

Social Media and Mental Health: A Study of the Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media Use

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Abstract

Social media has become a normal part of everyday life, especially for students and young adults. It provides opportunities for communication, entertainment, learning, self-expression and social connection, but frequent or unplanned use may also affect mood, sleep, attention, self-esteem and feelings of social comparison. This study examines how people perceive the relationship between social media use and mental health, with attention to both helpful and challenging effects. A descriptive cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted using Google Forms. The available dataset contained 15 valid responses from participants belonging to different age groups and occupational backgrounds. Descriptive percentages were used to summarize social media use patterns and responses to mental-health-related statements. The findings show that 60% of respondents spend 2–4 hours per day on social media, while 13.4% reported spending more than four hours daily. Instagram and WhatsApp were the most commonly mentioned platforms. Although 46.7% of participants described the overall effect of social media on their mental health as positive, 53.3% chose a neutral response, suggesting that the relationship is not simply positive or negative. A large majority reported that social media affects their mood, while many also reported difficulty stopping use and feeling left out when seeing activities they were not part of. At the same time, most respondents felt that social media helps them stay connected and can provide emotional support. The study therefore suggests that the mental-health impact of social media depends strongly on how, why and how long it is used. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for mindful and balanced social-media use and highlights the need for larger studies with more diverse samples.

Keywords: social media, mental health, students, digital well-being, social comparison, sleep, anxiety, mindful use

1. Introduction

Social media has changed the way people communicate, learn, relax and maintain relationships. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook and other networking services allow users to exchange information within seconds and remain connected even when they are physically far apart. For university students, social media can also support learning, career exploration, networking and access to communities that may not be available in their immediate surroundings.

At the same time, the same platforms can create pressure to remain constantly connected. Notifications, endless scrolling, comparison with carefully selected online images and the fear of missing out can make social media difficult to use in a balanced way. Previous research has linked problematic or excessive social media use with concerns such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, poor sleep, loneliness, lower self-esteem and emotional exhaustion. However, the effects are not identical for every person. Social media can also reduce feelings of isolation, provide peer support and help people find useful information or communities.

This makes the topic more complex than simply asking whether social media is good or bad. A more useful question is how patterns of use are related to well-being. A person who uses social media for communication, learning or support may have a very different experience from someone who uses it mainly through automatic scrolling or constant checking. Recent research also suggests that the amount of time spent online matters, but the type of content, the user's personal characteristics and the social context matter as well.

The present study therefore combines a review of relevant research with a small questionnaire-based survey. The aim is not to diagnose mental-health conditions, but to understand participants' everyday experiences and perceptions. The study gives special attention to mood, anxiety or stress, social comparison, fear of being left out, sleep, difficulty stopping use, pressure for online approval, social connection and emotional support.

2. Review of Literature

Social media and mental health. Ulvi et al. (2022) reviewed evidence on social media use and mental health and highlighted that the relationship can include both benefits and risks. Social media may support communication and information sharing, while problematic exposure may be associated with poorer psychological outcomes.

Depression and social media use. Lin et al. (2016) reported an association between social media use and depression among U.S. young adults, contributing to evidence that frequent social networking can be relevant to mental-health outcomes.

Anxiety in emerging adults. Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian (2017) examined social media use and anxiety in emerging adults and found that greater use was associated with greater anxiety symptoms.

Sleep and emotional well-being. Woods and Scott (2016) found that social media use among adolescents was associated with poorer sleep quality, anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem.

Young people's perspectives. O'Reilly et al. (2018) showed that young people recognize both positive and negative effects of social media, supporting a balanced approach.

Longitudinal pathways. Viner et al. (2019) examined social media, cyberbullying, sleep and physical activity in relation to mental health and well-being, showing that several pathways may connect digital behavior with well-being.

Online social support. Naslund and colleagues have described how social media can facilitate social interaction and peer support for people experiencing mental-health difficulties, while also creating challenges such as harmful content and privacy concerns.

Psychological well-being. Ostic et al. (2021) examined social media use and psychological well-being and emphasized the importance of psychological and social factors in explaining outcomes.

Academic and interpersonal effects. Chandrasena and Ilankoon (2022) discussed relationships between social media use, academic performance and interpersonal relations among health-science undergraduates.

Panic and information exposure. Ahmad and Murad (2020) found a strong relationship between social-media exposure and panic-related information during the COVID-19 period, illustrating the importance of content type.

Social media during crises. Gao et al. (2020) reported that frequent social-media exposure during the COVID-19 outbreak was associated with mental-health problems.

Social support and anxiety. Ni et al. (2020) found that social support was associated with lower probable anxiety and depression, showing that connection can also be protective.

Digital interventions. Plackett, Blyth and Schartau (2023) reviewed interventions designed to influence social-media use and mental well-being and noted the potential value of structured digital habits.

Social media for support. Selkie et al. (2020) examined how adolescents use social media for social support, showing that online communities can provide connection and understanding.

Body image and comparison. The reviewed literature indicates that idealized online images and social comparison can contribute to dissatisfaction and negative self-evaluation, particularly among young users.

Cyberbullying. Research reviewed in the literature identifies cyberbullying as a major risk factor associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness and reduced psychological well-being.

Loss of control. Recent research on college students emphasizes problematic social-media use, including repeated checking, difficulty stopping and emotional discomfort when access is reduced.

University-student evidence. Osman (2025) reported high social-media use among university students and associations with sleep disturbance, mental exhaustion, social isolation and anxiety.

Longitudinal adolescent evidence. Nagata et al. (2025) found that increases in social-media use were associated with later increases in depressive symptoms within individuals across follow-up periods, while emphasizing the value of longitudinal designs.

Social support and resilience. Cai, Wang and Jin (2026) examined social-media addiction, social support and resilience among college students and suggested that social support and resilience help explain differences in mental-health outcomes.

3. Research Gap

Much of the existing literature focuses on large student samples, adolescents or specific mental-health outcomes. The present study takes a smaller exploratory approach and focuses on participants' own descriptions of everyday social-media experiences. It deliberately includes positive dimensions such as connection and emotional support alongside negative dimensions such as stress, comparison, sleep and difficulty stopping use.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the daily social-media usage patterns of the respondents.
- To identify common reasons and platforms associated with social-media use.
- To explore perceived effects of social media on mood, stress, sleep, self-evaluation and social connection.
- To examine whether respondents feel that reducing social-media use could improve their mental well-being.
- To understand the positive and negative changes participants believe they have noticed in themselves.
- To suggest practical ways of promoting healthier and more mindful social-media use.

5. Research Questions

1. How much time do respondents spend on social media each day?
2. What mental-health-related experiences are most commonly reported?
3. Do respondents experience social media as a source of connection and emotional support?
4. Do respondents feel that social media affects their mood, sleep or ability to stop using it?
5. Do respondents believe that reducing social-media use could improve their well-being?

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire prepared in Google Forms. The questionnaire contained demographic questions, social-media usage questions, Likert-scale statements about mental-health-related experiences, an overall perception question and an open-ended question about personal changes noticed because of social media.

6.2 Participants and Sample

The available questionnaire file contained 15 valid responses. Participants represented different age groups and occupational backgrounds. Because the dataset available for analysis contained 15 responses rather than 20, this manuscript reports the actual sample size (N=15) and does not invent additional responses. The sample should therefore be treated as exploratory and not as representative of the wider population.

6.3 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were reached through an online questionnaire using a convenience-based response approach. Responses were collected during September 2026. Individual respondents are not identified in this manuscript.

6.4 Measures

The questionnaire measured daily social-media use, reasons for use and frequency of checking without a specific reason. Participants then responded to statements concerning anxiety or stress, mood, social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, fear of being left out, sleep quality, difficulty stopping, pressure for likes or comments, social connection and emotional support.

6.5 Data Analysis

The responses were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Because the sample was small and exploratory, the analysis focuses on descriptive patterns rather than statistical generalization or causal claims. Open-ended responses were reviewed thematically and grouped around recurring ideas such as learning, creativity, mood improvement, connection, comparison, overuse, tiredness and attention difficulties.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary. The analysis presented in this paper is based on the responses supplied for the research project, and individual respondents are not identified. The study does not attempt to diagnose anxiety, depression or any other mental-health condition from questionnaire answers.

7. Results

7.1 Demographic Profile

Age group	n	Percentage
18-20	8	53.3%
ABOVE 30	3	20.0%
26-30	2	13.3%
21-25	2	13.3%

Gender	n	Percentage
FEMALE	12	80.0%
MALE	3	20.0%

Occupation	n	Percentage
STUDENT	9	60.0%
SELF-EMPLOYED	2	13.3%

WORKING PROFESSIONAL	2	13.3%
Law student+ accountant	1	6.7%
House wife	1	6.7%

The sample was predominantly female (80.0%), and more than half of the respondents were aged 18–20 years (53.3%). Students represented 60.0% of the sample. The diversity of occupations and age groups is useful for an exploratory study, but the small sample limits broad conclusions.

7.2 Daily Social Media Use

Daily use	n	Percentage
2-4 hours	9	60.0%
1-2 hours	4	26.7%
4-6 hours	1	6.7%
More than 6 hours	1	6.7%

The most common pattern was 2–4 hours of daily social-media use, reported by 9 respondents (60.0%). Four respondents (26.7%) reported 1–2 hours, while one respondent each reported 4–6 hours and more than 6 hours. Thus, 73.3% of the sample reported at least two hours of social-media use each day.

7.3 Platforms and Reasons for Use

Instagram and WhatsApp were the most commonly mentioned platforms, each appearing in 10 of the 15 responses. YouTube appeared in 8 responses and Snapchat in 6. Because the platform question allowed multiple selections, these counts represent mentions rather than mutually exclusive categories.

The reasons for using social media were varied. Entertainment was the most common theme, while communication, education, news/information and career or business activities also appeared repeatedly. One participant specifically described using social media to relax by watching mountain reels, showing that users may treat social media as a short-term mood-management tool.

7.4 Unplanned Checking

- Sometimes: 8 respondents (53.3%).
- Occasionally: 2 respondents (13.3%).
- Often: 2 respondents (13.3%).
- Always: 2 respondents (13.3%).
- Never: 1 respondents (6.7%).

Eight respondents (53.3%) said they sometimes check social media without a specific reason. Two respondents each reported doing so occasionally, often or always, while one respondent said never. This suggests that unplanned checking is common in the sample and may be relevant to habit formation.

7.5 Mental-Health-Related Responses

Measure	Agree / Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Anxiety or stress after spending a lot of time	5 (33.3%)	4 (26.7%)	6 (40.0%)
Mood affected	9 (60.0%)	5 (33.3%)	1 (6.7%)

Social comparison	5 (33.3%)	2 (13.3%)	8 (53.3%)
Feeling not good enough	5 (33.3%)	5 (33.3%)	5 (33.3%)
Feeling left out	7 (46.7%)	6 (40.0%)	2 (13.3%)
Sleep affected	7 (46.7%)	1 (6.7%)	7 (46.7%)
Difficulty stopping	8 (53.3%)	1 (6.7%)	6 (40.0%)
Pressure for approval	2 (13.3%)	2 (13.3%)	11 (73.3%)
Connection	11 (73.3%)	3 (20.0%)	1 (6.7%)
Emotional support	8 (53.3%)	6 (40.0%)	1 (6.7%)

The strongest positive dimension was social connection: 11 respondents (73.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media helps them feel connected to friends and family. Eight respondents (53.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media can provide emotional support and reduce loneliness. At the same time, 9 respondents (60.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media affects their mood, and 8 (53.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they find it difficult to stop using social media when they want to. Seven respondents (46.7%) reported that social media affects their sleep quality, while 7 (46.7%) also reported feeling left out when seeing posts about activities they did not attend. Pressure for likes or comments was less common: only 2 respondents (13.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

7.6 Overall Perception and Desire to Reduce Use

Overall effect on mental health	n	Percentage
Neutral	8	53.3%
Positive	7	46.7%

Would reducing use improve well-being?	n	Percentage
Maybe	8	53.3%
Yes	5	33.3%
No	2	13.3%

Seven respondents (46.7%) described the overall effect of social media on their mental health as positive, while eight (53.3%) selected neutral. No respondent selected an overall negative category. This does not mean that the sample experienced no difficulties; rather, it suggests that many participants see both benefits and drawbacks and do not describe the overall experience in strongly negative terms.

Five respondents (33.3%) believed that reducing social-media use would improve their well-being, while eight (53.3%) were unsure and selected 'Maybe'. Only two respondents (13.3%) said no. The high proportion choosing 'Maybe' indicates awareness that the amount of use may matter, but also uncertainty about how strongly it affects personal well-being.

8. Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The open-ended answers provide useful context behind the numerical results. Several respondents described positive outcomes, including learning fashion and new ideas, improving creativity, developing communication or style, finding motivation and feeling mentally relaxed. One respondent explained that social media can lift their mood when they

feel low. These responses support the literature showing that social media can provide connection, information and supportive communities.

However, the responses also contained concerns about overuse and self-comparison. Participants mentioned spending too much time scrolling, becoming dependent on social media, overthinking, feeling tired and experiencing a reduced attention span. One participant described social media as both irritating and enjoyable, while another felt that it had made them more active in real life. This mixed pattern again suggests that social media is not experienced in a single way.

A particularly important theme is mindful use. Some participants recognized both the advantages and disadvantages of social media and described an intention to use it more carefully. This is consistent with recent research suggesting that purpose-driven use, digital mindfulness and healthy boundaries may help reduce negative outcomes while preserving the benefits of online connection.

9. Discussion

The questionnaire findings broadly fit the wider research literature while also showing why simple conclusions can be misleading. The majority of respondents used social media for at least two hours a day, and unplanned checking was common. This resembles the broader literature describing social media as deeply integrated into student and young-adult routines.

The most striking finding is the coexistence of connection and difficulty controlling use. Nearly three-quarters of participants said that social media helps them feel connected to friends and family, yet more than half also agreed that they find it difficult to stop using it. These findings are not contradictory. A platform can satisfy genuine social needs while also encouraging habitual checking. The same activity may therefore feel rewarding and tiring at different moments.

Mood effects were also common. Nine respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media affects their mood. This does not automatically mean that social media harms mood. Mood can be affected positively when users encounter supportive friends, entertainment or useful information, and negatively when they encounter comparison, conflict, pressure or overwhelming content. The open-ended responses reflect this two-sided pattern.

Sleep is another area of concern. Almost half of the respondents said social media affects their sleep quality. Although this small survey cannot establish whether social media caused sleep problems, the finding is consistent with previous studies linking social-media use with poorer sleep quality. The result supports the practical value of setting boundaries around late-night use.

Social comparison and fear of missing out were present but not universal. Five respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they compare themselves with people they see online, and seven reported feeling left out when seeing posts about activities they were not part of. This suggests that the emotional effect of social media may depend partly on the type of content users consume and how they interpret it.

Overall, the study supports a balanced interpretation: social media itself should not be treated as inherently harmful. Rather, problematic patterns such as automatic checking, excessive time, comparison and difficulty disengaging may create risks, while communication, learning and emotional support can create benefits.

10. Recommendations

6. Set intentional daily limits rather than relying only on willpower.
7. Keep social-media-free periods during study time and before sleep.
8. Turn off non-essential notifications to reduce automatic checking.
9. Curate feeds by unfollowing or muting content that repeatedly causes comparison or distress.
10. Use social media with a clear purpose—for example, communication, learning, creativity or professional networking.

11. Balance online interaction with offline friendships, hobbies, physical activity and face-to-face communication.
12. Students should periodically reflect on how they feel before and after using social media.
13. Universities can include digital-well-being awareness in student-development and mental-health programs.
14. Future researchers should use larger and more diverse samples and, where possible, combine self-reports with objective screen-time data.
15. Longitudinal studies are needed before making strong claims about cause and effect.

11. Limitations of the Study

- The final available sample was small (N=15), so the findings cannot be generalized to all students or social-media users.
- The sample was convenience-based and may not represent the wider population.
- Social-media use and mental-health-related experiences were self-reported and may be affected by recall or response bias.
- The cross-sectional design shows patterns at one point in time and cannot establish that social media causes a particular mental-health outcome.
- The questionnaire measured perceptions and experiences rather than clinically validated diagnoses.
- The platform question allowed multiple selections, so platform counts represent mentions rather than exclusive categories.

12. Conclusion

This study shows that social media occupies an important place in participants' everyday lives and has a mixed relationship with mental well-being. In the present sample, social media was strongly associated with connection, emotional support, entertainment and learning, but participants also reported mood changes, difficulty stopping, sleep effects and feelings of being left out. The overall responses were not strongly negative: 46.7% described the effect as positive and 53.3% selected neutral. This suggests that participants generally recognize social media as useful while remaining aware of its possible drawbacks.

The central message of the study is therefore not that social media should be avoided, but that it should be used intentionally. Healthy digital habits involve knowing why one is opening an app, noticing how content affects one's mood, taking regular breaks, protecting sleep and maintaining meaningful offline relationships. A future study with a larger sample, validated mental-health measures and objective usage data could provide stronger evidence about which patterns of social-media use are most closely related to well-being.

13. Declarations

13.1 Author Contributions

Princy Tejwani: questionnaire development, data collection, data organization, analysis, interpretation and manuscript preparation. Dr. Mohammad Bakhtawar Ahmed: academic supervision, guidance and review of the manuscript.

13.2 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

13.3 Funding

No external funding was received for this study.

13.4 Data Availability

The questionnaire responses used for this manuscript are available to the researcher and may be made available in anonymized form where appropriate.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire Summary

The questionnaire included demographic questions, daily-use duration, platforms used, purpose of use, unplanned checking, ten mental-health and well-being statements, an overall mental-health perception question, a question about reducing use, and an open-ended question.