

# Social Media and Mental Health: A Negative Psychiatric Impact on Teenagers

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## Abstract

Social media, especially among the youth, is growing exponentially in our world today as more people gain access to the internet. However, the sharp increase in social media usage has led to concerns about mental health and overall well-being. While social media can be valuable for staying connected with friends and being informed about the world, it can also bring about a multitude of problems, especially among the youth. This paper aims to examine available research on the relationship between social media and issues such as depression, anxiety, and cyberbullying among adolescents. Furthermore, it will explore how childhood maltreatment can affect how an individual interacts with social media. This paper not only explains how social media could have a negative effect on adolescents, with many of the aforementioned problems being linked to social media usage, but also how social media could also bring about some benefits. However, further research is needed to better understand the complexity of youth's relationship with social media.

## Keywords

Problematic Social Media Use (PSMU), Cyberbullying, Anxiety, Sleep Debt

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years, social media use has become more prevalent as more people have been using these platforms. Social media has become a regular part of society that people, especially the youth, have become involved with. The Child Mind Institute (2017) reports that almost 90% of 16- to 24-year-olds engage with the internet for social networking, revealing just how prevalent it is [1]. Adolescents are attracted to the virtual world for a variety of reasons. Social media can act as a source of social contact and social support for those who are unable to have this in the physical world. It can also be a place adolescents turn to for advice and for news. How-

ever, adolescents do not always interact with social media positively and can engage in problematic social media use (PSMU). PSMU is the “overwhelming motivation to engage in social media, spending excessive time on social media platforms leading to impairments in social, personal, and/or professional life, as well as problems associated with psychological health and well-being” [2]. PSMU can be linked to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and childhood maltreatment.

## **2. Childhood Maltreatment and Cyberbullying.**

With the rise of the internet and social media, cyberbullying or online-bullying has also increased. Cyberbullying is defined by Patchin and Hinduja as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices” [3]. Excessive use of social media creates an environment where cyberbullying can thrive and allows for the bullying to be done remotely. In this way, the victim could still be targeted outside of school and in their private spaces. Cyberbullying is a problem nowadays, with one study finding that over 50% of the students in the study were involved in cyberbullying in the last three months in some way, as the perpetrator, victim or both [4].

Cyberbullying does not have only one direct cause, with childhood maltreatment being a possible cause. For instance, a study done in China found that childhood maltreatment is a strong predictor of involvement in cyberbullying [5]. The same study discusses that an explanation of this correlation could be the social learning theory, which explains that behavior is a result of observing and imitating others. As these maltreated children grew up, they could have learned the abusive behavior and were more likely to inflict abuse on others. However, childhood maltreatment does not always result in the person becoming a perpetrator, as they could also become revictimized. A Pearson correlation analysis has shown that there was also a positive correlation between childhood maltreatment and cyberbullying victimization [6]. The abused becoming the abuser or the victim becoming victimized again later on in their lives is also referred to as the cycle of violence [7]. While the victim does not always become the perpetrator or a victim again, there is an increased risk.

As a result, childhood maltreatment is able to increase the chances of becoming both the perpetrator and the victim in a cyberbullying case. Cyberbullying itself is linked to consequences for adolescents such as, “poor school performance, mental health problems, substance use, and criminal involvement” [8]. Social media is the platform that allows for cyberbullying to go on, especially because it is easy to direct hate towards someone just through a few messages. The possibility of staying anonymous on social media platforms could also encourage the perpetrator to continue victimizing.

## **3. Depression**

Social media could also be a factor in causing depression among the youth, especially because, according to the World Health Organization, adolescence is a pe-

riod when people experience physical, social, and emotional changes [9]. Therefore, it is important for adolescents during this time to develop social and emotional habits that ensure a healthy mental state. All of these changes also mean adolescents could be more vulnerable to mental health illnesses, and so the link between social media and depression raises concern. According to Caroline Miller, there have been several studies that show teens and young adults who spend a lot of time on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, have a 13 to 66 percent higher rate of reported depression than those who spend less time on social media platforms [10]. One contributing factor is the superficial nature of social media, where only the best parts of someone's life are shown. The social comparison theory explains that people have a drive to compare themselves with others to evaluate their own opinions and abilities [11]. While people would usually prefer to be objective in their evaluations of themselves, they will compare themselves to others when they are unable to evaluate themselves in such an objective standard [11]. When an individual compares themselves to others, it will result in skewed perceptions of themselves. They could end up comparing themselves with someone they perceive to be better than them in some way. However, social media only displays the most ideal moments of life, and this combined with the crucial developmental period of adolescence, could lead to adolescents feeling inadequate. This feeling of inadequacy is caused by the feeling that other people are living happier and more fulfilling lives. Yitshak Alfasi referenced Fox and Morland, who found through their interviews that social comparison seems to happen often on Facebook and that this usually leads to feelings of negativity [12]. Feinstein also found a positive association between Facebook social comparison and depressive symptoms [12]. These studies suggest that platforms like Facebook serve as a place for individuals to compare their lives with the unrealistic standards set on social media, creating a sense of envy and negativity, which could result in depression.

Another less direct effect of social media that could lead to depression or depressive symptoms is the lack of sleep that excessive use of social media can cause. Sleep is important both physically and mentally, as it is important for our body to have a period of rest. The Child Mind Institute reports that adolescents who spend time on social media every day are 19% more likely to not get enough sleep [1]. According to the CDC, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends 13 - 18-year-olds to sleep 8 - 10 hours a day [13]. From this, we can tell that social media is preventing some adolescents from getting the recommended 8-10 hours of sleep per day. The Child Mind Institute also reported that teens who don't get enough sleep are more than twice as likely to report depressive symptoms than those who do get enough sleep [1]. Furthermore, adolescents who don't get enough sleep over a period of time causes them to accumulate "sleep debt." The NIH defines sleep debt as when the total amount of sleep someone lost out on is added up [14]. Sleep debt can be dangerous and as shown by a study, less sleep can increase the risk for major depression [15]. To conclude, there is a relationship

between excessive social media use, sleep deprivation, and depression. As a result, managing time spent on social media is important for both healthy sleep and better mental health.

#### 4. Loneliness

Social media also serves as an alternative way for adolescents to gain social support and contact. On the positive side, it allows adolescents to contact peers and receive support from others much more easily. It can help build an online community in which a sense of community can be built. Social media was especially important during the COVID-19 lockdown, during which in-person contact was limited. Without many ways to contact people, many adolescents turn to social media to help with their feelings of loneliness. A survey done among 2165 Belgian adolescents about their feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and happiness levels during COVID-19 shows that many of them used social media to deal with feeling lonely during this time [16]. However, the study showed that using social media to deal with loneliness did not affect the happiness of the participants. In fact, there was even a negative correlation between social media use to deal with loneliness and happiness [16]. The negative correlation could imply that face-to-face socialization is much more effective than social media socialization and that online socialization is not a good enough replacement for physical, social relations.

Adolescents are particularly susceptible to feelings of loneliness especially because they are still developing. At first, it seems like social media would be beneficial for loneliness, as it is a quick and reliable way to get in contact with someone without having to see them in person. However, Çiftci *et al.* had a study that showed that there is actually a relationship between social media and loneliness ( $p < 0.05$ ) [17]. Their data shows the level of loneliness increases as the level of social media addiction also increases. Similarly, Çiftci *et al.* also stated that several other studies, like the one done by Bayram and Gündoğmuş, also determined that adolescents who spent more time on social media (more than three to four hours a day) were reportedly more lonely than those who spent less time on social media [17]. These studies could back the claim that social media doesn't actually help with loneliness as much as it seems like it could, but it could even be the cause of an even higher level of loneliness.

#### 5. Anxiety

Anxiety is common in the world and is experienced by everyone at one point. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), anxiety can be characterized by “feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure” [18]. Anxiety is not always negative, as it can be helpful to performance levels in the short term, but anxiety does become a problem as it becomes chronic [19]. Anxiety disorders have the ability to affect someone's daily activities, and according to the World Health Organization (WHO), anxiety disorders are also estimated to affect 4% of the world's population [20]. There are

many different kinds of anxiety disorders ranging from phobias to social anxiety, and panic disorders, each with its own set of challenges. Anxiety disorders also have the chance to develop into other problems, such as substance use, depression, and suicidal thoughts [20]. Anxiety is commonplace and can lead to several other problems, which brings up the question: What can cause anxiety?

Social media can be a source of anxiety among adolescents and can also be a place for people who already have anxiety to continue experiencing it. Social media has been found to be particularly attractive to already socially anxious individuals because of their preference for online interactions. However, while socially anxious individuals may want to interact online, they are likely to engage in negative behaviors such as upward comparison, making it harder for them to achieve the socialization they want [21]. Besides, social media can cause anxiety among adolescents because of feelings of FOMO (“Fear Of Missing Out”). Hughes references Graham D.L. in stating that FOMO is the anxiety that occurs when individuals are afraid they missed out on some kind of interesting event [19]. Many adolescents feel pressured to frequently check social media to see what their friends are up to and to see what they have missed out on, resulting in social anxiety. In his study, Hughes was also able to find that the amount of social media platforms an individual had was able to significantly predict anxiety [19]. These findings indicate that social media while offering an opportunity for connection, is also a place for anxiety to develop because of the constant comparison, whether that be through upward comparison or through feelings of FOMO.

## 6. Further Direction

With more people being concerned about social media, there is still much more research to be done before we can fully understand the positives and the negatives of social media. While this paper primarily focused on the negatives of social media, it can’t be denied that there are also some positives. Besides having a connection to mental illnesses like depression and anxiety, social media can also help with these mental problems, as an online space could be a place for peer support that an individual might not be able to find offline. Adolescents who have experienced childhood maltreatment or have anxiety disorders have also been shown to turn to social media for support. As a result, the conflicting results mean that further research is needed to determine the overall impact of social media on adolescents.

Research has varied results, with certain populations being more affected than others. It also seems that certain populations could be more affected by social media while others are not as affected. For example, some studies have shown that their female participants tend to be more affected negatively by social media than their male participants do. For example, Geng *et al.* found that female participants had higher levels of FOMO than their male participants [6]. Mishna *et al.* also found that females were more likely to be bully victims as compared to males [4]. While these differences could be attributed to biological differences, more re-

search could also be done on whether socialization differences can affect an individual's relationship with social media. Another idea that could be studied could be if an individual's relationship with social media could also vary from country to country. This idea is worth studying because studies reported cyberbullying rates in certain countries had higher frequencies [6]. It raises the question of if the culture of certain places affects how the youth interact with social media. Are there cultures with people more likely to interact with social media negatively or positively, and if so, what are the reasons behind this?

## 7. Conclusion

This paper explores the association, particularly negative ones, of social media with factors like loneliness, depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, and childhood maltreatment. Research has shown that social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic didn't increase happiness or loneliness levels. Social media also provides a platform for cyberbullying, and those who have experienced childhood maltreatment have a higher risk of being involved in this. Social media also correlates to depression through the lack of sleep excessive social media usage can cause. Social media could also perpetuate the anxiety of already socially anxious individuals and also cause anxiety through feelings of FOMO.

Discrepancies between numerous studies about the benefits or consequences of social media call for further research on social media in general. Some specific research that could be explored is if the demographic of the adolescent, such as gender or nationality, plays a big role in how they interact with social media. Social media is a vast and multifaceted topic, with many areas still unexplored or debated.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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