

# The Effects of Social Media Use on Mental Health in Adolescents

Yijun Sheng

Jiulongwan Campus of Wuxi Binhu Experimental School Affiliated to  
Nanjing Normal University, Wuxi 214071, Jiangsu, China

**Abstract:** Social media have become an indispensable part of adolescents' lives because of their vital roles in social interaction and recreation, and their effects on teenagers' mental well-being have garnered wide attention in academia. This study seeks to investigate the positive and negative effects of social media on adolescent mental health based on the existing literature. Their positive effects include augmenting social support for teenagers' mental well-being and facilitating their access to mental health knowledge. On the other hand, social media use may impair adolescents' mental health by deteriorating their psychological states, subjecting them to online bullying, and increasing their exposure to unhealthy content. Also discussed are personal and environmental factors influencing these effects. The article concludes with suggestions on how to mitigate the unfavorable effects of social media on adolescent mental health.

*Science Insights Education Frontiers* 2025; 28(1):4599-4612

DOI: 10.15354/sief.25.re512

*How to Cite:* Sheng, Y. (2025). The effects of social media use on mental health in adolescents. *Science Insights Education Frontiers*, 28(1):4599-4612.

**Keywords:** Social Media Use, Mental Health, Adolescent

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**About the Authors:** Yijun Sheng, Jiulongwan Campus of Wuxi Binhu Experimental School Affiliated to Nanjing Normal University, Wuxi 214071, Jiangsu, China.. E-mail: [362027742@qq.com](mailto:362027742@qq.com)

**Correspondence to:** Yijun Sheng at Wuxi Binhu Experimental School Affiliated to Nanjing Normal University in China.

**Conflict of Interests:** None

**Funding:** No funding sources declared.

**AI Declaration:** The authors affirm that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

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## **Introduction**

**S**OCIAL media are internet-based application platforms where users interact with each other and selectively present themselves. Social media users benefit a lot from the content shared on the platforms and their communication with others (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In recent decades, with the growing needs for online communication and information, social media use has become increasingly popular among the public, particularly the younger populations. The most used social media are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat, and TikTok, among others. The use of these platforms has permeated the day-to-day lives of adolescents, serving as essential tools for information acquisition, social intercourse, and entertainment. Despite their significant roles in enriching users' lives, there are growing concerns about the negative effects of social media on mental health in adolescents.

As per Sadagheyani and Tatari (2021), the outcomes of social media use are mixed: while it may increase the risk of being cyberbullied, elevate the anxiety and depression levels, impair sleep quality, and lower life satisfaction in users, it enables them to access additional emotional support and improve psychological regulation by increasing their self-expression opportunities, creating their connections with other individuals and web-based communities, as well as making the health experience of others and specialist health advice available. Compared to adults, adolescents are more prone to developing dependence on social media. Samji et al. (2022) finds the time this group spent on social media platforms nearly doubled after the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, individuals in adolescence are most likely to suffer mental health instability and conduct risk-taking behaviors (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Hence, a thorough understanding of the relationship between social media use and mental health in adolescents is of vital significance, and the topic has garnered much attention in the research community. Dai et al.'s (2022) study, a systematic review, suggests that the mental consequences of social media use for adolescent users are primarily manifested as cognitive effects (on self-concept, self-esteem, etc.), emotional effects (eliciting depression, anxiety, envy, loneliness, etc.), and effects on subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction). Popat and Tarrant (2023) surveyed relevant qualitative studies published between 2014 and 2020 to find that social media use can negatively affect adolescent mental health through factors like the pursuit of group identity, fear of judgment, appearance anxiety, cyber-addiction, and cyberbullying. Nevertheless, certain recent studies report positive effects of social media use on teenager mental health (Martingano et al., 2022; Chen Yihan & Xie Bin, 2023). Tibber and Silver (2022) argue that moderate social media use helps fulfill the basic psychological needs of youngsters, such as senses of acceptance

and belonging. Ferguson et al. (2022) claimed that no association between social media use and adolescent suicidal ideation could be identified in their study.

Based on recent research developments, this study aims to comprehensively investigate the effects of social media use on mental health in adolescents and provide suggestions on how to reduce its negative consequences for the young population's mental well-being.

## **Effects of Social Media Use on Mental Health in Adolescents**

### ***Positive Effects***

Evidence of the positive effects of social media use on teenager mental health is relatively less in the literature. Still, they deserve serious examination, which can provide implications for maximizing the positive outcomes of social media for adolescents in the context of increasing presence of the technology.

### **Augmenting Social Support**

Proper use of social media can result in enhanced subjective well-being in adolescents (Ni & Shao, 2019), as it brings various social support to them. First off, social media significantly expands the networking opportunities for teenagers, who can develop and strengthen friendships with others through tweeting, texting, and sharing content (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Al-Gasem, 2019). Particularly, the positive response they receive in their social activity on social media platforms can elicit immense psychological satisfaction, which is beneficial to their mental health (Sun et al., 2017). Furthermore, the social media platform may provide a supportive community for the young person, enhancing their sense of belonging and reducing loneliness (O'Reilly et al., 2019). For example, some senior YouTube users make the young generation realize they are not alone in fighting teenage problems by sharing their prior mental health stories. In addition, social media offers adolescents opportunities for identity creation and creative expression, enabling them to fully exchange novel ideas on the platforms, which results in boosted self-confidence and well-being (Gupta et al., 2022; Al-Gasem, 2019).

### **Enhancing Mental Health Intervention Awareness**

To contribute to the prevention of mental problems, many social media platforms have embedded various mental health interventions in their

platforms. For example, some platforms can automatically present links to suicide prevention lifelines, counseling services, or crisis intervention websites when they identify certain users browsing on certain “special” topics (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018). Some social media have even developed more sophisticated machine learning technologies to detect symptoms of mental health conditions in users, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation, by analyzing their posts or behavior on the platform (Gupta et al., 2022).

Additionally, social media can serve as a valuable source of information, improving adolescents’ knowledge of mental health issues and providing effective strategies for combating stress or other problems (O’Reilly et al., 2019). At the same time, the anonymity of social media helps reduce the worries about the stigma attached to mental health issues, allowing young people to extensively seek specialist information, particularly on topics like sexual health, stress management, and depressive symptoms (Kaur & Bashir, 2015), without the fear of being discriminated against.

## ***Negative Impacts***

The view that social media use is detrimental to adolescent mental health dominates public opinion in this regard. As per prior research findings, although not all mental issues in teenagers relate to social media use, a portion of them are caused or exacerbated by the latter.

## **Negative Emotions**

The connection between social media use and depressive symptoms in adolescents has been evidenced by many studies (Gupta et al., 2022; Khalaf et al., 2023; Deep, 2015; Kaur & Bashir, 2016; Prabhakararao & Hladková, 2016). Furthermore, adolescents who use multiple social media platforms or spend disproportionate amounts of time on them are more likely to develop depressive conditions (Al-Gasem, 2019; Deepa & Priya, 2020). There are numerous possibilities that social media use can induce or exacerbate depressive conditions in adolescents. For instance, exposure to others’ curated displays of luxurious lifestyles on the platforms may lower their satisfaction with their lives, fueling senses of inferiority and thereby instigating depressive emotions; unhealthy content or miserable events on social media, such as cyberbullying victimization, can increase the risk of developing depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, certain researchers argued that the relationship between social media use and depression in adolescents was not as straightforward as assumed. For example, Zhu et al.’s (2021) longitudinal study, which collected data over a five-month period, finds that

the intensity of social media use of the adolescents could be predicted by their initial levels of depression measured at the beginning of the study, whereas their initial intensity of social media use could not predict their depression levels in five months. In other words, the depression level determines social media behavior in this group, but not vice versa. This result suggests that the relationship between adolescent depressive symptoms and social media use remains indefinite, pending further research.

The research literature suggests a positive correlation between social media use and general anxiety symptoms, appearance anxiety, and fear of missing out (FOMO) in adolescents (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2018; O'Reilly, 2020; Deepa & Priya, 2020). Information overload or undesirable comments and interactive experiences from social media platforms may add psychological pressures to adolescents, leading to their heightened anxiety levels. On the platforms where visual content predominates, the presentation of abundant “perfect” images may cause adolescents, especially girls, to develop dissatisfaction with their appearance, and such comparisons pose significantly negative impacts on their self-esteem and body image (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Fear of missing out is a broad form of anxiety that arises from the individual’s apprehension of missing out on meaningful information, events, and experiences, a manifestation of their strong desire to stay informed about others’ activities (Chai et al., 2018). Prior studies have found that some adolescents may experience FOMO when they feel unable to check updates on social media in a timely manner (Al-Gasem, 2019; O'Reilly, 2020).

Other negative emotions associated with social media use include jealousy, anger, sadness, helplessness, and more. For example, image management attempts predispose social media users to focus on their merits and strengths in online self-presentation (Dai et al., 2022). Such biased information can easily spark irrational comparisons between young viewers, leading to groundless jealousy. The longer the adolescent lingers on the social media platforms, the more likely it is for them to feel that others are all living better lives than they are (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020). To make things worse, teenagers may choose to suppress rather than confront their feelings when experiencing such “unspeakable” emotions (Kaur & Bashir, 2016), which could further exacerbate their emotional states.

## Risks of Cyberbullying Victimization and Exposure to Harmful Content

The anonymity and interactivity of social media activity contribute to the incidence of cyberbullying, which can be in various forms, including the prank, malicious post, private information circulation, harassment, and even threat of violence. Cyberbullying can significantly negatively affect

adolescent mental well-being. In some studies, teenagers polled reported severe mental health consequences of cyberbullying victimization, such as psychological distress, confusion, and isolation. Cyberbullying victimization can lead to school avoidance, and in more severe cases, even suicidal ideation (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Prabhakararao & Hladkov 2016).

On social media platforms, adolescents have the chance to encounter all sorts of harmful content, whose impacts are multifarious. For instance, the algorithmic recommendation mechanism embedded in the social media platform may expose users to triggering content, which has the potential for evoking specific emotions, memories, or reactions, often linked to past trauma, such as self-injury and eating disorders (Elmqvist & McLaughlin, 2018). Such triggering content can possibly stimulate adolescents' negative emotions and behaviors. In addition, social media use may expose adolescents to other unfavorable content, such as violence, pornography, etc., which is not just detrimental to their mental well-being but may rationalize and reinforce some of their unhealthy behaviors. Also, some of the social media content may have a negative influence on teenagers' outlook on life. Displays of extravagant lifestyles online, for instance, could instigate materialistic tendencies in adolescent social media users (Hu & Liu, 2020).

## Social Comparison and Self-Perception Issues

Social comparison is a psychological process in which an individual compares their competence, outlook, social status, emotional state, and other aspects with those of others. There are two main types of social comparison: upward comparison (where an individual compares themselves to those who are more successful) and downward comparison (where an individual compares themselves to those who are less prosperous) (Qiu et al., 2017). Adolescents are more prone to engage in social comparison on social media, particularly comparing themselves to those users who appear to be more accomplished or lead happier lives. According to social comparison theory, such comparisons may activate the threat perception system in their brains, leading to stress, envy, low self-esteem, and other negative emotions, thereby compromising their mental health (Orben, 2020). Several studies have emphasized that social comparison is a key mediating factor in the relationship between social media use and mental health decline (Chen & Xie, 2023; Qiu et al., 2017).

Social media use may also hinder the adolescent's effort to reach legitimate self-perception and self-evaluation (e.g., reducing the clarity of self-concept) (Dai et al., 2022). Teenagers are typically active in creating personal profiles and other content on social media to showcase their "best selves." Yet, underlying this self-expression is the high value they placed on

others' evaluations, which may prompt them to become overly concerned about external judgments. Receiving negative comments or failing to garner sufficient engagement can easily trigger an identity crisis by affecting their self-esteem (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). In pursuit of more desirable comments, some adolescents continually modify their online identity. The discrepancy between their online and real-world personas can further blur their self-concept.

## **Social Media Addiction**

Compared to other age groups, teenagers are more likely to develop social media addiction, with issues like high usage frequency, difficulty controlling screen time, and losses of interest in other activities (Deep, 2015). These issues can bring disruptions to their schoolwork, interpersonal relationships, social life, and emotional regulation, deteriorating their mental health (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Prabhakararao & Hladíková, 2016). Meanwhile, sleep deprivation is a pronounced consequence of social media addiction, heavily discussed in the literature. Excessive or before-bedtime social media use has been identified as the chief cause of sleep inadequacy, poor sleep quality, and daytime sleepiness among adolescents (Khalaf et al., 2023; Deep, 2015; O'Reilly et al., 2019; O'Reilly, 2020; Prabhakararao & Hladíková, 2016). The most concerning is that social media platforms may deliberately develop the capability to reinforce illegitimate behavior and foster addictive tendencies in users, drawing on behavioral psychology, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence technology (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020).

## **Factors Influencing Social Media's Effects on Adolescent Mental Health**

Prior research findings also reveal that the relationship between social media use and mental health in adolescents can be influenced by multiple factors, personal and environmental.

Among personal factors, social media behaviors serve as a salient moderating factor in the relationship in question (Yin et al., 2019). Active acts, such as chatting, messaging, and liking, may help increase social capital and senses of connection, positively affecting mental health; on the other hand, passive acts, such as browsing news and scrolling through photos, may elicit upward social comparison and the attendant feelings of jealousy, leading to negative mental health consequences (Orben, 2020). Additionally, social media usage intensity is another important moderating factor (Cheng, 2021). Inordinately lengthy and frequent use of social media may disrupt life routines, impair sleep quality, and consequently, negatively affect emotional

regulation, increasing the risk of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, in adolescents.

The mental health state of a teenager also serves as a personal factor that influences the mental health consequences of social media use (Marciano et al., 2022; Vidal et al., 2020; Senekal et al., 2023). Psychologically healthier adolescents are more likely to reap mental benefits from social media use. Particularly, those with high self-esteem, who maintain positive evaluations of their self-worth and capabilities, can successfully circumvent the negative effects of social media (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Contrarily, adolescents who have previously experienced psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, or adverse incidents like cyberbullying, are more likely to suffer mental damage from social media use. Additionally, the effect of gender on the relationship between social media use and mental health in adolescents is also discussed in the literature. According to a cross-sectional study of 910 Belgian high school students using a structural equation model, passive Facebook use had a negative emotional effect on girls, whereas active use had a positive effect on their perception of online social support, which, in turn, improved their emotional well-being; for boys, however, the impact of active use of the platform is primarily negative (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Nevertheless, certain meta-analyses find that the moderating effect of gender is not significant (Wu & Mao, 2020; Ivie et al., 2020).

Environmental factors, such as family socioeconomic status (SES), parental intervention, social support, and cultural background, can all significantly affect the mental health outcomes of social media use in adolescents. Specifically, adolescents with higher SES origins are more likely to acquire positive mental experiences using social media (Hamilton et al., 2021). Parental management of social media use also plays a crucial role (Senekal et al., 2023; Biernesser et al., 2020). Proper parental guidance can help nurture children's capacity for time management in social media use while also protecting them from harmful online information. Meanwhile, a lack of parental supervision may lead to poor self-regulation and excessive social media use in teenage children, which is harmful to their mental and physical health. Furthermore, the quality of social support received by adolescents also informs their mental experiences in social media use (Vidal et al., 2020; Biernesser et al., 2020). Social support can come from family, friends, teachers, and other sources. Adolescents who receive robust social support are more likely to have desirable mental experiences on social media platforms, as opposed to isolation, helplessness, and other negative emotions experienced by those lacking social support, who are more susceptible to negative impacts of the platforms. Additionally, the cultural background can markedly influence the mental health outcomes of social media use in adolescents. A more significantly positive correlation between social media

use and mental well-being is detected among adolescents from a collectivist tradition (Yin et al., 2019; Vidal et al., 2020).

## **Discussions and Suggestions**

Our review shows the relationship between the mental health states and social media use in adolescents is not a straightforward one. On balance, the negative consequences of social media use outweigh its benefits for teenager mental well-being. Compared to adults, it is more difficult for adolescents to resist the temptations from social media platforms. Hence, it is imperative for various stakeholders to take action to mitigate the adverse impact of social media on teenagers.

First off, parents as the guardians of their adolescent children have the responsibility to monitor the latter's social media behavior to ensure they do not become addicted to the internet-based activity. To this end, developing a "family social media use scheme" (Khalaf et al., 2023) may be an advisable approach, with which parents can set limits for screen time and content access in negotiation with their children. Further, parents should create opportunities for their children to engage in more diverse leisure pursuits. In the meantime, parents, as their children's first educators, should act as role models by properly managing their own screen time (Deep, 2015).

It is also important for the school to provide education on social media use to its students, helping them develop a thorough understanding of the hazards of illegitimate use of the emerging technology and increase the capacity to discern false information and harmful content on the virtual platforms. At the same time, to address existing mental health issues associated with social media use in the students, the school should provide professional psychological counseling to assist them in combating mental pressures from online social life.

As service providers, social media companies should be aware that protecting adolescent mental health is a component of corporate social responsibility. For example, some platforms have introduced a "teenage mode," which applies technology to the screening and filtering of inappropriate content, such as violence, pornography, and horror. Also, this mode has the built-in feature of limiting screen time and usage, preventing adolescents from developing social media dependence. On the other side, governmental regulation of social media ought to be strengthened to create a relatively safe and sound online environment for the young generation. For instance, the China Internet Network Information Center launched the "Cyberspace Cleansing Campaign," consisting of a series of targeted actions aimed at combating harmful online incidents like cyberviolence and cleaning up cyber environments by removing unlawful information from digital platforms.

Most importantly, adolescents should have the opportunities to develop diverse interests in areas like painting, dancing, calligraphy, and handicraft to enrich their lives in the real world so that their engagement with social media is maintained at an appropriate level. Furthermore, face-to-face social interactions can provide more effective social support against infringements, such as bullying, in comparison to online relationships (Khalaf et al., 2023). Hence, it is crucial that adolescents actively participate in real-world social activities, building positive relationships with family members, friends, and schoolmates.

## **Conclusion**

This study reviews the relationship between social media use and mental health in adolescents in the literature to find that social media as efficient information exchange platforms can help boost adolescents' mental well-being by providing social support and mental health knowledge; that inappropriate use of social media may elicit negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, which can be further exacerbated by cyberbullying and harmful content on social media platforms, disrupt the formation of self-concept, and instigate social media addiction in them; and that both personal and environmental factors can mediate the relationship.

The review also finds the limitations of prior studies of the impact of social media on adolescent mental health. First, most of these studies are cross-sectional, lacking longitudinal research. Cross-sectional studies can only capture associations between variables at a certain point, unable to reveal the dynamic interactions between them over a certain period of time or account for other confounding factors. Therefore, future research should adopt more diverse approaches, including longitudinal studies. Gathering and analyzing multiple data can generate more powerful evidence for further clarifying the effect of social media use on mental health in adolescents. In addition to quantitative research, well-crafted qualitative studies are warranted to obtain deeper insights into adolescents' genuine perceptions of mental health consequences of social media. Second, current research in this area exhibits a disproportionately heavy use of student self-reports on the associations between social media use and mental health (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Chen & Xie, 2023). While the self-report as a data-gathering device is easy to manipulate and cost-effective, it is subject to subjective prejudice, memory bias, social expectations, and other factors, potentially skewing the research findings. Third, many studies measure the use of social media by adolescents primarily in terms of frequency and duration, rarely taking account of the form of online interaction (Schønning et al., 2020) or the quality of interaction. Future research should pay attention to these additional dimensions to enhance the reliability and accuracy of its findings.

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*Received: January 10, 2025*

*Revised: February 11, 2025*

*Accepted: April 15, 2025*