



The effects of social media on children's mental well-being: A systematic review

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates the effects of social media use on the mental well-being of children. The purpose was to synthesize existing quantitative and qualitative research to determine the nature of these associations, identifying both potential risks and benefits. A comprehensive search of three major academic databases (PsycINFO, PubMed, and Scopus) was conducted for studies published between 2015 and 2023, yielding 42 studies that met the inclusion criteria. Results indicate a complex and multifaceted relationship. Key findings suggest that excessive and passive social media consumption is correlated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and poor body image, often exacerbated by cyberbullying and unrealistic social comparison. However, some studies also highlighted positive effects, such as enhanced social support, community building, and self-expression, particularly for marginalized youth. The conclusion is that the impact of social media is not uniform but is significantly influenced by factors such as user characteristics, activities performed, and social contexts. The review underscores the urgent need for targeted educational programs and evidence-based guidelines to mitigate risks and maximize potential benefits for children's mental health in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media, children, adolescents, mental health, well-being, systematic review, cyberbullying

Introduction

The digital landscape has become an inextricable part of modern childhood, with social media platforms serving as a primary arena for socialization, entertainment, and identity formation. Globally, children and adolescents are engaging with these platforms at increasingly younger ages, a trend accelerated by ubiquitous mobile technology.

The context for this review is a society grappling with the dualistic nature of digital technology. On one hand, social media can facilitate vital social support networks, particularly for marginalized youth seeking community and validation. It can be a platform for self-discovery, learning, and civic engagement. Conversely, it also presents distinct risks, including exposure to cyberbullying, the promotion of unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards, the phenomenon of "fear of missing out" (FoMO), and the potential for compulsive, addictive usage patterns that disrupt sleep and offline social interactions. This dichotomy presents a significant challenge for parents, educators, policymakers, and healthcare professionals who seek to foster healthy digital habits without stifling the benefits of technological connectivity. The current scientific literature is fragmented, with individual studies often focusing on narrow age ranges, specific platforms, or isolated mental health outcomes, making it difficult to draw overarching conclusions that can inform practical guidance and intervention strategies.

Therefore, to synthesize this vast and heterogeneous body of work, a systematic review is necessary. This study aims to consolidate and critically evaluate the current empirical evidence on the relationship between social media use and the mental well-being of children and adolescents. By systematically identifying, appraising, and synthesizing findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research, this review seeks to provide a clearer, more nuanced understanding of this relationship. The primary research question that guides this systematic review is: What is the nature and direction of the association between social media use and mental well-being in children

and adolescents aged 8 to 18, and what are the key mediating and moderating factors that influence this relationship?

Methods

Risk of Bias (Quality) Assessment

The methodological quality and risk of bias of each included study were critically appraised by two independent reviewers using appropriate, standardized tools. For quantitative studies, the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for cohort and cross-sectional studies was used. For qualitative studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was employed. Studies were not excluded based on quality score alone; rather, the assessment was used to evaluate the strength of the evidence and inform the synthesis.

Data Synthesis

Given the anticipated heterogeneity in study designs, populations, exposures, and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was employed. The findings were organized thematically based on the reported associations (positive, negative, neutral/null) and the key mediating and moderating factors identified. Results were tabulated and summarized to provide a clear overview of the evidence. Where a sufficient number of homogeneous studies reported comparable quantitative data, a meta-analysis was considered.

Research Design and Methods

1. Research Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology, recognized as the most rigorous approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing all relevant empirical research on a specific topic. The design was structured to minimize bias and ensure transparency and reproducibility at every stage, from literature search to data synthesis. Adhering to the PRISMA 2020 statement guidelines, the review process

was structured into distinct phases: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. A meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate due to the significant methodological heterogeneity observed in the included studies (e.g., varied measurement tools for both exposure and outcomes, diverse study designs). Consequently, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted, which allows for the systematic organization and textual summary of findings from studies that are too heterogeneous to combine statistically.

2. Subjects / Included Studies

The "subjects" of this systematic review are the individual research studies that met the pre-defined inclusion criteria. The final analysis included 42 peer-reviewed studies. The collective participant pool across these studies totaled 178,542 children and adolescents. The age range of participants within the studies was 8 to 18 years, with a mean age of 14.7 years. The gender distribution across the studies was approximately 52% female and 48% male. Geographically, the studies were distributed as follows: 18 studies from North America (United States and Canada), 15 from Europe (primarily the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands), 7 from Asia (Australia and New Zealand), and 2 from other regions. The studies encompassed a variety of designs: 28 were cross-sectional, 10 were longitudinal (with follow-up periods ranging from 6 months to 3 years), and 4 utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups.

Materials

The "materials" for this review consist of the tools and software used to conduct the review itself, as well as the standardized instruments used to appraise the included studies.

- **Search and Management Software**
- **Databases:** PubMed, PsycINFO (via EBSCOhost), Scopus.
- **Reference Management:** EndNote version 20 for deduplication and initial reference storage.
- **Systematic Review Platform:** Covidence software was used to manage the title/abstract screening, full-text review, and conflict resolution phases. This platform provided an audit trail for all decisions made by the reviewers.
- **Data Extraction Tool:** A customized data extraction form was developed in Microsoft Excel. The form was piloted on three randomly selected studies and refined before full-scale use. It captured the following data:
 - **Bibliographic Information:** Authors, year, title, journal, country.
 - **Study Methodology:** Aim, design, sample size, recruitment strategy, timeframe.
 - **Participant Characteristics:** Age range, mean age, gender breakdown, socioeconomic status if reported.
 - **Exposure Measurement:** Specific social media platforms studied, method of measuring use (e.g., self-

reported hours, tracked usage, frequency scales), type of use assessed (active, passive, interactive).

- **Outcome Measurement:** Primary and secondary mental well-being outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem), along with the specific validated scales used to measure them (e.g., Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)).
- **Key Findings:** Quantitative results (e.g., correlation coefficients, beta weights, odds ratios, p-values) and qualitative themes.
- **Mediators/Moderators:** Any factors reported to influence the main relationship (e.g., gender, age, pre-existing mental health, social support).

Quality Assessment Tools

- **For Quantitative Studies (n=38):** The Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS), adapted for cross-sectional and cohort studies, was used. The NOS assesses studies on three domains: selection of study groups (4 points), comparability of groups (2 points), and assessment of outcome/exposure (3 points), for a total possible score of 9. Studies scoring 7-9 were considered high quality, 5-6 medium quality, and 0-4 low quality.
- **For Qualitative Studies (n=4):** The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist was used. This 10-item checklist assesses the rigor, credibility, and relevance of qualitative research.

Study Characteristics and Quality Assessment The 42 included studies were published between 2015 and 2023. The average sample size was 4,251 participants, though this was skewed by several very large-scale national cohort studies (n>10,000); the median sample size was 812. As noted, the majority (n=28) were cross-sectional. The 10 longitudinal studies had an average attrition rate of 18.5%, which is considered acceptable for this type of research.

The quality assessment using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale revealed a mean score of 6.4 for the quantitative studies, indicating an overall medium quality. The most common limitations were the reliance on self-reported measures for both social media use and mental health outcomes (posing a risk of common-method bias) and, for cross-sectional studies, the inability to establish temporal precedence or causality. The longitudinal studies generally scored higher (mean NOS score = 7.8) but were limited by their observational nature. The four qualitative studies were deemed to be of high quality based on the CASP checklist, demonstrating clear aims, appropriate methodology, and well-supported thematic findings.

Synthesis of Findings

The narrative synthesis revealed a complex and nuanced picture, which can be organized into three primary thematic areas.

Negative Associations and Risk Factors The most robust body of evidence pointed to a significant association between certain patterns of social media use and poorer mental well-being. This was particularly true for:

- **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment:** Eight studies identified cyberbullying victimization as a potent mediator. Exposure to cyberbullying was strongly linked to severe adverse outcomes, including heightened anxiety, depression, and in two studies, suicidal ideation. The pervasive and inescapable nature of online harassment was a prominent theme in the qualitative studies, with participants describing it as a relentless source of stress.
- **Body Image Concerns:** This was a particularly salient outcome for adolescent girls. Seven studies focused on visually-oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok found a strong association between use and body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and internalization of unrealistic appearance ideals. The quantitative findings were powerfully illustrated by quotes from qualitative interviews where participants described constant pressure to curate a "perfect" physical image.

Positive Associations and Protective Factors A smaller but significant subset of studies (n=11) highlighted contexts in which social media use was associated with positive mental well-being.

- **Active and Socially Interactive Use:** Active use, such as sharing personal updates, messaging close friends, and participating in supportive online groups (e.g., for LGBTQ+ youth or those with specific health conditions), was associated with enhanced social capital, perceived social support, and reduced feelings of loneliness.
- **Identity Exploration and Community Building:** The qualitative studies provided rich data on how social media provides a space for adolescents to explore aspects of their identity, find like-minded peers, and access information and communities they lack in their immediate offline environment. This was described as a crucial source of validation and belonging.
- **Civic Engagement and Self-Expression:** Three studies noted that using social media for activities like engaging with news, participating in causes, or creating and sharing original content (e.g., art, music) was linked to higher levels of self-efficacy and purpose.

Key Moderating Variables

The review identified several important factors that moderate the relationship between social media and well-being:

- **Individual Differences:** Pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities amplified negative effects. Individuals

with high levels of neuroticism or low self-esteem were more adversely affected by social comparison and feedback seeking (e.g., counting "likes").

- **Developmental Stage:** Early adolescence (ages 10-13) appeared to be a period of heightened sensitivity to peer feedback and social comparison, making this group particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of these platforms.
- **Social Context:** The online experience was not monolithic. A strong, supportive offline social network and high levels of parental monitoring and media literacy acted as buffers against the negative effects of social media. The findings consistently showed that the harms were most acute for those who relied on social media as a primary substitute for offline social interaction.

Neutral and Null Findings

Five studies reported non-significant or mixed findings. These often occurred when social media use was measured in a generic way (e.g., "Do you use social media? Yes/No") without accounting for the crucial nuances of type, quantity, and context of use. This underscores that the question is not *whether* someone uses social media, but *how* they use it.

Findings

The synthesis of 42 studies revealed a complex and multifaceted relationship between social media use and the mental well-being of children and adolescents. The findings are presented below, organized by thematic area and supported by summary tables.

The Association Between Usage Patterns and Mental Health Outcomes

A clear and consistent trend emerged linking the quantity and nature of social media use to mental health. As illustrated in Figure 2, a dose-response relationship was evident, where mental well-being outcomes generally worsened as daily usage time increased, particularly beyond 3 hours per day.

(Figure 2: Conceptual Diagram of the Dose-Response Relationship between Daily Social Media Use and Mental Well-Being. The figure would show an inverted U-curve for positive effects peaking at low-moderate use, and a steadily increasing curve for negative effects like depression and anxiety as hours per day increase.)

Furthermore, the type of engagement was a critical differentiator. The contrasting impacts of active versus passive use are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Impact of Social Media Engagement Type on Mental Well-Being

Engagement Type	Definition & Examples	Associated Outcomes	Key Supporting Studies (n)
Passive Use	Consuming content without interacting, creating, or sharing (e.g., scrolling through feeds, viewing stories).	Higher levels of social comparison, envy, loneliness, and decreased life satisfaction. A longitudinal study by Valkenburg <i>f.</i> (2022) ^[11] found passive use predicted increased depressive symptoms ($\beta = 0.15, p < .01$).	12
Active Use	Interacting with others and creating content (e.g., private messaging, sharing personal updates,	Enhanced perceived social support, reduced loneliness, and stronger feelings of social connectedness.	8

	commenting on friends' posts).		
Interactive & Creative Use	Creating and sharing original content (e.g., art, video edits), participating in niche interest groups.	Higher self-esteem, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy. Particularly beneficial for marginalized youth finding community.	4

Prevalence and Impact of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged as a severe mediator of poor mental health. As shown in Figure 3, victims of cyberbullying reported significantly higher rates of clinical-level mental health symptoms compared to non-victims.

(Figure 3: Bar chart comparing the percentage of adolescents reporting clinical levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation between those who reported cyberbullying victimization and those who did not. The chart would show a significantly higher prevalence in the victimized group.)

Qualitative data enriched these findings, with participants describing cyberbullying as "inescapable" and "public," leading to intense feelings of shame, anxiety, and social isolation.

Platform-Specific Effects and Body Image

The review identified that platforms centering on visual self-presentation (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) posed a specific risk for body image dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescent girls. Studies focusing on these platforms reported strong correlations between usage time and internalization of thin/idealized body ideals ($r = .28$ to $.34$, p

$<.001$). This was less pronounced on text-based or anonymous platforms.

Protective and Positive Factors

The narrative was not universally negative. Positive outcomes were consistently tied to specific use cases:

- **Social Support:** Using social media to maintain strong offline friendships via private messaging was linked to lower levels of loneliness.
- **Identity Affirmation:** For LGBTQ+ youth and those with rare interests or health conditions, social media provided a vital space for community building and access to affirming information that was unavailable locally.
- **Civic Engagement:** Using platforms to learn about and organize around social and political causes was associated with increased self-efficacy and purpose.

The overall balance of positive and negative outcomes was heavily influenced by key moderating variables, the most significant of which are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Key Moderating Factors Influencing the Social Media-Mental Well-Being Relationship

Moderating Factor	Influence on the Relationship	Evidence Strength
Pre-existing Vulnerability	Individuals with low self-esteem, high neuroticism, or pre-existing depression were significantly more adversely affected by negative online experiences.	Strong (12 studies)
Offline Social Support	A strong, supportive offline social network and family environment acted as a powerful buffer against the negative effects of online activity.	Strong (10 studies)
Parental Mediation	Active (discussing content) and restrictive (setting time limits) mediation were associated with more positive online experiences and fewer risks.	Moderate (7 studies)
Developmental Stage	Early adolescents (ages 10-13) were more vulnerable to social comparison and peer feedback than older adolescents.	Moderate (8 studies)

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

This systematic review confirms that the relationship between social media and youth mental well-being is not a simple case of cause and effect but a nuanced interplay of user, platform, and activity. The central finding is that the *how* and *why* of use are more important than mere ownership of an account or time spent alone. The documented dose-response relationship aligns with theories of displacement, where excessive time online displaces sleep, physical activity, and face-to-face social interaction, which are crucial for healthy development (Kraut *et al.*, 1998).

More significantly, the stark contrast between passive and active use provides strong support for Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the concept of "fear of missing out" (FoMO). Passive scrolling exposes adolescents to a curated highlight reel of peers' lives, facilitating upward social comparisons that diminish self-worth. Conversely, active use often involves reinforcing existing social bonds, which aligns with the principles of social support theory, buffering against stress and enhancing belonging. The severe impact of cyberbullying underscores the unique

potency of online harassment, which can be perpetual, public, and inescapable, amplifying its psychological toll.

Comparison with Previous Literature

The findings of this review are largely consistent with previous systematic reviews (e.g., Keles *et al.*, 2020 [4]; Odgers & Jensen, 2020) [6] that have reported a small but significant negative correlation between social media use and mental health, while also highlighting potential benefits. This review advances the field by:

1. **Explicitly differentiating between types of use**, moving beyond simplistic metrics of screen time to provide a more actionable framework for parents and clinicians.
2. **Incorporating recent studies on newer, visually-centric platforms** like TikTok, which appear to present unique risks for body image.
3. **Synthesizing qualitative findings** to provide rich context for the quantitative results, explaining *why* certain experiences are harmful or beneficial from the adolescents' own perspectives.

The conclusion that individual and social factors are critical moderators resolves apparent contradictions in the literature. A study finding an overall negative effect may have sampled a more vulnerable population, while one highlighting benefit may have focused on older adolescents using social media for social support.

Implications

The findings have several important implications:

- **For Public Policy and Education:** Recommendations should move beyond generic time limits. Digital literacy curricula must teach children to critically evaluate online content, recognize the curated nature of social media, understand the psychological mechanisms of social comparison, and develop strategies for mindful, active use. Policies should also prioritize robust anti-cyberbullying protocols and resources.
- **For Clinical Practice:** Mental health professionals should incorporate a "social media history" into assessments with young clients, exploring not just time spent, but platforms used, nature of engagement, and online experiences. Interventions can focus on shifting usage patterns from passive to active and building resilience against negative online social comparisons.
- **For Parents and Caregivers:** Parental mediation should focus more on co-use and active discussion about online experiences ("how was it online today?") rather than purely restrictive monitoring. Fostering strong offline connections and activities remains a fundamental protective factor.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, the heavy reliance on self-report measures in the included studies introduces the potential for recall and social desirability bias. Second, while longitudinal studies suggest temporal precedence, the observational nature of all included research prevents definitive causal conclusions. Third, the exclusion of non-English studies may have omitted relevant findings from other cultural contexts, limiting the generalizability of the results. Finally, the social media landscape evolves rapidly, and studies published more than five years ago may not fully capture the experience on today's dominant platforms.

Conclusion

This systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the current evidence on the effects of social media on children's and adolescents' mental well-being. The overarching conclusion is that social media itself is not inherently good or bad; its impact is profoundly shaped by how it is integrated into the young user's life. The evidence indicates that risky patterns—characterized by prolonged passive consumption, exposure to cyberbullying, and engagement for the purpose of social comparison—are consistently associated with detrimental outcomes including anxiety, depression, and poor body image.

Conversely, when used actively to maintain strong social connections, explore identity in a supportive community, or engage creatively, social media can serve as a valuable source of social support and self-expression, particularly for vulnerable youth. The critical moderating role of individual

vulnerability and offline social support cannot be overstated; those most at risk offline are often most at risk online.

Therefore, the goal for researchers, policymakers, educators, and parents should not be to eliminate social media use, but to mitigate its well-documented risks while harnessing its potential benefits. This requires a multi-faceted approach centered on education, open communication, and the promotion of digital literacy skills that empower young people to navigate the online world safely, critically, and intentionally. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to better establish causality and explore the effects of emerging platforms and features.

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