

The Influence of Social Media Use on the Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being of Young Adults: A Critical Examination

Sara Flannelly

Marywood University

SLAS 6013: Qualifying Seminar

PhD in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies

Spring 2025

Abstract

The prevalence of social media has been linked to significant mental health concerns among young adults, a demographic that shows high engagement rates on these platforms. This paper explores the relationship between social media usage and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem from multiple theoretical perspectives. The analysis utilizes Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory to explore how social media can influence psychological and social dynamics among young adults. The study highlights the complexities of online interactions, including cyberbullying, unrealistic expectations and the 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), which exacerbate mental health issues. The ethical implications are considered with a focus on the potential harm social media platforms can perpetuate as well. This research contributes to understanding the urgent need for policies that prioritize the well-being of young adults in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media, Mental Health, Young Adults, Anxiety, Depression, Cyberbullying, Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Policy Recommendations.

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Exploring the Impact of Social Media Usage on the Mental Well-Being of Young Adults.

Social media has become an integral part of modern life, especially among young adults. The pervasive usage of social media platforms has raised concerns about its potential effects on mental health (Beyari, 2023). According to a review by Bashir and Bhat (2017), social media usage can lead to various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, self-esteem and sleep disturbances. The authors suggest that constant exposure to information and the pressure to maintain an online presence can contribute to feelings of stress and inadequacy (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). Issues like cyberbullying and the tendency to engage in comparisons with others on social media platforms may intensify these problems, leading to more severe psychological effects (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). The correlation between the intensity of social media usage and mental well-being issues has also been explored by reputable sources such as The National Library of Medicine, which points to a clear link between these factors (Naslund et al., 2020).

This relevance has only intensified following the global COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by a large increase in social media consumption (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). The research on potential risk factors is extensive given the prevalence of the issue throughout the world. In recent years, the role of social media has become integrated into the daily experiences of young adults, influencing many aspects of their lives. As these young adults engage in content on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, concerns of the psychological effects have been a rise in topic (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). Publishers such as The National Library of Medicine began to draw connections between the intensity of social media usage and an array of mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Naslund et al., 2020).

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Research suggests that the higher frequency and longer duration of social media usage may correlate with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression and decreased self-esteem among young adults due to former research (Khalaf et al., 2023). This relationship may be influenced by individual factors such as resilience or pre-existing disorders, which could exacerbate or mitigate the psychological effects of social media usage. By analyzing this relationship, the study aims to offer insights that could add to preexisting research or assist with strategies to enhance mental well-being outcomes related to social media usage.

The National Library of Medicine states that "Fear of missing out" (FOMO) and attention-seeking behaviors such as frequent status updates and constantly checking for likes can exacerbate and mirror symptoms of anxiety due to the constant need to stay connected and the pressure to keep up with social interactions online (Shensa et al., 2018). It is suggested that individuals who engage in problematic social media usage such as arguing with others and/or experiences of cyber bullying can exacerbate symptoms of depression (Shensa et al., 2018). The National Library of Medicine also produced a study where findings suggested that social media usage was significantly associated with increased depression in young adults (Lin et al., 2016). Additionally, these studies highlight the need for increased awareness and interventions aimed at reducing harmful social media behaviors to mitigate their negative psychological impacts. Understanding these patterns can guide the development of targeted strategies to improve the mental well-being among frequent social media users.

Beyari (2023) also investigated the relationship between social media usage and mental health problems among young adults. The study found that excessive usage of social media was associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Furthermore, the research highlighted the role of social comparison on social media in contributing to negative mental

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health outcomes (Beyari, 2023). Young adults' experiences with social media usage reveal a complex relationship between the two domains. While social media offers opportunities for connection and communication, it can also have detrimental effects on mental health through various mechanisms such as cyberbullying, negative comparisons, and constant exposure to information (Beyari, 2023).

Therefore, this research will examine the impact social media usage has on the mental health of young adults. Researchers such as Beyari (2023), Bashir & Bhat (2017), and findings from the National Library of Medicine collectively reveal that higher engagement levels with social media correlate highly with mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem. These adverse effects are compounded by factors such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and intensive online interactions, which reinforce feelings of inadequacy and stress among young adults. Moving forward, it is crucial to foster greater awareness and develop strategic interventions that can help mitigate these negative impacts. Emphasizing balanced social media use and educating young adults on the potential psychological risks are vital steps toward enhancing mental health outcomes in this digitally connected age.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study stems from its potential to explain the complex relationship between social media usage and mental health among young adults. As social media becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, particularly for young adults, understanding its psychological impact is more crucial than ever. This research aims to highlight how constant interactions with digital content, from incessant exposure to idealized images to encounters with cyberbullying, may influence mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

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By exploring these dynamics, the study not only will explain underlying patterns but also will set the stage for creating targeted, effective interventions and insightful policies that prioritize mental well-being. This research is important as it goes beyond simply identifying a link between social media and mental distress as it also aims to look at different ways that social media influences young adults. The insights could greatly assist educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers by offering an understanding necessary for developing strategies and support systems. Implementing these strategies may help individuals navigate their digital experiences more healthily and promote a healthy relationship with social media usage. Ultimately, this study contributes to a larger societal goal of ensuring the well-being of individuals within society.

Thesis Statement

This research explores the impact of social media on the mental health of young adults, identifying correlations between online interactions and increased psychological distress, and proposes strategic interventions to enhance overall well-being while utilizing these apps.

Literature Review

Exploring the impact of social media on mental well-being in young adults has become very relevant due to the vast number of young people constantly online. The effects of social media usage are complex: it connects us like never before and serves as an important platform for self-expression and community building, but it also has a darker side. Research indicates a link between heavy social media use and elevated risks of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Khalaf et al., 2023).

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Several studies have drawn attention to how deep the impact can run, showing that intense engagement with social media can correlate with greater levels of depression, particularly among young adults (Khalaf et al., 2023). This correlation raises important questions about how professionals can develop effective strategies to counteract these negative effects without losing the benefits that social media can offer. However, there's also a positive angle to consider. Some research points out the supportive aspects of social media, like creating connections that might not otherwise occur and providing a space for positive self-expression (Vaingankar et al., 2022). These aspects can play a protective role in mental health, suggesting that if we can find the right balance, social media could be a tool for good rather than a risk. Recognizing the dual impact of these platforms is key.

Social Media

Social media refers to a variety of online platforms that enable users to create, share content, and participate in social networking (Shensa et al., 2018). These platforms range from blogs to networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, each designed to fulfill different social interaction needs. Commonly, these platforms facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos and photos. Ultimately, social media serves as a digital space for individuals to engage in communication and community-building activities, transcending traditional boundaries of time and space (Shensa et al., 2018).

Social media usage is the manner and extent to which individuals interact with these digital platforms (Bekalu et al., 2023). It includes various behaviors such as posting updates, sharing content, commenting on others' posts, and private messaging. The frequency, duration, and type of activities conducted on social media contribute to the overall usage (Bekalu et al., 2023).

Usage patterns may vary as some users may scroll through feeds without much interaction, while

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others actively create content and engage with other users frequently. The level of engagement may significantly shape an individual's experience with social media.

Mental Well-Being

Mental well-being refers to a state of psychological health and emotional balance that enables individuals to realize their abilities and cope with the normal stresses (Gautam et al., 2024). A critical aspect of mental well-being is the presence or absence of mental health issues, such as depression. Depression is a common but serious mood disorder that negatively affects how a person feels, thinks, and handles daily activities (Gautam et al., 2024). Understanding the influence of factors like social media usage on mental well-being is important given the rising prevalence of depression, especially among young adults as technology continues to advance (Gautam et al., 2024).

Impact of Social Media on the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents and Young Adults

The pervasive influence of social media on the mental health of adolescents and young adults has increasingly become a focal point in psychological research, as discussed in the systematic review by Khalaf et al. (2023). According to the article, over one billion individuals are currently active users of Facebook alone, with global social media usage reaching 3.484 billion in 2019, reflecting a 9% increase from the previous year (Khalaf et al., 2023). The growth of social media engagement presents a crucial context for examining its psychological ramifications. The authors highlight that while social media can create connections and provide important opportunities for communication and information dissemination, there is a significant concern about its impact on mental well-being, particularly among the younger demographic that represents most active users.

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The review thoroughly assesses the dual-faceted nature of social media's impact, indicating that its use is closely tied to increased risks of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Particularly alarming is the association between high social media usage and mental distress, self-harming behaviors, and suicidality among teens as evidenced in various studies cited in the review. Also, the article discusses how certain social media behaviors, like cyberbullying and sleep disruption due to late-night device usage, exacerbate these mental health challenges (Khalaf et al., 2023). On the contrary, there are beneficial dimensions to social media use, such as enhanced social support, self-expression, and identity exploration, which can potentially counterbalance some negative effects. However, these benefits often depend heavily on the nature of the user's social interactions and their existing mental health status.

Mental Well-Being and Gender

Matud et al., study explored the interconnectedness of gender and mental/psychological well-being. Their research looked into how gender influences various aspects of psychological and mental health, suggesting that understanding these dynamics is important for developing more effective mental health strategies and support systems specifically for different gender needs (Matud et al., 2019). The study uses a comprehensive approach, analyzing psychological patterns across different genders, aiming to identify specific factors that may contribute to well-being or distress experienced by each gender (Matud et al., 2019)

One of the significant findings of the study shows how societal and cultural pressures related to gender roles impact mental health outcomes (Matud et al., 2019). The research shows that women may experience higher rates of certain stresses due to societal expectations and emotional expressiveness, which could contribute to mental health challenges compared to men (Matud et al., 2019). The study also explores how masculine norms, such as the stigma against

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expressing vulnerability, might adversely affect men's psychological well-being, potentially leading to underreporting of mental health issues and lower engagement with mental health services (Matud et al., 2019).

The implications of this research show the need for mental health services and interventions that are aware of and sensitive to gender-specific factors. Mental health professionals can use these insights to approach treatment with a more nuanced understanding of how gender impacts psychological well-being. Additionally, the study encourages a broader societal shift towards more inclusive and supportive environments that acknowledge and address gender-specific mental health needs (Matud et al., 2019).

Association between Social Media Use and Depression

This critical review by Khalaf et al. shows the need for more research to support the interactions between social media use and mental health outcomes in adolescents and young adults. While the evidence points towards a generally negative correlation, the variability in individual experiences and the influence of mediating factors such as types of social media activity, personal resilience, and offline social environments suggest that the actual impact may be highly individualistic.

The study conducted by Lin Yi Lin and colleagues provides information about how social media use impacts the mental health of young adults across the United States. Involving a nationally representative sample of 1,787 individuals aged 19 to 32, the study presents compelling statistical evidence linking heavy social media use to increased levels of depression (Lin et al., 2016). Specifically, the findings revealed that young adults in the highest quartile of daily social media usage had a higher likelihood of experiencing depression, with an adjusted odds ratio

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(AOR) of 1.66 compared to those using it the least (Lin et al., 2016). This relationship is further emphasized by the increase in depression with increased frequency of social media visits per week and the overall global frequency score, which tracked how often respondents engaged with various social media platforms.

What's interesting about these results is the relationship indicated between the intensity of social media engagement and the severity of depressive symptoms. The younger adults are engaged in their social media feeds, the more likely they are to feel depressed. This expressed the urgent need for preventive measures and mental health interventions made for heavy social media users, especially since platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are deeply integrated into their daily routines.

Social Media and It's Positive Impact on Mental Well-Being

In the qualitative study conducted by Janhavi Ajit Vaingankar et al. (2022), the positive side of social media's influence on youth mental health is explored. Utilizing a mix of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with youth aged 15 to 24 in Singapore, the study accounts to understand how social media platforms can create positive mental health outcomes. This approach showed that through connections, engagement with content, and personal expression on social media, young users can experience significant boosts in aspects of mental health such as happiness, coping, and the development of a positive self-concept (Vaingankar et al., 2022).

Statistically, a significant proportion of teenagers and young adults are engaged in digital interactions, showing that 42% of youth spend upwards of 10 hours daily online (Vaingankar et al., 2022). This engagement shows the importance of understanding and leveraging the positive

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potential of social media. Over the last decade, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and newer entrants like TikTok have transformed from communication tools to new and bigger spaces for community building and social support. These platforms offer opportunities for young people to connect across geographical and cultural areas, creating a sense of global community and belonging that was previously unattainable (Vaingankar et al., 2022).

The research emphasizes how social media serves as a vital outlet for personal expression and identity exploration, crucial during the formative years of 15 to 24 (Vaingankar et al., 2022). The study's participants indicated that platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow them to narrate their own stories and share experiences that contribute to their self-concept and emotional resilience (Vaingankar et al., 2022). Importantly, the study also highlights how these online interactions often translate into real-world support networks, offering mental health benefits such as enhanced coping strategies during tough times, amplifying feelings of happiness (Vaingankar et al., 2022). These insights not only provide a counterargument to the typical discourse around social media and mental health but also suggest ways for how digital platforms can be better designed or utilized to increase mental health benefits.

Social Media Use Interventions for Mental Well-Being

In the systematic review conducted by Ruth Plackett et al., the impact of social media use interventions on adult mental well-being was analyzed. The review evaluated various intervention strategies across 23 select studies to determine their efficacy in mitigating mental health issues related to extensive social media usage. Among the different intervention strategies reviewed, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based interventions emerged as particularly effective (Plackett et al., 2023).

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CBT, which is fundamentally altering negative patterns of thought and behavior that contribute to individuals' distress, was shown to be more successful in improving mental well-being compared to simpler strategies such as reducing social media use or enforcing complete abstinence (Plackett et al., 2023). The review shows that 83% of the therapy-based interventions, which utilized strategies similar to CBT techniques, manifested improvements in mental health outcomes (Plackett et al., 2023). This contrasts with the 20% and 25% effectiveness rates for interventions that advised abstaining from social media usage (Plackett et al., 2023). This not only highlights the potential of CBT in addressing the impacts of social media but also emphasizes the necessity of structured and evidence-based approaches over reductions in usage (Plackett et al., 2023).

The review showed that depression was the most frequently improved outcome in these studies, with 70% showing significant alleviation of depressive symptoms following interventions such as CBT (Plackett et al., 2023). This particularly shows the efficacy of CBT-oriented strategies, given its proven effectiveness in treating depression by restructuring negative thoughts and promoting more adaptive behaviors and emotional responses (Plackett et al., 2023). This is important for both clinical practice and policymaking, advocating for a shift towards more therapy-based interventions rather than simplistic usage reductions to assist with the adverse mental health effects of social media.

Social Media Usage and Gender

Svensson, Johnson, and Olsson explore in their article how gender influences the relationship between well-being and various digital media activities. As digital platforms become more relevant in daily life, this study looks into the impacts these engagements might have by focusing on possible differences between male and female users.

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The authors designed their study using a cross-sectional method, analyzing the feedback from a large group of adolescents (Svensson et al., 2022). They concentrated on differentiating the data based on gender to see if digital habits and their effects varied between males and females. They looked at a variety of digital activities ranging from social media use to gaming and streaming, pointing out that these different forms of media might interact uniquely with male and female adolescents' mental health and overall well-being (Svensson et al., 2022).

One of the standout points from the study is the differences in how digital interactions affected males vs. females. For instance, the study found that certain digital activities might impact the two genders differently in terms of mental health outcomes and overall happiness levels (Svensson et al., 2022). This research by Svensson et al. is important as it not only increases our understanding of the digital world's impact on younger people but also opens up conversations about how gender plays a role in this dynamic. This study also encourages a more personalized approach to addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by genders in regard to social media usage (Svensson et al., 2022).

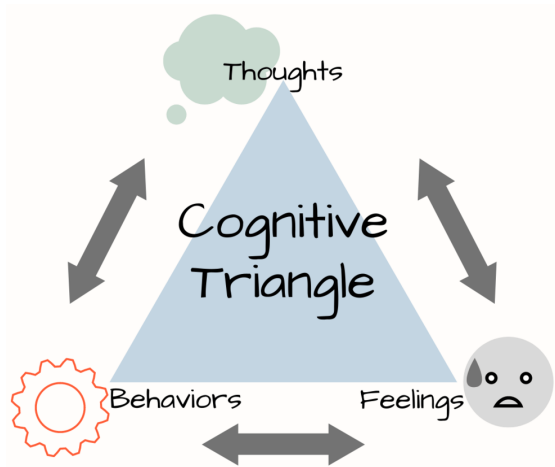
Analysis

In reviewing the impact of social media on mental health among young adults, the literature suggests several emerging themes. These themes cover the psychological effects such as increased anxiety and depression, engagement in negative social interactions like cyberbullying, comparison of oneself to societal expectations and emotional consequences of the 'fear of missing out' (FOMO). These themes also touch on the positive aspects of social media usage such as information and access to resources. These themes are analyzed from three distinct perspectives; psychological, sociological, and developmental in which each are then supported

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by different theoretical frameworks.

Figure 1. Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Main, 2022).



From a psychological perspective, Cognitive Behavioral Theory illustrates how negative automatic thoughts, provoked by interactions on social media, can lead to emotional disturbances (Ruggiero et al., 2018). Ruggiero et al. (2018) expressed that the traditional "second wave" cognitive therapies, which include standard cognitive therapy (CT) and constructivist approaches, focus mostly on the cognitive content related to self-perceptions. These perceptions include self-belief, self-schemata, and personality organizations, in which can help in understanding how young adults might internalize social media interactions. These interactions may often lead to distorted self-belief through constant social comparison and individuals seeking feedback from others. (See Figure 1).

Similarly, Social Comparison Theory explains feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, as social media users constantly measure themselves against idealized individuals on social media (Caliskan et al. (2024). According to Caliskan et al. (2024), Social Comparison Theory helps understand how individuals perceive themselves by comparing themselves to others, which has

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become increasingly prevalent when social media became relevant. Caliskan et al. (2024) emphasizes that the increase in research around Social Comparison Theory is significantly driven by social media's influence on body image and self-esteem. This is relevant to analyzing young adults' mental health, as these demographics frequently engage with social media platforms, where they are constantly comparing themselves with peers and public figures. These comparisons often revolve around physical appearance, lifestyle, and perceived successes, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem (Caliskan et al., 2024).

The article by Caliskan et al. (2024) also explores how social media intensifies feelings of jealousy and affects life satisfaction. The authors suggest that social comparison on social media is not always a passive observation but an engagement that shapes individuals' motivation and behaviors (Caliskan et al., 2024). For example, if young adults see their peers achieving certain milestones on social media, it may motivate some to improve but may also demotivate others, leading to feelings of inadequacy or discontent with their own lives.

Sociologically, theories like Social Capital Theory discuss the two sided nature of social media as a tool for enhancing or decreasing social bonds, which directly impacts mental health (Grover et al., 2022). Social Capital Theory provides a framework to understand how social media platforms are changing social interactions and engagement. According to the literature review by Grover et al. (2022), social media has become a huge influence on various aspects of human life, mostly altering how individuals engage within their social environments. Social Capital Theory, which focuses on the benefits individuals gain from these platforms and relationships, is important in exploring how these online interactions might replace, increase or decrease the traditional social support systems.

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Grover et al. (2022) suggest that while social media offers opportunities to connect with others, the quality and authenticity of these connections may differ significantly from those formed face to face. These online networks may give young adults access to social resources such as information, emotional support, or professional opportunities which can contribute positively to their social capital. However, the same platforms can also lead to feelings of isolation, envy, or inadequacy through negative social comparisons or the highlight reel effect, where only the most positive aspects of others' lives are presented.

By integrating Social Capital Theory into social media's role in shaping mental health outcomes, researchers and practitioners can create specific interventions that maximize the positive aspects of online connectivity while also decreasing its potential harms. This is important as social media usage continues to evolve and play a deeper role in everyday life, influencing mental health.

Media Influence Theory explores how these platforms influence user perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately, their mental health. Borah (2016) suggests that the theory consists of several core concepts that explain the power of media, such as social media, in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and the world around them.

One main takeaway of Media Influence Theory is the concept of framing effects. Borah (2016) describes framing as the way media presentations can influence our interpretation of things by emphasizing certain aspects over others. For young adults, social media platforms frame concepts of success, beauty, and lifestyle in ways that might not align with their personal realities, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. Borah (2016) is also agenda-setting. This refers to the media's ability to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda. In the context of social media, what is shared may impact what young

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adults perceive as priority concerns. For example, achievements, appearances, or social issues in which affect their emotional and mental focus or contribute to anxiety or stress.

Lastly priming, as discussed by Borah (2016), is the media's role in having certain representations or associations before other stimuli. Regarding social media, repetitive exposure to certain types of content can 'prime' young adults to respond emotionally or behaviorally in specific ways. For example, constant exposure to idealized body images can prime negative self-assessments concerning body image, which is closely linked to mental health issues such as depression or body dysmorphia.

Ethical Implications

The unresolved issues concerning social media's impact on the mental health of young adults present ethical dilemmas that demand immediate and thoughtful consideration. The center of these ethical concerns revolves around the fundamental right to mental health. The responsibility lies with social media companies to ensure their platforms do not harm users' mental well-being. Given the influence these platforms have on everyday lives, particularly among young adults, it becomes imperative for these companies to align their operational goals with the ethics of care and responsibility for other's well-being.

Stephen (2021) explores the autonomy that platforms have in moderating content, combined with their prioritization of profit over user safety in which poses risks. Stephen (2021) emphasizes that while social media companies enjoy the freedom due to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act because it protects them from liability for user-generated content, this also creates an environment where harmful speech can increase with few repercussions

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(Stephen, 2021). This legislative piece places power in the hands of social media companies to shape the discourse within their platforms without accountability.

The prevalence of harmful content such as misinformation, hate speech, and cyberbullying is harmful, and the sites put the risk on individuals' safety and well-being. Stephen (2021) raises important ethical questions about the balance between free speech and the protection of users, particularly young adults who are highly susceptible to the adverse effects of negative social media interactions. The dilemma here revolves around the extent to which social media platforms should be held accountable for the mental health impacts of the content they allow and the environments they create.

There is a need for an approach to regulation that better aligns the interests of social media companies with the well-being of their users. Stephen suggests a model specifically advocating for the creation of a Social Platform Regulatory Council (SPRC) (Stephen, 2021). This council would function similarly to the Advertising Self-Regulatory Council, setting and enforcing standards that prioritize user safety without going against free speech (Stephen, 2021). This model looks to create a regulatory environment that not only decreases the risks associated with harmful speech but also upholds the principles of open communication and innovation that are central to social media sites (Stephen, 2021).

These reforms are important to ensure that social media can be a space for positive engagement rather than a source of psychological distress. By rethinking the frameworks within which social media operates, there is potential to reduce harmful online interactions and improve the overall mental health outcomes for young adults (American Psychological Association, 2024).. While balancing regulation with freedom of expression is a difficult challenge, its impact on public health calls for a proactive approach. This will require collaboration between

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policymakers, mental health experts, and the community to ensure that these sites are safe and supportive for all users.

The principle of informed consent is important in the current social media platforms. When young adults register on these platforms, they often do so without a full understanding of how deeply their mental health might be affected. The typical terms of service and privacy policies do not make clear the potential negative impacts of prolonged social media use, nor do they adequately explain how personal data is used to manipulate user experience through content and targeted advertisements (American Psychological Association, 2024). This lack of transparency means users cannot truly give informed consent, which is a fundamental ethical violation.

Also, the issue of equity and access further complicates the ethics of this. As social media becomes integrated into many aspects of life including education, professional networking, and social interaction, those who choose, or need, to limit their use due to mental health concerns might face social and professional exclusion (American Psychological Association, 2024). This potential for creating a new form of inequality based on digital participation shows ethical concerns where individuals must balance mental health against essential social engagement.

Policy Recommendations

It is important for policymakers to implement regulations that show how content is created, shared, and promoted on social media platforms. This would involve setting strict guidelines on the operation of algorithms to prevent them from prioritizing engagement at the expense of users' mental health. Those operating these platforms should monitor compliance, offering accountability and transparency in social media operations.

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Social media companies should be required under new policies to provide clear information about how their algorithms work and how user data is utilized. This includes offering users more control over their data and the kind of content they wish to interact with. They should allow users to see why certain posts are being shown, why certain ads are targeted towards them, and how their data is being used in real-time.

The recent report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dual impact—both harmful and beneficial—of social media on the health and mental well-being of adolescents and young adults. To ensure balanced and healthy engagement with social media platforms, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023) suggested the establishment of a new set of standards. These standards should focus on platform design, data usage, and transparency. The involvement of the International Organization for Standardization is recommended to facilitate the creation of these standards, ensuring that they are comprehensive and globally applicable (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). Social media companies are encouraged to actively participate in this initiative and to follow the established standards to create a safer online environment for users.

Recognizing the large issue of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment, the article advocates for systems to report, follow up, and handle incidents of online abuse (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). Systems should be user-friendly, transparent, and hold perpetrators accountable. Implementing these measures is essential to protect adolescents and young adults from immediate harm. The report also suggests that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) create revisions of its current regulations to create new

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measures, especially in ways that do not conflict with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023)

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is recommended to develop or expand support and intervention programs for young people who experience online harms (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). These programs could pull from existing frameworks like StopBullying.gov and the 988 crisis call line to provide quick and effective support.

Increased research to further explore and understand the complex relationships between social media use and mental health would be beneficial. This research should aim to explore societal influence, the effects of specific platform features on mental health and the effectiveness of strategies to overcome struggles with mental well-being. This would advocate for the creation of long-term studies and the facilitation of data access for researchers by social media companies (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023).

The Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force has issued a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that social media serves as a positive force in the lives of America's youth (Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force, 2024). Their report dated September 10, 2024, explores key strategies that the Biden administration, Congress, and federal regulatory bodies were urged to adopt to decrease potential risks while increasing the benefits of social media usage (Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force, 2024). The main focus of these recommendations is enhancing social media literacy. This would lead to the development and implementation of educational programs for youth, their parents, and educators. It would cover topics like navigating online risks, misinformation, and establishing healthy habits with social media. Implementing this program into schools, community

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curriculums and on online platforms would be the most accessible and effective way for users to understand the risks and benefits of social media usage.

The recommendations also emphasize the need for stronger privacy protections to keep users from data practices often employed by social media companies. This involves expansion of existing privacy legislation such as the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), ensuring that the collection, usage, and sharing of data by social media are done transparently and ethically (Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force, 2024). Establishing stricter boundaries on how personal information is handled would protect the privacy of young users.

To decrease the negative effects social media has on individuals, networks should mandate that all social media platforms integrate easily accessible mental health resources. These might include direct links to mental health hotlines, coping skills tools for stress management and relaxation, and educational resources about how social media can affect your mental health. Collaborations with mental health organizations could ensure that the resources provided are reputable and evidenced based. Encouraging positive interactions on social media with guidelines and compliance towards supportive communities rather than creating negative or isolating experiences could change the way the world utilizes these platforms. Platform features that reward positive feedback, constructive conversations, and community support should be promoted, possibly even regulated by policy.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work together towards an environment where social media acts as a tool for positive growth and learning rather than a source of risk for young individuals. These policies aim to protect users so they may utilize social media in a healthy manner.

Summary

This paper helps explore how social media impacts the mental well-being of young adults, looking at the association with increased instances of anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem. Utilizing theories such as Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Social Capital Theory, this study shows the dynamics influenced by engagement on social media.

Social media's two-sided nature was a focus point of the discussion, highlighting the effects of constant exposure to idealized lifestyles and ongoing social comparisons. It was argued that these platforms may lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth, as young adults compare their everyday realities with the lives portrayed by peers and celebrities. Cognitive Behavioral Theory demonstrates how repetitive interactions with content on social media could create harmful cognitive patterns. These patterns can evolve into persistent mental health issues such as chronic anxiety and depression. The paper linked specific user behaviors on social media with psychological outcomes, suggesting that frequent usage on social media may lead to mental health complications.

Social Comparison Theory explained the psychological impact of constant comparative activities on social media. This theory helped articulate why young adults might feel a decrease in life satisfaction and self-esteem due to comparison of online images of others' lives. On the other hand, Social Capital Theory explains a broader perspective on how social media affects social relationships, discussing how these platforms could potentially create social connections and community support. The theory also suggests the potential for increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, emphasizing that while social media can create connections, it can also act as a barrier to interpersonal interaction.

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The debate is ongoing when discussing social media's role in shaping mental health outcomes among young adults. It does show the critical need for user education, better regulatory frameworks, and more ethically responsible platform management. The findings suggest that while social media offer benefits in terms of connectivity and information access, there is a need to decrease its adverse effects through strategies that prioritize user well-being.

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