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Social Media and Mental Well-being: Navigating the Opportunities and Risks of Digital Connection

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral component of contemporary social life, influencing how individuals communicate, develop relationships, obtain information, express identity, and seek support. At the same time, growing concerns have emerged regarding its potential effects on mental well-being, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Excessive or problematic social media use has been associated with experiences such as social comparison, cyberbullying, sleep disruption, anxiety, loneliness, and reduced psychological well-being. However, viewing social media exclusively as a source of harm provides an incomplete understanding of its role in people's lives. Online platforms can also facilitate social connection, peer support, community participation, health communication, and access to mental-health information. Recent research suggests that the relationship between social media and mental well-being is complex, bidirectional, and influenced by individual, social, developmental, and platform-related factors. This commentary argues that the central question should not be whether social media is inherently harmful or beneficial, but rather **how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances social media influences mental well-being**. A more nuanced approach is needed from researchers, families, educational institutions, policymakers, and technology companies. Future research should move beyond measuring time spent online and examine the quality, purpose, content, and context of social media engagement.

Keywords: Social Media; Mental Well-being; Mental Health; Adolescents; Digital Well-being; Social Comparison; Cyberbullying; Online Communities; Social Connectedness; Digital Behaviour

Introduction

Social media has fundamentally changed the way people communicate and participate in society. Platforms that were initially designed primarily for social networking have developed into spaces for entertainment, education, political participation, professional networking, health communication, and community formation. For younger generations in particular, digital interaction is no longer separate from everyday social life; it is closely integrated with friendships, identity formation, education, and leisure.

This transformation has generated increasing interest in the relationship between social media and mental well-being. Concerns about anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, body-image dissatisfaction, cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and problematic technology use have become prominent in public and academic debates.

However, the relationship is more complicated than a simple claim that “social media causes poor mental health.” A 2024 review in *Nature Reviews Psychology* notes that research linking social media use and adolescent mental health has produced mixed and inconsistent findings. The authors emphasize mechanisms such as social comparison, self-presentation, social feedback, exclusion, reward processing, and developmental vulnerability rather than treating social media exposure as a single uniform experience.

This suggests that the important question is not merely **how much social media people use**, but **what they do on social media and how those experiences interact with their existing psychological and social circumstances**.

Social Media as Both a Risk and a Resource

Social media occupies an unusual position in discussions of mental well-being because it can simultaneously function as a risk and a resource.

On one hand, online platforms provide opportunities for connection. Individuals who experience geographic isolation, social stigma, disability, or difficulty forming relationships offline may find supportive communities online. Social media can allow people to communicate with friends and relatives, discover communities with shared interests, and obtain information about mental-health concerns.

Mental-health communication through social media can also increase awareness. Research examining TikTok, for example, has explored how content creators can potentially communicate mental-health information to large audiences and increase exposure to health-related messages.

On the other hand, social media environments can expose users to misinformation, hostile interactions, unrealistic representations of everyday life, and harmful content. The same platform that enables a person to find emotional support can also expose that person to harassment or negative social comparison.

Therefore, social media should not be understood as inherently positive or negative. Its effects depend heavily on **content, context, user characteristics, social relationships, and patterns of engagement**.

Social Comparison and Self-Evaluation

One of the most important mechanisms linking social media with psychological well-being is social comparison.

Social media often presents highly selective representations of people's lives. Users typically share achievements, celebrations, attractive photographs, travel experiences, professional successes, and other positive moments. Exposure to such content can create the perception that others are happier, more successful, more attractive, or more socially connected.

For individuals who already experience low self-esteem or psychological distress, repeated upward comparison may contribute to negative self-evaluation.

The problem is not simply that people compare themselves with others. Social comparison is a normal psychological process. Rather, social media can increase the **frequency, visibility, and accessibility** of comparison targets. Users can encounter hundreds of carefully selected images and achievements within minutes.

Adolescence may represent a particularly sensitive period because identity, social belonging, and self-concept are still developing. The 2024 review in *Nature Reviews Psychology* emphasizes that developmental changes in self-concept, social feedback, reward processing, and social sensitivity may interact with social-media experiences to influence psychological vulnerability.

Cyberbullying and Online Social Harm

Another significant concern is cyberbullying. Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can occur continuously and potentially reach large audiences. Harmful content can be shared, reproduced, or viewed repeatedly, making it difficult for victims to escape the experience.

Cyberbullying can involve direct harassment, public humiliation, exclusion, impersonation, threats, or the distribution of embarrassing material. Such experiences can negatively affect emotional well-being and social functioning.

An umbrella review published in *Nature Human Behaviour* synthesized evidence on the risk factors, consequences, protective factors, and interventions associated with cyberbullying victimization. The research highlights cyberbullying as an important area for prevention and intervention rather than simply treating online harassment as an inevitable feature of digital communication.

This reinforces the need for stronger digital citizenship education, accessible reporting mechanisms, effective platform moderation, and supportive responses from parents, educators, and communities.

The Importance of Sleep and Digital Habits

The relationship between social media and well-being may also operate indirectly through daily routines.

Late-night scrolling, notifications, online conversations, and the desire to remain socially connected can interfere with sleep routines. Poor sleep is itself associated with emotional difficulties, reduced concentration, and impaired psychological functioning.

This creates a potentially reinforcing cycle. A person experiencing loneliness or anxiety may use social media more frequently as a coping mechanism. Increased nighttime use may then interfere with sleep, potentially worsening emotional well-being and encouraging further online engagement.

The World Health Organization's 2025 policy work on the digital determinants of youth mental health emphasizes that the relationship between technology use and mental health can be **bidirectional**. Mental-health difficulties may influence digital behaviour, while digital experiences may also influence mental well-being.

This is an important point because it challenges the assumption that social media use is always the original cause of psychological difficulties.

Social Media and Mental-Health Support

Despite concerns about social media, digital platforms also provide opportunities for mental-health support.

Individuals may use online communities to share experiences, find information, reduce feelings of isolation, and discover professional resources. For people who are reluctant or unable to access traditional services, digital spaces can provide an initial pathway toward support.

Social media can also serve as a source of population-level information. Researchers have demonstrated that large-scale social-media data can potentially provide information about population patterns of depression and anxiety. One 2024 study developed a pipeline using approximately one billion posts from two million geolocated users to estimate population-level mental-health indicators.

However, the use of social-media data for mental-health assessment raises important ethical questions. Online expressions should not automatically be interpreted as clinical symptoms, and individuals may not expect their public posts to be used for psychological inference.

Consequently, researchers must carefully address privacy, informed consent, data security, representativeness, and the potential consequences of automated mental-health classification.

Moving Beyond Screen Time

A major limitation in public discussions is the tendency to treat **time spent on social media** as the primary measure of risk.

Two individuals may spend the same amount of time online but have completely different experiences. One may communicate with supportive friends, participate in an educational community, and access useful information. Another may spend the same amount of time comparing themselves with others, encountering hostile content, or engaging in compulsive scrolling.

Therefore, future research should distinguish between:

- passive and active social-media use;
- supportive and harmful interactions;
- entertainment and compulsive consumption;
- positive and negative social comparison;
- meaningful communication and superficial engagement;
- exposure to reliable and misleading information; and
- intentional use and algorithmically driven consumption.

The quality and purpose of engagement may be more informative than duration alone.

Platform Design and Responsibility

Individual behaviour is only one part of the equation. Social-media platforms are designed environments, and their architecture can influence user behaviour.

Features such as infinite scrolling, notifications, personalized recommendations, engagement metrics, and algorithmically selected content can encourage prolonged interaction. Consequently, responsibility for digital well-being should not rest entirely on individuals.

Technology companies have a role in designing safer digital environments, improving content moderation, providing meaningful privacy controls, limiting harmful recommendation pathways, and increasing transparency about algorithms.

The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health emphasizes that current evidence is not sufficient to conclude that social media is adequately safe for children and adolescents and calls for action involving young people, families, researchers, policymakers, and technology companies.

This supports a broader principle: **digital well-being is a shared responsibility rather than solely an individual responsibility.**

Toward a More Balanced Approach

The appropriate response to concerns about social media should not necessarily be complete withdrawal from digital environments. Social media has become deeply embedded in contemporary social life, and eliminating access may also eliminate important opportunities for communication, education, support, and participation.

Instead, a balanced approach should focus on digital literacy and healthy engagement.

Young people should be taught how algorithms influence what they see, how to recognize misinformation, how to manage privacy, how to respond to cyberbullying, and how to identify unhealthy patterns of online behaviour.

Parents and educators should create environments in which young people can discuss negative online experiences without fear of punishment. Mental-health professionals should also consider the role of digital environments when assessing psychological difficulties.

At the policy level, stronger evidence-based standards are needed to protect vulnerable users while preserving the benefits of digital communication.

Future Research Directions

Future research should move toward more nuanced models of social-media effects. Longitudinal research is particularly important because cross-sectional associations cannot always establish whether social media contributes to poor mental health or whether individuals experiencing psychological difficulties are more likely to use social media.

Researchers should also examine differences between platforms, content types, age groups, cultural contexts, and patterns of engagement.

The rapidly changing nature of digital platforms presents another challenge. Findings concerning one platform or technology may become less relevant as users migrate to new services and algorithms change.

Research should therefore focus on underlying mechanisms rather than individual platforms alone. Questions concerning social comparison, belonging, identity development, social feedback, cyberbullying, sleep, and algorithmic exposure may remain relevant even as particular platforms evolve.

Conclusion

Social media has become an important determinant of contemporary social interaction and potentially of mental well-being. Its influence cannot be reduced to a simple positive-versus-negative classification. Social media can create connection, support, information, and belonging, while also exposing users to comparison, cyberbullying, harmful content, misinformation, and unhealthy patterns of engagement.

The evidence increasingly supports a **contextual and multidimensional understanding** of the relationship between social media and mental well-being. The WHO's 2025 assessment similarly emphasizes that the evidence is mixed, that vulnerable young people may experience disproportionate negative effects, and that the relationship between digital behaviour and mental health can operate in both directions.

The central challenge is therefore not to eliminate social media but to create healthier digital environments and equip users with the skills necessary to navigate them.

Researchers should move beyond simple measures of screen time. Policymakers should prioritize evidence-based regulation and digital safety. Technology companies should accept greater responsibility for platform design. Educational institutions should promote digital and mental-health literacy. Families and communities should provide supportive environments for discussing online experiences.

Ultimately, the question should not be **“Is social media good or bad for mental health?”** but rather:

“How can social media be designed, regulated, and used in ways that strengthen human connection while reducing preventable psychological harm?”

Answering this question will be essential as digital interaction becomes an increasingly inseparable part of everyday life.