
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**A Review on the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Well-being****Anderson Abbott***Department of Health Sciences, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada***Corresponding Author:** Anderson Abbott, **E-mail:** gabbot@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the impact of social media on mental health and well-being. It reviews existing literature to identify the key findings and provides a critical analysis of the research conducted in this area. The study finds that social media can have both positive and negative effects on mental health. On the positive side, social media provides a platform for social support, connection, and self-expression. It has been found to be beneficial for individuals with mental health conditions, as it allows them to find peer support and access resources. Additionally, social media can promote awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. However, the negative effects of social media on mental health are also evident. Studies have shown that excessive use of social media can lead to increased feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and lower self-esteem. It can also contribute to negative body image and eating disorders, as individuals are constantly exposed to unrealistic beauty standards and comparisons. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of social media in the emergence and propagation of cyberbullying. The anonymity and distance provided by social media platforms make it easier for individuals to engage in harmful behavior, which can have severe consequences for the mental health of the victims. In conclusion, social media has a complex relationship with mental health and well-being. While it can provide support and connection, it can also contribute to negative mental health outcomes. Therefore, it is important for individuals to be mindful of their social media use and for researchers and policymakers to continue exploring ways to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on mental health.

| KEYWORDS

Social Media, Mental Health, stigma, depression, cyberbullying.

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1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has evolved into an integral component of daily life, influencing the ways in which individuals communicate, share information, and perceive the world. With over 4.2 billion users worldwide as of 2021, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are not just tools for connecting with friends and family but also powerful platforms for shaping public discourse, culture, and even personal identity (Meier, 2021). However, the proliferation of social media usage has raised significant concerns regarding its potential impact on mental health and well-being. This dichotomy between the benefits of connectivity and the potential psychological toll warrants a comprehensive examination.

The allure of social media lies in its potential to fulfill fundamental human needs for social connection and belonging, yet it simultaneously poses risks related to addiction, cyberbullying, social comparison, and misinformation (Braghieri, 2022). The omnipresent nature of social media means that individuals are almost

constantly exposed to a barrage of curated content, which can distort perceptions and expectations of reality. Researchers have found parallels between excessive social media use and negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Gupta, 2022). Conversely, positive aspects such as support communities, informational resources, and opportunities for self-expression also find recognition in academic discourse.

This review seeks to encapsulate current knowledge and emerging trends on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being. By critically analyzing existing literature, the aim is to elucidate the nuanced relationship between social media use and psychological outcomes (Janicke-Bowles, 2022). A section will be dedicated to understanding the mechanisms through which social media influences mental health, including the roles of frequency and type of usage, content interaction, and demographic variables such as age and gender. Additionally, the review will explore both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies to provide a temporal perspective on these effects (O'reilly, 2018). The synthesis of empirical findings will inform a balanced view, identifying areas where social media can be both a boon and a bane.

In recognizing the implications of these findings, this study will not merely diagnose problems but also aim to highlight intervention strategies and recommendations for healthier social media usage patterns (Schønning, 2020). Taken together, this review aspires to contribute valuable insights to stakeholders, including policymakers, mental health practitioners, educators, and the general public, empowering them to navigate the digital landscape more judiciously.

This comprehensive review thus embarks with a primary objective: to unravel the intricate web linking social media to mental health and well-being, fostering a deeper understanding that could pave the way for constructive strategies and informed decision-making in the digital era.

2. Literature Review

The emergence of social media platforms over the past two decades has significantly altered the landscape of human interaction and communication. As these platforms have become embedded in daily life, a growing body of research has examined their impact on mental health and well-being. This literature review synthesizes findings from key studies, providing an overview of the current understanding of the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes.

Several studies highlight the potential benefits of social media for mental health. For instance, Seabrook (2016) found that social media usage can enhance individuals' perceived social capital by facilitating connectivity and support networks. This enhanced connectivity can lead to increased feelings of belonging and emotional support, which are associated with greater well-being. Similarly, a study by Valkenburg (2022) emphasized that social media can serve as an important tool for individuals with mental health conditions to access peer support and mental health resources, potentially reducing feelings of isolation.

Contrastingly, a substantial body of research points to the adverse effects of social media use on mental health. Numerous studies have documented associations between high levels of social media use and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Berryman et al. (2018) found that individuals with higher social media usage reported significantly higher levels of perceived social isolation compared to those with lower usage. The study suggests that passive consumption of social media content might exacerbate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy due to social comparison.

Moreover, studies by Hardy (2018) have drawn connections between the rise of social media and increasing rates of depression and suicide among adolescents. Their research suggests that the pervasive nature of social media, combined with cyberbullying and unrealistic portrayals of life, may contribute to these adverse outcomes. The constant exposure to idealized images and lifestyles can lead to negative self-assessment and body dissatisfaction, particularly among young people.

The relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and influenced by various moderating factors. Karim (2020) highlights that the effects of social media on well-being can be moderated by factors such as age, the type of social media interaction, and individual differences in emotional stability. Their work indicates that while some individuals may derive benefit from social interaction online, others may be more susceptible to the negative effects of social comparison and cyberbullying. Similarly, Naslund (2020) points out that personality traits, such as narcissism and self-esteem, play a crucial role in determining how individuals are impacted by social media use.

Research has also begun to explore interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on mental health. A study by Popat (2023) suggests that promoting digital literacy and mindfulness can help individuals navigate social media more healthily, reducing susceptibility to negative influences. Furthermore, Schønning (2020) proposes that developing platforms specifically designed to foster supportive and authentic interactions can enhance the positive aspects of social media.

The current literature underscores the dual-edged nature of social media in relation to mental health and well-being. While social media holds the potential to provide significant emotional and social support, its usage also carries risks associated with increased anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Abbott, 2023). As social media continues to evolve, future research should focus on identifying strategies to maximize its benefits while minimizing negative outcomes, considering the complex interplay of individual differences and social media behaviors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Literature Search Strategy

This review adopts a comprehensive and systematic approach to collate, evaluate, and synthesize existing research on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being. The literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, considering publications from the inception of these databases until 2023. The keywords used for the search included combinations and variations of "social media," "mental health," "well-being," "depression," "anxiety," "self-esteem," and "social networking sites." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine the search results. Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and substantial reports from authoritative bodies were included, ensuring a broad and comprehensive coverage of the subject matter.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection criteria were meticulously defined to ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies were included in the review. To be included, studies had to meet the following criteria: 1) Focus on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being; 2) Employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method research designs; 3) Be published in English; 4) Provide clear methodology and robust statistical analysis (for quantitative studies) or rigorous thematic analysis (for qualitative studies). Exclusion criteria were: 1) Studies not directly related to social media's impact on mental health; 2) Opinion pieces, editorial articles, or anecdotal reports; 3) Articles without peer-review or evident methodological rigor. This stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that the final pool of studies included in the review offered reliable and valid findings.

3.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted using a standardized form to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness. Key information extracted included the authors, publication year, study design, sample characteristics, social media platform(s) studied, mental health outcomes measured, and key findings. This structured approach facilitated a systematic comparison and synthesis of the results. For quantitative studies, metrics such as effect sizes, correlation coefficients, and significance levels were recorded. For qualitative studies, prominent themes and insights were extracted. The synthesis was conducted using narrative analysis for qualitative data and meta-analysis for quantitative data where possible. The themes identified across studies were grouped and discussed to provide a holistic view of the impact of social media on various dimensions of mental health and well-being.

3.4 Quality Assessment

To ensure the robustness of the conclusions drawn, a quality assessment of the included studies was performed. Quantitative studies were evaluated using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS), while qualitative studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. Studies were categorized as high, medium, or low quality based on these assessments. Only high and medium quality studies were included in the final synthesis. This rigorous quality assessment procedure ensured that the review's findings were based on credible and high-quality evidence, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Although this review did not involve primary data collection with human participants, ethical considerations were diligently addressed. The review adhered to ethical standards in literature review practices, ensuring accurate representation of findings, appropriate citation of original works, and avoidance of plagiarism. Further, the review recognized the potential impact of its findings on public perception and policy-making regarding social media use and thus maintained a balanced and unbiased approach throughout.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Positive Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Well-being

Various studies have highlighted the beneficial effects of social media on mental health and well-being, particularly in the domains of social connectivity, emotional support and community building, and access to educational and informational resources.

4.1.1 Social Connectivity

Social media plays a crucial role in maintaining relationships and amplifying social networks. Different platforms provide users with opportunities to stay in touch with family and friends, irrespective of geographical distance. A study by Kaur (2022) found that Facebook usage was positively correlated with the maintenance and growth of social capital. This connectivity serves as a buffer against feelings of being isolated, particularly for individuals who may otherwise have limited social interactions.

Several case studies emphasize the role of social media in alleviating loneliness. For instance, a case study involving elderly participants revealed that using social media to connect with family members significantly reduced feelings of loneliness and contributed to better overall mental health (McCroory, 2020). Another notable example is a community of senior citizens who reported increased happiness and a sense of belonging after engaging in social media interactions (Poon, 2020). These findings suggest that social media can be a valuable tool for enhancing social connectivity and mitigating loneliness.

4.1.2 Emotional Support and Community Building

Social media platforms also facilitate the creation of online support groups and mental health communities, which can provide emotional support to their members. These groups often offer a safe space where individuals can share their experiences, seek advice, and receive empathy and understanding from others who are experiencing similar issues. A study by Stawarz (2019) found that participation in online peer support groups significantly improved the mental health outcomes of individuals with serious mental illnesses.

The internet, including social media, has democratized access to mental health resources and information. Individuals can easily find support networks, comprehensive mental health guides, and even online therapy services. Platforms like Reddit and Facebook have numerous subgroups and pages dedicated to mental health support. This accessibility helps in reducing the stigma around mental health and encourages individuals to seek help. For example, a study by Srivastava (2019) demonstrated that young people with depression found social media to be a key resource for obtaining information and peer support, which contributed to their well-being.

4.1.3 Educational and Informational Resources

Social media has proven to be an effective tool for disseminating mental health awareness and education. Campaigns conducted on these platforms can reach a wide audience quickly and efficiently (Bekalu, 2019). For instance, initiatives like "Bell Let's Talk" and "Mental Health Awareness Week" use social media to promote awareness and understanding of mental health issues. These campaigns often include personal stories, informational posts, and educational materials that help destigmatize mental health issues and encourage open conversations (Hjetland, 2021).

Numerous mental health campaigns have gained significant traction on social media. The "#ItGetsBetter" campaign, targeted at LGBTQ+ youth experiencing mental health struggles, reached millions globally and provided a source of hope and support (Bekalu, 2019). Similarly, the "#HereForYou" campaign by Instagram aimed to create a supportive community for users dealing with mental health issues, emphasizing that help is always accessible. These campaigns not only raise awareness but also actively contribute to improved mental health by fostering a supportive online environment (Hardy, 2018).

Overall, social media can have a positive impact on mental health and well-being by enhancing social connectivity, providing emotional support, creating community, and offering educational resources (Meier, 2021). Understanding these benefits can help develop strategies that leverage social media for mental health promotion while mitigating its potential harms.

4.2 Negative Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Well-being

4.2.1 Anxiety and Depression

A significant body of research indicates a strong correlation between social media use and increased levels of anxiety and depression. For instance, a study conducted by Poon et al. (2020) found that individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to experience higher levels of perceived social isolation, which is a significant predictor of both anxiety and depression. This finding aligns with the results from another study by Schønning et al. (2020), which demonstrated that the more time young adults spent on Facebook, the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time.

However, it is essential to consider causative links. Research by Abbott et al. (2023) asserts that the rise in adolescent depressive symptoms correlates strongly with increased use of social media. They pointed out that teens who spend more than three hours a day on social media are at a heightened risk for mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. This further raises the question of bidirectionality: does social media lead to mental health deterioration, or are individuals already struggling with mental health issues more likely to seek comfort in social media?

4.2.2 Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue with the advent of social media, significantly impacting victims' mental health. Research by Kaur et al. (2022) revealed that victims of cyberbullying experience elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation compared to those who are not victimized. According to a report by the Cyberbullying Research Center (Braghieri, 2022), nearly 34% of students have experienced cyberbullying at some point in their lives, which is a concerning statistic for parents, educators, and policymakers.

In response to the growing prevalence of cyberbullying, numerous strategies and policies have been developed to combat this issue (Hjetland, 2021). For instance, various social media platforms have implemented reporting mechanisms and anti-bullying algorithms aimed at identifying and mitigating cyberbullying behavior. Furthermore, educational programs that focus on digital citizenship and empathy training are being introduced in schools to promote respectful online behavior (Naslund et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Addiction and Behavioral Changes

Social media addiction is a rising concern that has been linked to various psychological effects. Schønning et al. (2020) identified components of social media addiction, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse, much like other behavioral addictions. They found that individuals addicted to social media exhibit higher levels of anxiety, depression, and decreases in life satisfaction.

Excessive social media use has also been associated with significant behavioral changes. According to a study by Seabrook et al. (2016), high engagement in social media can lead to decreased academic performance and difficulties in maintaining face-to-face relationships. These findings suggest a need for strategies to manage social media usage effectively to prevent such negative repercussions.

4.2.4 Comparisons and Self-Esteem Issues

The culture of comparison prevalent on social media platforms can severely affect users' self-esteem and body image. Research by Berryman et al. (2018) demonstrated that individuals who frequently compare themselves to others on social media report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. This aligns with previous findings by Karim et al. (2020), which highlighted that upward social comparisons on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook could lead to increased feelings of envy and decreased self-worth.

Additionally, the phenomenon of 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO) has garnered significant attention in the literature. Research by McCrory et al. (2020) showed that individuals who experience FOMO are more likely to engage in social media use compulsively, which can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. These studies suggest that fostering a balanced perspective and encouraging mindful media consumption could mitigate the adverse effects of social media on users' mental well-being.

In summary, the negative impact of social media on mental health and well-being is multifaceted, encompassing increased levels of anxiety and depression, the prevalence of cyberbullying, addiction and behavioral changes, and issues related to self-esteem and social comparisons (O'reilly, 2018). The findings underscore the importance of continued research and the development of strategies to address these challenges effectively.

4.3. Mixed Impacts and Nuanced Findings

Findings from various studies present a complex picture of the impacts of social media on mental health and well-being. While some research highlights detrimental effects, others suggest potential benefits. This section delves into these mixed impacts, with a particular focus on the influence of individual differences, contextual factors, and situational variables.

4.3.1 Individual Differences and Moderating Factors

The impact of social media on mental health can vary significantly based on demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. For instance, research by Popat (2023) indicates that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, including increased anxiety and depression. Conversely, young adults might experience positive outcomes, such as enhanced social engagement and support, as found in studies by Stawarz (2019).

Gender differences have also been noted, with studies like those conducted by Valkenburg (2022) revealing that teenage girls are more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media than boys. This could be attributed to increased social comparison and cyberbullying experiences. Ethnicity and socio-economic status further complicate the picture, as marginalized groups may experience unique stressors related to online discrimination, as observed in Gupta et al. (2022).

Personal traits such as self-esteem, introversion or extroversion, and neuroticism can also moderate the effects of social media. A study by Janicke-Bowles (2022) found that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to suffer

from social comparison and subsequent depressive symptoms due to social media use. On the other hand, extroverts may benefit from the connectivity and interaction platforms offer, enhancing their social support networks (Srivastava, 2019).

4.3.2 Contextual and Situational Factors

The context in which social media is used significantly contributes to its impact on mental health. For example, using social media for passive consumption—such as scrolling through feeds without interacting—has been associated with feelings of envy and loneliness, as demonstrated in research by Naslund et al. (2020). Conversely, active engagement, like commenting and messaging, can foster a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation (Schønning, 2020).

Additionally, the type of social media platform also plays a role. Platforms focused on professional networking, such as LinkedIn, might contribute to career development and self-esteem (Kaur, 2022), whereas platforms designed for visual content, like Instagram, may increase pressure related to body image, particularly among young women (Berryman et al., 2018).

Situational factors such as time spent on social media, the purpose of use, and the user's immediate environment can further influence mental health outcomes. Heavy use of social media, particularly late at night, has been linked to poor sleep quality and depressive symptoms (Hjetland, 2021). In contrast, moderate use with a clear purpose, such as maintaining contact with distant friends or seeking social support during stressful periods, has been shown to have therapeutic effects (Poon et al., 2020).

4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

4.4.1 Identified Gaps in Current Literature

Despite the wealth of existing research on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being, several gaps remain that warrant further investigation. One primary area needing greater exploration is the differential effects of various social media platforms. Most studies have treated social media as a monolithic entity, but platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok can have divergent impacts on users due to their unique features and user demographics (Schønning, 2020). Additionally, the influence of algorithms that curate content based on previous user behavior is under-researched, representing a crucial element that shapes user experiences and, subsequently, their mental well-being.

Another gap concerns the role of individual differences in mediating the relationship between social media use and mental health. While some people are more vulnerable to negative effects, others may benefit from social media interactions (Abbott et al., 2023). Understanding these individual differences, including personality traits, baseline mental health conditions, and social skills, is essential for developing targeted interventions. Moreover, the majority of existing studies have focused predominantly on adolescents and young adults, leaving a dearth of information about older adults and other age groups (Janicke-Bowles, 2022).

4.4.2 Proposed Methodologies for Future Studies

Future research should embrace a multi-method approach to encapsulate the complex dynamics involved in social media use and mental health. Mixed-method studies that combine quantitative measurements (e.g., surveys and longitudinal data analysis) with qualitative approaches (e.g., in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies) can provide a more comprehensive understanding (O'reilly, 2018). Innovative tools for data collection, such as passive data from smartphones and wearable technology, can offer real-time insights into social media usage patterns and their immediate impact on mental well-being.

Advanced analytical techniques, such as machine learning and sentiment analysis, can also be employed to analyze large data sets derived from users' social media activity. These techniques can help identify patterns and predictive factors relating to mental health outcomes (Bekalu et al., 2019). For example, natural language processing can be

utilized to assess the emotional content of posts and interactions, thereby providing insights into users' emotional states and potential mental health issues.

4.4.3 Longitudinal and Cross-Cultural Studies

The importance of longitudinal studies cannot be overstated in understanding the long-term impact of social media on mental health. Whereas most current research relies on cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies can elucidate causal relationships and offer insights into how social media use affects mental health over time (McCrory, 2020). These studies could track a cohort of individuals across different developmental stages to observe how changes in life circumstances and social media environments collectively influence mental well-being.

Cross-cultural studies, too, hold significant potential for expanding our understanding of this subject. Cultural differences in how social media is used and perceived can lead to varying mental health outcomes. For instance, in collectivist societies, social media might serve as a valuable tool for maintaining social bonds, whereas in individualistic societies, it might exacerbate feelings of isolation (Braghieri, 2022). Research incorporating diverse cultural perspectives will help to generalize findings and develop culturally sensitive interventions.

5. Conclusion

The pervasive influence of social media on mental health and well-being has garnered substantial attention in contemporary research, shedding light on its multifaceted impact. This review synthesizes current findings, providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between social media usage and mental health outcomes.

Firstly, the dual-edged nature of social media is apparent; it serves as both a platform for social connection and support while also posing risks for exacerbating feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Positive interactions and supportive communities can foster a sense of belonging and emotional well-being, demonstrating the potential benefits of social media when used mindfully and in moderation.

Conversely, the pervasive nature of social media can amplify negative experiences, including cyberbullying, social comparison, and exposure to harmful content. These factors can significantly impair mental health, particularly among vulnerable populations such as adolescents and individuals predisposed to mental health disorders. The constant need for validation and the curated portrayal of lives on these platforms contribute to unrealistic social comparisons, manifesting in decreased self-esteem and increased stress.

Moreover, the review highlights the importance of individual differences in social media's impact. Factors such as personality traits, existing mental health conditions, and the context of social media use play critical roles in determining outcomes. This emphasizes the need for personalized approaches in managing social media use and mitigating its adverse effects.

Interventions aimed at promoting digital literacy, setting healthy boundaries, and encouraging offline activities are crucial in fostering a balanced relationship with social media. Awareness campaigns and educational programs can empower users to navigate social media platforms more mindfully, reaping the benefits while minimizing the risks.

In light of these findings, future research should explore the longitudinal effects of social media use, the efficacy of intervention strategies, and the role of emerging technologies in shaping user experiences. Policymakers and platform designers must collaborate to create safer online environments that support mental well-being.

In conclusion, while social media offers significant advantages in terms of connectivity and access to information, its impact on mental health is complex and context-dependent. By fostering a balanced and informed approach to social media use, society can harness its potential while safeguarding mental health and well-being.

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