



SOCIAL MEDIA, MENTAL HEALTH, AND YOUTH IDENTITY: A HEALTH AND SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has significantly transformed the social experiences, identity formation, and mental health of young people. While social media offers opportunities for connection, self-expression, and information sharing, it has also been linked to rising concerns related to anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and identity confusion among youth. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from social sciences, health studies, and technology research to examine the complex relationship between social media usage, mental well-being, and youth identity development. Using survey-based data collected from university students and young adults, the study analyzes patterns of social media engagement and their perceived psychological and social impacts. The findings indicate a dual effect of social media, acting as both a supportive and a risk-enhancing environment for youth mental health. The study concludes with recommendations for educators, policymakers, and health professionals to promote healthier digital engagement among young populations.

Keywords: Social media, mental health, youth identity, health and society, digital behavior, interdisciplinary research.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly for young people. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) are not merely tools for communication but spaces where identities are formed, negotiated, and displayed. Youth today



navigate social relationships, academic pressures, and self-concept development within digital environments that operate continuously and publicly.

From a health and society perspective, concerns regarding youth mental health have intensified alongside the growth of social media usage. Rising levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and body image dissatisfaction among adolescents and young adults have prompted scholars to examine the psychosocial effects of digital technologies. While some studies highlight the positive role of social media in fostering belonging and social support, others emphasize its association with social comparison, cyberbullying, and psychological distress.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between social media use, mental health outcomes, and youth identity formation by integrating insights from sociology, public health, and digital media studies. By adopting an interdisciplinary framework, the study seeks to move beyond simplistic narratives of harm or benefit and instead understand social media as a complex social environment shaping youth experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Research by **Twenge et al. (2018)** suggests a strong association between increased screen time and depressive symptoms among adolescents. Similarly, **Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020)** found that excessive social media use correlates with anxiety and poor sleep quality.

However, other scholars argue for a more nuanced interpretation. **Orben and Przybylski (2019)** report that the effects of digital technology on mental health are relatively small and context-dependent. **Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014)** highlight the role of social media in providing emotional support and peer connection, particularly for marginalized youth.

2.2 Identity Formation in Digital Spaces

Identity development is a critical aspect of youth psychology. **Erikson's theory of psychosocial development** emphasizes adolescence as a stage of identity exploration. In digital contexts, **boyd (2014)** argues that social media platforms



act as “networked publics,” where youth perform and negotiate identities in front of visible audiences.

Studies by **Valkenburg and Peter (2011)** indicate that online self-presentation can enhance self-esteem when feedback is positive, but negative interactions may reinforce insecurity. **Manago et al. (2012)** note that curated online identities can lead to discrepancies between real and ideal selves, contributing to emotional distress.

2.3 Health and Society Perspectives

From a public health standpoint, **WHO (2021)** recognizes youth mental health as a global priority influenced by social environments, including digital spaces. **Odgers and Jensen (2020)** argue that social media effects are shaped by social inequality, family context, and offline support systems.

Interdisciplinary studies such as **Primack et al. (2017)** reveal links between heavy social media use and perceived social isolation, reinforcing the need for integrated health and sociological analyses.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey-based research design to examine social media usage patterns and their perceived impact on mental health and identity among youth.

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of **220 respondents** aged 18–25 from Canadian universities. Participants were recruited through online academic forums and student networks.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used, including:

- Frequency of social media use
- Types of platforms used
- Self-reported mental health indicators (stress, anxiety, self-esteem)
- Perceptions of identity expression and social comparison



3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were applied to identify trends and relationships between variables.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Key Findings

The results indicate that social media use has both positive and negative implications for youth mental health and identity.

Table 1: Social Media Use and Perceived Mental Health Impact (n = 220)

| Variable | Percentage (%) |
|--|----------------|
| Daily social media use (>3 hours) | 68 |
| Reported increased anxiety | 54 |
| Experienced positive social support | 61 |
| Engaged in social comparison | 72 |
| Felt social media helped self-expression | 64 |

4.2 Discussion

A majority of participants reported experiencing anxiety linked to social comparison and online validation metrics such as likes and comments. At the same time, many acknowledged that social media provided a sense of belonging and a platform for expressing personal identity.

These findings align with **Orben and Przybylski (2019)**, suggesting that social media effects are not universally harmful but contingent on usage patterns and individual vulnerability. From a health and society lens, social media functions as both a risk environment and a social resource.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media plays a complex role in shaping youth mental health and identity. Rather than being inherently harmful or beneficial, its impact depends on social context, intensity of use, and individual coping mechanisms. Interdisciplinary approaches are essential to understanding these dynamics and designing effective interventions.



Policymakers and educators should promote digital literacy, encourage balanced usage, and integrate mental health awareness into educational curricula. Future research should explore longitudinal effects and culturally diverse populations to deepen understanding of digital youth experiences.

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