unclear whether excessive social media use leads to low self-esteem and poor mental well-being, or whether individuals with pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities are more inclined toward problematic usage patterns.

Another notable gap concerns the overemphasis on quantity of use rather than quality of engagement. Many studies measure social media exposure in terms of hours spent or frequency of use, without adequately examining the nature of interactions, types of content consumed, or emotional responses elicited by online experiences. This narrow focus restricts a deeper understanding of how different modes of engagement differentially affect self-esteem and mental health.

The literature also reveals insufficient attention to cultural and contextual diversity. A substantial portion of empirical evidence is derived from Western populations, particularly from North America and Europe. As a result, findings may not be fully generalizable to young adults in non-Western or collectivist societies, where social norms, family structures, and digital behaviors differ significantly. This gap is particularly relevant in developing countries, where social media adoption is rapidly increasing but remains underexplored in psychological research.

Additionally, inconsistencies exist in the conceptualization and measurement of key constructs such as self-esteem, mental well-being, and social media addiction. Variations in measurement tools and operational definitions make it difficult to compare findings across studies or synthesize results conclusively. Furthermore, limited research has explored protective factors such as digital literacy, emotional regulation, resilience, and offline social support that may buffer negative psychological effects.

#### **5. Future Directions**

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to better establish causal pathways between social media usage and psychological outcomes. Such approaches would enable researchers to examine changes in self-esteem and mental well-being over time and to identify critical developmental periods of vulnerability or resilience among young adults.

There is also a need for greater emphasis on qualitative and mixed-methods research to capture subjective experiences and contextual meanings associated with social media use. In-depth interviews, focus groups, and

diary studies can provide valuable insights into how young adults interpret online feedback, manage self-presentation, and emotionally respond to digital interactions.

Cross-cultural and comparative studies should be expanded to enhance the global relevance of findings. Examining social media use across diverse socio-cultural contexts can help identify universal patterns as well as culture-specific influences on self-esteem and mental well-being. Such research is particularly important for informing culturally sensitive interventions and policies.

Future studies should also explore the role of emerging platforms and technological features, such as algorithm-driven content, short-form video applications, and artificial intelligence-based personalization. Understanding how these features shape attention, self-perception, and emotional well-being will be critical as digital environments continue to evolve.

Finally, there is a growing need for intervention-oriented research that translates empirical findings into practical applications. Psychological interventions focusing on digital well-being, mindful social media use, and media literacy programs can be developed and empirically tested. By addressing these future directions, research can move beyond problem identification toward evidence-based solutions that promote healthier social media engagement and enhance the self-esteem and mental well-being of young adults.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present review has critically examined the existing body of literature on the impact of social media usage on self-esteem and mental well-being among young adults, a demographic that represents the most active and psychologically vulnerable group of social media users. The review demonstrates that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor uniformly harmful; rather, its psychological impact is complex, multidimensional, and highly context-dependent.

Evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that social media can serve as a valuable resource for social connection, self-expression, identity exploration, and emotional support, particularly when engagement is active, purposeful, and socially meaningful. At the same time, a substantial body of research highlights the adverse consequences of excessive or maladaptive social media use, including diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms, loneliness, and psychological distress. Mechanisms such as upward social comparison, fear of missing out, appearance-based validation, and cyberbullying emerge as critical factors contributing to negative mental health outcomes.

The review further underscores the importance of moderating and mediating variables such as gender, personality traits, cultural context, and patterns of use in shaping psychological outcomes. The chronological progression of research reveals an increasing recognition of these complexities, moving from simplistic cause effect assumptions toward more nuanced and integrative models. Nevertheless, methodological limitations particularly reliance on cross-sectional designs, self-reported measures, and Western-centric samples continue to constrain definitive conclusions.

In light of these findings, the review emphasizes the need for future research that adopts longitudinal, cross-cultural, and mixed-method approaches to deepen understanding of causal mechanisms and contextual influences. Moreover, translating research insights into practical interventions such as digital well-being education, media literacy programs, and psychologically informed platform design holds significant promise for promoting healthier engagement with social media.

In conclusion, understanding the relationship between social media usage, self-esteem, and mental well-being is of critical importance in an increasingly digital world. A balanced, evidence-based approach that recognizes both opportunities and risks is essential for fostering psychological resilience among young adults. This review contributes to the ongoing academic discourse by synthesizing current knowledge and offering a foundation for future research, policy development, and psychological practice.

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## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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