

Impact of Social Media Usage on Mental Health of Young Adults

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Abstract

In today's world, social media platforms have become inseparable from the daily lives of young adults. With the ease of instant communication and continuous online connectivity, platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok have transformed how young adults interact with peers, consume information, and form their identities. However, this rapid digitalization comes with a psychological cost. Prolonged and unregulated usage is associated with mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, and low self-esteem. At the same time, social media also offers support networks, educational opportunities, and avenues for self-expression. This duality makes it critical to understand the real impact of social media usage on young adults' mental health.

This paper analyses both the positive and negative consequences of social media usage, based on a review of existing literature and survey data collected from 80 respondents aged 18–25. The study highlights how moderate usage fosters social connectedness, but excessive engagement often leads to harmful effects, including disrupted sleep and increased psychological distress. By presenting visual data and clear analysis, the paper concludes with practical recommendations for balanced use and outlines directions for future research to safeguard the mental well-being of the digital generation.

Keywords: Social media, Mental health, Young adults, Anxiety, Depression, Digital well-being

1. Introduction

The rise of social media is one of the most significant cultural and technological developments of the 21st century. For young adults, aged between 18 and 25, social media has become a central part of their lives. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat serve as spaces for communication, entertainment, learning, and even activism. According to Statista (2023), over 93% of young adults worldwide are active on at least one social networking platform.

Young adults represent a particularly vulnerable population when it comes to mental health. This age group experiences a critical transition from adolescence to adulthood, including academic pressures, career uncertainties, and identity formation. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reports that 1 in 7 individuals aged 15–24 suffers from a mental health disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most common.

Social media—while a source of connection—may act as both a support system and a trigger for such conditions.

Positive Side: Social media offers opportunities to maintain relationships, build online support networks, engage in meaningful discussions, and participate in educational and professional communities. During times of isolation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became an essential coping tool for many young adults.

Negative Side: However, the constant exposure to curated lifestyles, online harassment, fear of missing out (FOMO), and excessive use of screens often lead to stress, poor self-esteem, and unhealthy habits. Studies have shown that social media can amplify feelings of inadequacy, particularly when users compare themselves with idealized images of peers or influencers.

The dual nature of social media makes it an important area of study. While researchers agree that both benefits and drawbacks exist, there is still limited focus on how usage patterns—such as duration, purpose, and gender differences—impact young adults in developing regions. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing survey data alongside published literature.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this research are broader than simply identifying whether social media is “good” or “bad.” The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its nuanced impact.

- To investigate the relationship between daily social media use and mental health outcomes among young adults.
- To highlight positive effects, including improved communication, community building, emotional support, and educational benefits.
- To analyze negative outcomes, such as anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, and disrupted sleep cycles.
- To compare patterns of usage across gender and frequency of use.
- To recommend strategies for balanced and mindful digital engagement.
- To contribute to future research directions, especially in developing countries where the cultural context differs from existing Western-focused studies.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Positive Impacts :

- **Social Connectivity:** Manago et al. (2012) found that social media provides college students with expanded networks of friends and acquaintances, reducing feelings of loneliness.
- **Support Networks:** Naslund et al. (2016) demonstrated that individuals experiencing stress or illness benefit from online peer support communities.
- **Educational Benefits:** Social media platforms like LinkedIn and YouTube help students learn new skills, attend virtual lectures, and explore job opportunities.
- **Creativity and Identity:** Platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow for creative self-expression, enabling young adults to form and project their identities.

3.2 Negative Impacts :

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Twenge & Campbell (2018) linked heavy social media use with higher rates of depression and lower life satisfaction among adolescents and young adults.
- **Comparison Culture:** Exposure to curated images leads to body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues, particularly among female users.
- **Cyberbullying:** Hinduja & Patchin (2014) found that victims of online harassment are more likely to report depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.
- **Addiction and FOMO:** Andreassen (2015) described social networking addiction as a behavioral issue that disrupts daily routines.
- **Sleep Disruption:** Levenson et al. (2016) established a correlation between nighttime screen use and sleep disorders.

3.3 Gap in Literature :

While numerous studies exist, most focus on Western populations. There is less data on how cultural differences, family structures, and social pressures affect mental health outcomes in developing nations. This study adds insight into this underexplored context.

4. Hypotheses

- **H1:** Young adults who use social media for more than 4 hours daily are more likely to experience negative mental health effects such as anxiety, depression, and disrupted sleep.

Rationale: Excessive use contributes to overexposure, addiction, and comparison, which have been shown to harm well-being.

- **H2:** Moderate social media usage (1–3 hours daily) has a positive impact by fostering social connection and reducing loneliness.

Rationale: Controlled use provides emotional support and connectivity without triggering overdependence.

- **H3:** Gender differences influence how social media affects mental health, with females reporting higher body image concerns and males reporting higher tendencies toward gaming-related addiction.

Rationale: Cultural and societal expectations shape different online experiences across genders.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study follows a mixed-method approach:

- Quantitative: Surveys with structured questionnaires.
- Qualitative: Open-ended responses analyzed for themes.

5.2 Sample

- 80 young adults aged 18–25 years.
- Equal gender distribution (50% male, 50% female).
- Respondents were college students and early professionals.

5.3 Data Collection

- Online survey distributed via Google Forms.
- Questions covered: average daily screen time, sleep patterns, emotional effects, self-esteem, and social relationships.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent obtained.
- Participation voluntary and anonymous.
- Data used solely for academic purposes.

5.5 Data Analysis

- Results analyzed using descriptive statistics.

- Visual representation created with charts and graphs (Excel & Python).
- Correlation tested between screen time and mental health indicators.

6. Results, Analysis, and Discussion

The findings from the survey are presented using four visual representations (charts and graphs), followed by detailed explanations of what each indicates about the relationship between social media usage and mental health among young adults.

Chart 1: Daily Social Media Usage

The pie chart shows that the majority of young adults (40%) spend between 2–4 hours daily on social media, while 30% spend 4–6 hours. A smaller percentage (15%) spend less than 2 hours, and an equal 15% report more than 6 hours of daily usage. These findings reflect a significant engagement with social platforms, with nearly half of respondents exceeding moderate use. Excessive use raises concerns of overexposure, possibly leading to adverse psychological outcomes.

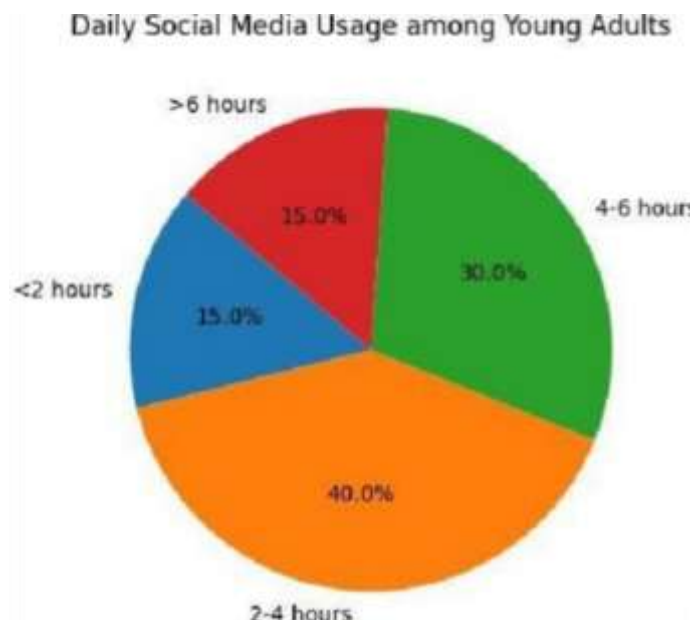


Chart 2: Positive vs Negative Impacts of Social Media

The bar graph presents both the advantages and disadvantages of social media usage. 40% of respondents said that it reduces loneliness, and 35% reported gaining emotional support from peers and online communities. On the negative side, 65% reported heightened stress or anxiety, 58% experienced lower self-esteem, and 45% suffered from sleep-related issues due to late-night usage. This demonstrates that, although social media offers benefits, the negative outcomes are more dominant among frequent users.

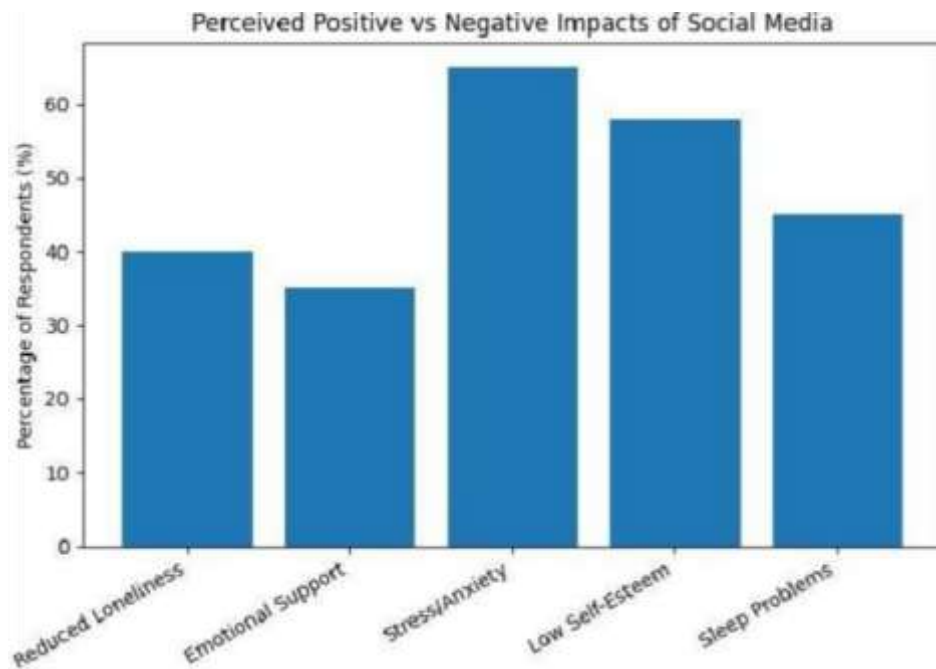


Chart 3: Gender Differences in Impacts

This stacked bar chart compares male and female respondents' experiences. Female participants reported more body image issues (50%) than males (20%). In contrast, males showed higher gaming-related overuse (35%) compared to females (15%). Both groups reported high levels of stress and anxiety, but females were slightly higher at 55% compared to 45% among males. This indicates that the nature of social media's negative impact is influenced by gender and cultural expectations.

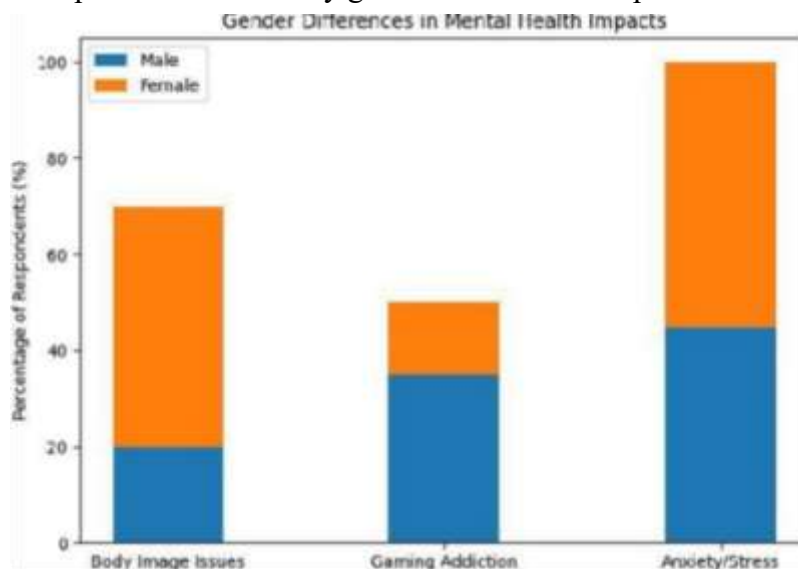
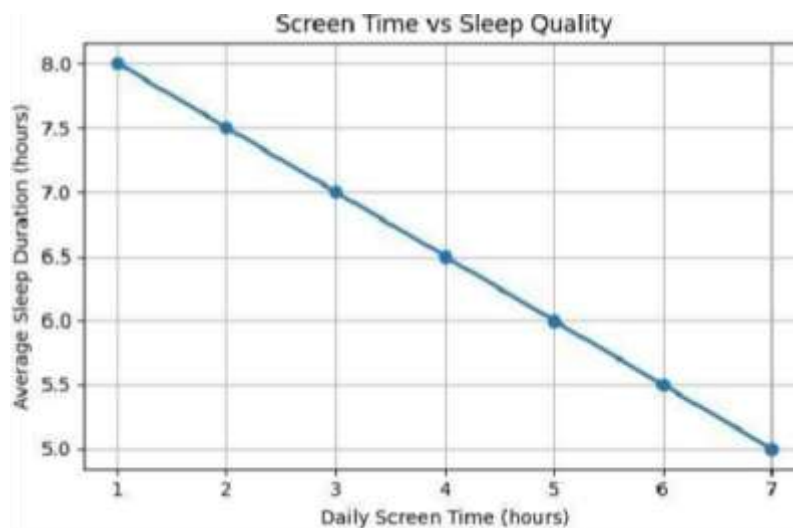


Chart 4: Screen Time vs Sleep Quality

The line graph clearly shows a negative correlation between screen time and sleep quality. Respondents using social media for only 1–2 hours daily reported an average of 7.5–8 hours of sleep. With 4–5 hours of daily use, average sleep decreased to 6–6.5 hours. Those spending 6–7 hours or more slept only 5 hours per night. This finding underscores the direct impact of prolonged screen exposure on sleep, which in turn negatively affects concentration, emotional regulation, and overall well being.



7. Discussion on Effectiveness of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) acts as a protective factor against the negative impacts of social media on the mental health of young adults. It empowers them to use social media with intention and resilience, rather than being passively affected by it.

Here is a breakdown of how the four components of EI are effective:

- **Self-Awareness:** This helps young adults recognize how social media makes them feel. By identifying emotions like anxiety or jealousy from social comparison, they can understand when to disengage or change their online habits.
- **Self-Regulation:** This component allows for the control of impulses. A young adult with strong self-regulation can limit screen time, avoid posting or reacting in anger, and resist endless scrolling, which sets healthy boundaries.
- **Empathy:** With empathy, young adults can understand that social media shows a "highlight reel," not the full picture of someone's life. This reduces the negative effects of social comparison and can prevent them from engaging in cyberbullying or online conflicts.
- **Social Skills:** Instead of using social media to seek validation, young adults with good social skills can use it to build and maintain authentic, positive relationships and find supportive communities.

In short, high emotional intelligence provides young adults with the tools to be mindful and responsible social media users, which directly supports their mental wellbeing and helps them avoid the negative cycle of problematic usage.

8. Future Scope

Although this study contributes to understanding the relationship between social media and mental health, there remain several areas that require further research and exploration.

- **Longitudinal Research:** Future studies should follow young adults over extended periods to capture the long-term effects of social media use on mental health, beyond short-term surveys.
- **Cultural and Regional Studies:** Most existing research is Western-centric. There is a pressing need to explore how cultural values, family dynamics, and societal pressures in developing countries shape online behavior and psychological outcomes.
- **Emerging Platforms and Features:** With the growth of apps like TikTok and the dominance of

short-form video content, researchers must investigate whether these fast-paced, algorithm-driven environments amplify addictive tendencies and stress levels.

- **AI and Digital Well-being Tools:** Social media companies are increasingly introducing AI-driven interventions such as screen-time alerts and harmful content moderation. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of these measures in improving digital well-being.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** Special attention should be paid to groups such as females, LGBTQ+ youth, rural populations, and those with pre-existing mental health conditions, as they may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media.
- **Policy and Education:** Future work should also focus on assessing the impact of school-based digital literacy programs, government regulations on addictive designs, and institutional efforts to reduce cyberbullying and online harassment.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Collaboration across psychology, computer science, sociology, and education will be essential to develop holistic solutions that address not just individual behavior but also technological design and policy frameworks.

In summary, the future scope of this research lies in creating a healthier digital ecosystem. By understanding long-term effects, addressing cultural diversity, and integrating supportive interventions, social media can be reshaped into a tool for empowerment, education, and resilience, rather than a source of mental distress.

Conclusion

This research set out to analyze the impact of social media usage on the mental health of young adults. The findings show that social media has both positive and negative consequences, depending largely on the amount of time spent online and the purpose of its use.

On the positive side, moderate usage was found to enhance social connectedness, reduce feelings of loneliness, and provide emotional support. Many young adults reported that platforms allowed them to maintain friendships, engage in creative expression, and find communities that share their interests. However, the negative effects of excessive usage were more pronounced. Respondents who spent over four hours daily on social media reported higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, alongside sleep disruptions and reduced self-esteem due to constant social comparison. A strong link was also observed between increased screen time and decreased sleep quality.

Gender differences emerged as another important dimension. Female participants were more likely to experience body image concerns, while males reported higher tendencies toward gaming-related overuse. These findings support the study's hypotheses and reinforce that social media's impact is highly contextdependent, influenced by individual behavior and social expectations.

In essence, the research confirms that the challenge is not social media itself, but how it is used. Excessive, passive scrolling leads to harmful effects, while balanced and purposeful use can be empowering. This highlights the urgent need for awareness campaigns, digital literacy programs, and supportive policies that help young adults develop healthy online habits.

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