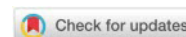


THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

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Abstract: Despite a substantial body of research, findings concerning the complex and multi-layered impact of social media on youth health continue to exhibit a high degree of inconsistency. The literature frequently presents conflicting, and at times even diametrically opposed, conclusions regarding both the positive and negative effects of social media use. This heterogeneity of results underscores the fact that the multidimensional nature of the relationship between social media use and youth health remains insufficiently clarified, both theoretically and empirically, particularly with respect to contextual factors that shape patterns of use, as well as the implications such patterns have for behavior within digital, or virtual, environments.

Against the backdrop of these theoretical and empirical ambiguities, the primary aim of the present study is to provide a systematic analysis of existing scientific evidence on the effects of social media use on the mental health of young people. At the same time, the study seeks to identify key gaps in the current body of knowledge and to delineate directions and opportunities for future research in this field. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for a more in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which different patterns of social media use give rise to divergent mental health outcomes.

In this context, the effective mitigation of potential health risks associated with social media use among youth, alongside the recognition, affirmation, and optimal utilization of its positive aspects, can be achieved only through the long-term, systematic, and interdisciplinary advancement of media literacy. Furthermore, it is essential to foster the development of an inclusive, safe, and supportive digital environment that promotes responsible technology use and empowers young individuals to engage in critical thinking and constructive participation within the contemporary media landscape.

Keywords: mental health, health risks, social media, media literacy, infodemic

Field: Medical Sciences and Health

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media environments are replete with opportunities for social comparison, which renders the investigation of both short-term and long-term exposure to comparison-relevant content an ongoing research imperative. Empirical findings indicate that frequent use of social networking platforms is associated with lower levels of self-esteem, particularly in the domain of personal attributes. For instance, Facebook users have been found to report reduced self-confidence, a relationship mediated by increased exposure to social comparison processes. Additionally, experimental studies examining brief exposure to social media profiles demonstrate that participants' self-esteem and relative self-evaluations tend to decline when target profiles contain elements conducive to unfavorable comparisons, such as lower levels of social activity or the presence of unhealthy lifestyle habits (Vogel et al., 2014).

Of particular concern is the observation that the predominant body of evidence regarding the detrimental effects of social media on youth continues to rely heavily on subjective self-report measures. In contrast, only a negligible number of studies substantiate these findings using more clinically objective indicators, such as symptoms of mental disorders.

A relevant theoretical perspective emphasizes that the key determinant of the valence of adolescents' exposure to social media influences, and of the balance between potential risks and benefits, is not the duration of use per se, but rather the qualitative nature of engagement with these platforms (Davila et al., 2012; Feinstein et al., 2013).

Lloyd (2014) summarizes the positive implications of social media use among young people across several domains, with particular emphasis on benefits for individuals from minority communities, persons with disabilities, and those living with chronic illnesses. Specifically, social media provide opportunities for meaningful connections with others who share similar life circumstances, despite geographical distance. Moreover, it is suggested that policymakers and healthcare professionals could leverage social media as a tool for fostering engagement and support in the domain of mental health. However, as Dimitrovska (2026) warns, unhealthy lifestyles may lead to adverse health outcomes, not only through their direct clinical consequences but also by imposing substantial economic and societal burdens on healthcare

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systems, including increased healthcare expenditures, reduced productivity, and the erosion of overall living standards.

Media hyperproduction has led to an exponential increase in the volume of information circulating within the digital environment, a substantial portion of which consists of misinformation, misinterpreted content, and unverified rumors. Okray (2022) highlights findings indicating that the phenomenon of the infodemic is associated with a higher prevalence of various mental health disturbances, including depersonalization and derealization, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Such trends carry potentially serious societal implications, as they undermine individuals' capacity to make rational, evidence-based decisions.

Moreover, a transformation of discursive patterns within online support communities for individuals with mental disorders has been observed, characterized by a marked increase in content reflecting negative affective states, such as hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, and even themes related to suicide.

A considerable proportion of individuals with mental health conditions do not utilize mental health services to obtain treatment. At the same time, there is compelling evidence that individuals with mental and psychosocial difficulties are becoming increasingly aware and are seeking greater influence and control over life events and treatment processes. In this context, social media, encompassing emails, video calls, text messaging, helplines, and social networking platforms, have emerged and expanded against the backdrop of exponential technological growth.

The proliferation of redesigned technologies has the potential to facilitate patient-centered services, support empowerment strategies, and enable the personalization of care, while simultaneously reducing associated costs. Additionally, there is a growing interest in the application of social media within the domain of mental health care and promotion (Di Napoli et al., 2015).

2. SOCIAL MEDIA: POSITIVE IMPLICATIONS VS. NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Social media constitute an integral component of adolescents' everyday lives. However, their increasing pervasiveness simultaneously raises concerns regarding potential adverse implications. Contemporary research, as well as parental perspectives, suggests that continuous digital connectivity, prolonged use of social networking platforms during late evening hours, and the pressures inherent in online interactions may exert detrimental effects on young people's psychological well-being, academic performance, and overall health status (Richter, 2026).

In examining the emotional experiences of younger users in the context of social media engagement, Christodoulou et al. (2026) identify three key thematic domains. First, the authors address the emotional consequences of social media use, including phenomena such as disengagement and intermittent withdrawal as coping strategies in response to feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, and psychological strain. Second, an increasing level of distrust toward social media platforms and online informational content is highlighted, manifesting as heightened skepticism toward misinformation, algorithmically curated content, and contemporary artificial intelligence technologies. Third, the prevalence of aggressive communication patterns within social networks is analyzed, with users frequently exposed to hostile digital environments and consequently developing various defensive mechanisms to avoid such contexts.

The findings further indicate a dynamic transformation of behavioral patterns over time: earlier models characterized by active participation and content sharing have gradually given way to greater caution, distrust, and social withdrawal. This shift is interpreted as an adaptive response aimed at protecting individuals from emotional exhaustion and the adverse effects of exposure to unreliable or harmful information. While the existing literature predominantly focuses on younger cohorts, the present study makes a significant contribution by directing attention to the comparatively underexplored population of middle-aged individuals.

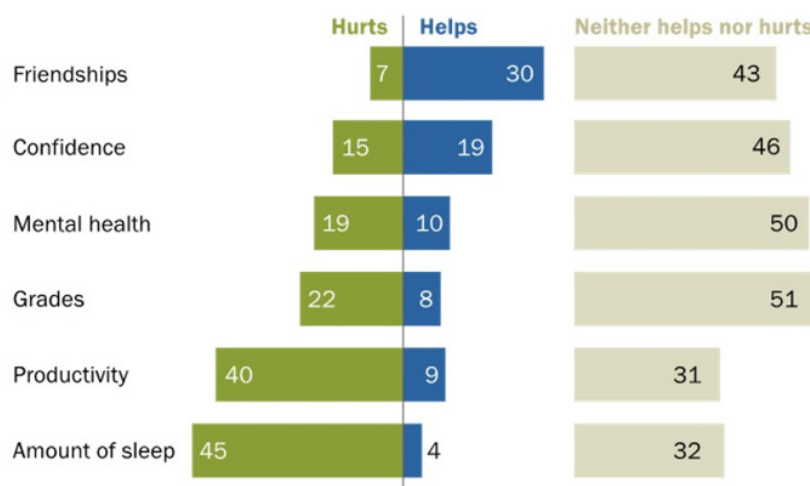
Marku and Kuneshka (2026) warn that excessive use of screen-based devices has been recognized as one of the major behavioral risk factors during childhood, as it promotes a sedentary lifestyle and contributes to the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity. Therefore, the development and implementation of comprehensive public health strategies aimed at limiting screen time, while simultaneously encouraging the adoption of healthier lifestyle habits and balanced daily routines, are of paramount importance for improving children's physical health, as well as their educational outcomes and academic achievement.

When Faverio et al. (2025) from the Pew Research Center surveyed American adolescents regarding the potential effects of social media, they highlighted its bidirectional nature as both a source of benefits and risks. Certain aspects of life were perceived as enhanced through social media use, with

30% of teenagers reporting a positive impact on friendships, and 19% noting increased self-confidence, making these the only domains with a predominantly positive net effect. By contrast, negative effects are more frequently reported in the domains of academic work and daily functioning: 40% of adolescents believe that social media diminish their productivity (compared to 9% who perceive benefits), while 22% report adverse effects on academic performance, in contrast to only 8% who indicate improvement.

The most pronounced negative impact relates to sleep: as many as 45% of respondents report that social media reduce the amount of sleep they obtain, whereas only 4% believe they contribute to better rest. These findings underscore sleep as the domain most adversely affected, highlighting in particular the detrimental influence of late-night social media use on adolescents' rest patterns.

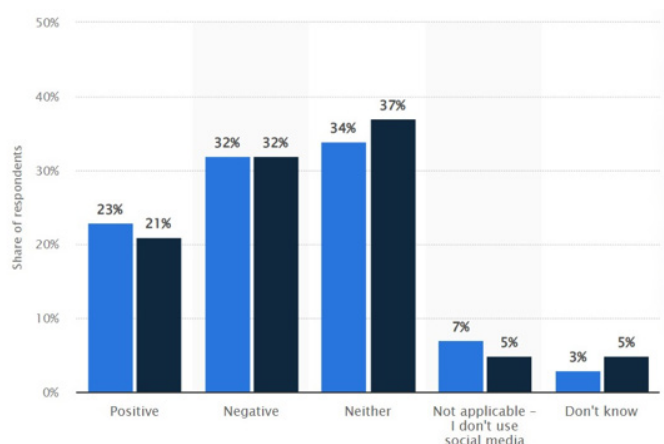
Figure 1. % of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say using social media _ each of the following a lot/a little



Note: Survey conducted Sep. 18 – Oct. 10, 2024
Source: Pew Research Center, 2025

According to a study conducted in the United States in December 2025, modest gender differences were observed in the perception of the impact of social media on mental health: 23% of male respondents and 21% of female respondents evaluated this impact as positive. At the same time, an identical proportion of 32% of respondents from both genders reported that social media exert a negative effect on their mental health.

Graph 1. Mental health effects of social media for adults in the U.S. 2025, by gender



Source: Statista Research Department, 2025.

The use of social media is increasingly recognized as a potential risk factor for the development of mental health problems among adolescents. However, despite the growing interest of the scientific community in this topic, the number of longitudinal studies that systematically examine this association remains limited, and none of the existing studies has precisely quantified the proportion of adolescent

mental health problems that can be directly attributed to social media use.

In this context, Riehm et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal cohort study involving a sample of 6,595 participants, followed across three waves of data collection: the first between September 12, 2013, and December 14, 2014; the second between October 23, 2014, and October 30, 2015; and the third between October 18, 2015, and October 23, 2016. The findings indicate that adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media may be at an elevated risk of developing mental health problems, particularly internalizing problems such as anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Based on these findings, the authors emphasize the need for further research aimed at systematically examining the effectiveness of various intervention strategies. Specifically, future studies should explore whether imposing limits on daily social media use, enhancing levels of media literacy, and the potential redesign of social media platforms themselves may constitute effective approaches to reducing the burden of mental health problems among adolescents.

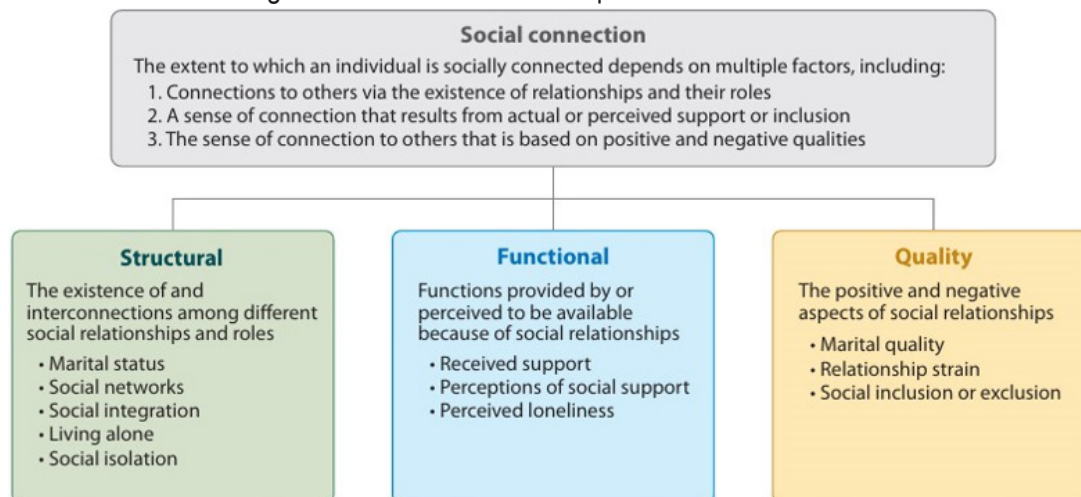
Table 1. The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Youth: Evidence from Longitudinal Studies

Aspect	Positive Implications	Negative Implications	References
Depression and Anxiety	Moderate use may contribute to a sense of belonging and social support.	Increased prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms among adolescents with high levels of social media use.	Watson i sar., 2026 Tsomokos, 2025
Self-Esteem and Self-Image	The opportunity for identity expression and receiving positive feedback from peers.	Negative effects of social comparison, particularly among adolescent girls; increased risk of poor body image.	Tsomokos, 2025
Sleep	Moderate engagement may reduce feelings of isolation, thereby indirectly improving sleep quality.	Higher usage is associated with sleep disturbances and shorter sleep duration.	Tsomokos, 2025
Cognitive Functions	Moderate use may support cognitive engagement and access to information, potentially enhancing certain learning processes.	Excessive use is associated with reduced attention span, impaired concentration, and potential negative effects on executive functioning.	Watson i sar., 2026
Suicidal Ideation and Behaviors	There is no clear longitudinal evidence of a protective effect.	Elevated risk of suicidal ideation and attempts among adolescents with persistently high or rapidly increasing social media use.	Watson i sar., 2026

Source: Authors, based on data from multiple sources (see references), 2026.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2023), a decline in social connectedness has been observed in the United States. Between 2003 and 2020, the time individuals spent socializing with friends decreased by approximately 20 hours per month, while overall social interaction with others declined by about 10 hours per month. Concurrently, individuals experiencing loneliness or dissatisfaction with the quality of their social relationships face an increased risk of premature mortality, as well as poorer health outcomes. Empirical evidence indicates that loneliness significantly contributes to an elevated risk of developing anxiety, depression, and dementia.

Figure 2. The Three Vital Components of Social Connection



Source: Holt-Lunstad, 2018

Based on a longitudinal study conducted on a nationally representative sample of adults in the Netherlands, collected across nine annual waves, Roberts et al. (2026) report that passive use of social media may contribute to increased levels of loneliness. At the same time, the authors emphasize that it remains premature to conclude that active social media use exerts a protective effect in terms of reducing loneliness. The findings further indicate the presence of a bidirectional relationship between the extent of social media use and loneliness.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that mediate the relationship between social media use and adverse mental health outcomes. In this regard, there is a clear need for sustained research attention directed toward the identification and analysis of specific processes emerging from complex interactions within the virtual environment that may pose risks to health. Concurrent with the growing number of social media users, there has been an increased prevalence of dissatisfaction with social interactions, diminished perceived connectedness with others, and heightened feelings of loneliness. Perceived loneliness, in turn, places individuals at elevated risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia, as well as for neurological and cardiovascular disorders.

Within a broader context, there is an imperative to develop and implement targeted interventions aimed at mitigating and reducing fatigue, psychological exhaustion, and distress associated with social media use. It is equally important to enhance users' competencies in recognizing misinformation, while strengthening trust in digital platforms through appropriate educational and regulatory frameworks. Future research should devote substantially greater attention to the phenomenon of negative social comparison in the context of social media use, given its documented association with increased depressive symptoms, as well as suicidal ideation and attempts among younger populations.

It is particularly concerning that the majority of assessments regarding the harmful effects of social media use on youth are predominantly based on self-report measures. In contrast, only a limited number of studies rely on more objective indicators, such as clinically relevant symptoms of mental disorders. This discrepancy points to a significant methodological limitation within the existing body of empirical literature.

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