



Social Media and the Risk of Poor Mental Health Among Young Adults

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become an integral part of people's lives in the last decade. As a prominent fixture in young people's lives, social platforms have allowed them to share their experiences and connect with peers. However, using these platforms excessively can become problematic. Research has linked problematic use of social sites to more risk of having mental health issues. Some of the common mental health problems reported include depression, anxiety, loneliness, social media-related fatigue, unhappiness, and increased risk of alcohol use. Different reasons contribute to the increased risk of developing mental health problems because of excessive use of these platforms. They are sedentary behavior, poor sleep patterns, cyberbullying and victimization, multitasking, and internalizing online experiences. Others have a high risk of developing mental disorders because they neglect important aspects of their lives such as real-life social interactions. Addressing these factors can lower individual's risk of developing mental health issues. Besides, some studies have shown that there is a link between using social platforms and positive mental health more so for individuals struggling with mental problems. Social sites can be used to provide social support for young individuals experiencing mental problems. Individuals can use these platforms to share about their life struggles with mental issues. They can also use these platforms to obtain help and resources. Therefore, the aim of this review is to explore how social media increases the risk of mental problems among young adults.

Keywords: Social media, depression, anxiety, loneliness, social support, problematic/excessive social media use

Introduction

The last decade has seen social media become an integral part of individual's lives more so young adults. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X formerly known as Twitter, and TikTok have become popular tools for social interaction more so for youths and young adults. According to Pew Research Center, approximately 7 in 10 Americans use sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok being some of the most famous platforms with a large following by young adults.¹ The growth in popularity of such platforms among young adults can be attributed to a number of factors. Key among them is the ability to use the platform to communicate, share messages, co-create, and exchange digital content including photos and videos.^{2,3} Social media also plays a role in creating and shaping young people's experiences. For most young adults, these platforms provide a means for people to interact with others which is crucial in forming their identities online.⁴ However, despite the significance of these platforms in shaping the experience of most young people, some scholars believe it is like a double-edged sword. Double-edged sword in the sense that it allows young people to express their feelings and receive social support, and also contributes to an increased risk of having mental health issues and other psychological problems.^{5,6,7,8,9,10} Research has also shown that individuals who live with different mental disorders use social platforms more than the general population.^{11,12} The high use of social platforms in this population could be attributed to a number of factors including as a platform to seek information, as a mechanism to give and receive social support, or as a mechanism to cope. Whichever the case, social platforms

cannot be disregarded pertaining to its contribution to mental health. Therefore, this review seeks to explore the role of social media as a problematic aspect when it comes to mental health in young adults. Particularly, the review explores how these platforms are contributing to the risk of having mental health issues among young adults.

Mental Health Among Young Adults

Mental health disorders remain one of the most significant problems affecting the adult population. The World Health Organization estimates that 1 in every 8 individuals which is approximately 970 million of the world population live with a mental health disorder. Among the adult population, young adults are one of the groups that is adversely affected by mental health problems.¹³ According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 57.8 million adults in the US suffer from mental health disorders with young adults being one of the groups that is mostly affected.¹⁴ According to the data, young adults aged 18 to 25 years had the highest prevalence of mental illness at 33.7%. Adults aged 26 to 49 years accounted for 28.1% and those aged 50 years and older were 15%.¹⁴ Young adults were also the most affected by serious mental illness. Serious mental illness in this case is a mental illness that results in severe functional impairment. Of the 14.1 million adults who were diagnosed with serious mental illness in 2021, 11.4% of these were young adults aged 18 years to 25. The number was higher than the 7.1% that was reported among adults aged 26 to 49 years and 2.5% in adults aged 50 years and older.¹⁴

Issues related to mental problems are a major area of concern reported among young adults. If not addressed, mental health

problems can lead to severe impairment and significantly affect functioning. The Global Burden of Disease study that was conducted in 2019 reported mental health disorders contribute significantly to years lived with disability (YLD).¹⁵ Based on the study, the number of YLDs contributed significantly to the burden of mental health disorders with 125.3 million YLDs. Mental health disorders also contributed significantly to disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) with the numbers increasing from 80.8 million in 1999 to 125.3 million in 2019.¹⁵ Some of the main mental health disorders affecting young adults are major depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and alcohol use disorders.¹⁶

Addressing mental disorders affecting young adults is vital. In addition to contributing significantly to mental challenges and physical functioning, mental disorders also affect overall health and social well-being. However, addressing mental disorders can be challenging because of the complexities involved. This is particularly the case where social media is involved. The growing use of social platforms in young adults' lives can be problematic more so when it comes to problematic behaviors such as addiction. Addiction can be a fueling factor for mental health problems. Social media addiction can lead to increased isolation and loneliness with real-life social contracts leading to challenges such as depression. Considering the challenges that mental health causes in young adults, there is a need to explore how these platforms contribute to increased risk of mental health issues.

Social Media and Mental Health

The advent of social media has seen an increase in the number of people affected by mental health issues. Some studies have reported that using social platforms excessively increases individual's risk of having mental problems. Other studies have reported that social platforms use leads to positive outcomes when it comes to mental health. Although the results on the impact of social platforms are mixed, evidence suggests that the quantity of exposure is what really matters. Mere exposure is not regarded as harmful. However, constant exposure is seen as a catalyst factor for mental issues.¹⁷ According to a scoping review by McCrory et al. the time individuals spend using highly visual social platforms impact their mental health.¹⁸ Some studies report that people who spend more time on these platforms report a greater sense of social connection and acceptance. Other studies reported that individuals who spend more time on social media had higher levels of loneliness and depression.¹⁸ Similarly, another study by Shensa et al. found using social platforms in a manner that was problematic made people be at a higher risk of developing depression.⁸ Problematic use of social platforms in this case refers to the amount of time people spent on these sites. Other measures that were used to determine problematic social media usage were having an uncontrollable urge to use the platforms, logging in social sites as way to forget one's problems, using social sites to an extent that it was problematic to one's job and studies, trying to cut down social sites usage without having much success, and being restless when asked to stop using social platforms.⁸ The findings from this nationally representative study were similar to those by Primack et al.⁹ According to Primack et al. increased social sites usage was associated with both depression and anxiety.⁹ The more time one spent on social sites increased their risk of having depression and anxiety symptoms.⁹ Individuals who used 7 to 11 platforms reported more likelihood of experiencing depression and anxiety.⁹ The risk of developing anxiety was high because of the fear of missing out. The fear made individuals check social platforms on a regular basis contributing to anxiety. Lin et al. also established increased odds of depression among young adults who reported high usage of social sites than those who reported using less time of

social platforms per day even after controlling for factors such as age, sex, and race.¹⁹

In addition to depression and anxiety, social platforms leads to risk of having other mental problems. Social media use led to a decline in individual's subjective well-being.²⁰ In this case, two components were used to measure the participants' subjective well-being namely how they felt from moment to moment and how satisfied they were with their lives.²⁰ The study established that the more people used Facebook the worse they felt. Consistent use over a period of two weeks led to lower levels of life satisfaction over time. Another study found that Facebook led to decrease in mood.²¹ The reason why Facebook was associated with a decrease in mood is because individuals judged the site as less useful, less meaningful, and more of a waste of time.²¹ These perceptions are what could have led to a decrease in mood. Other mental problems that are associated with social media use are fatigue, loneliness, unhappiness, and increased risk of alcohol use.²² Depression seems to be the most commonly reported mental disorder in individuals who have problematic social platforms use.

Reasons Why Social Media Increases the Risk of Mental Health

Different plausible explanations have been given as to why social platforms increases the risk of having mental challenges. One of the reasons is because it is a sedentary behavior. As a sedentary behavior, social media increases the risk of health problems including mental issues. Research has found that leading a sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of mental problems.^{23,24,25} Lack of physical activity is always associated with poor mental well-being with individuals that have lower levels of exercise being known to lead to poor mental health outcomes.²⁶ When it comes to excessive use of social platforms, engaging in physical activity becomes a problem. Because of the considerable amount of time spent on these platforms, engaging in any form of physical activity becomes difficult which explains why leading a sedentary lifestyle leads to mental problems.

In addition to being a sedentary behavior, excessive social media use affects sleep patterns risking mental health issues. Research has found that poor and inadequate sleep leads to mental issues and well-being more so the risk of developing depression in young people.²⁷ Inadequate sleep has also been linked to mental distress in adults with 6 hours of sleep and less being shown to increase the likelihood of developing mental distress.²⁸ Problematic media use increases the risk of inadequate sleep and chronic sleep deprivation. The use of electronic devices near bedtime is common among young people. In some instances, the use may be problematic leading to inadequate sleep. According to a systematic review by Alonzo et al. significant association between excessive use, poor mental outcomes, and poor sleep quality was reported.²⁹ Poor sleep quality led to negative mental health.²⁹ Similar findings were established by Yu et al.³⁰ The study found that excessive social use, poor sleep quality, and poor outcomes were associated. Some of the reasons why social media use was associated with poor sleep quality was because the sites were interactive platforms which increased mental stimulation and subsequent poor sleep. Besides, prolonged use of social sites before bedtime affected sleep onset. The mental stimulation did not create a conducive environment for sleep. It also reduced the overall period of sleep duration.

An additional reason why social media use has been associated with increased depressive symptoms is because individuals who spend most of their time on these platforms tend to neglect other important aspects such as real-life social interactions.⁸ Spending a lot of time on social platforms can make individuals have fewer face-to-face interactions which can affect their social

well-being. Some studies have reported decreased levels of social interaction and social support in real life for individuals who use these platforms excessively.^{31,32} Social interactions play a crucial role when it comes to providing support and subsequent well-being. Although social platforms can provide support, face-to-face interactions play a key role when it comes to keeping the social connection. Despite being an avenue for social support and interaction, these platforms may not fill the void the user may be seeking to fill which is why it can lead to more feelings of exclusion.⁹ Lower levels of social support and exclusion can lead to lower levels of social satisfaction and subsequent depression.

The way individuals internalize their online experiences is also vital when it comes to social platforms use and increased risk of mental issues. People internalize experiences differently. Some people tend to over-analyze situations which can lead to feelings of depression and sadness. Others can engage in excessive self-comparison which can lead to low mood. According to a study done by Chou et al. Facebook use had an impact on how people perceived other individuals' lives.³³ For instance, positive messages and happy pictures were perceived as doing better in life. Individuals may engage in self-comparison with others based on these pictures and messages which lead to feelings of sadness for feeling unaccomplished. Use of social platforms has also been associated with a greater risk of internalizing problems.³⁴ Internalizing social experiences can increase the risk of mental problems. It can lead to increased sadness and the likelihood of developing depression.

Cyberbullying and victimization on social platforms are other emerging threats that are being reported by young people following the increasing use of these sites. The increasing incidences of cyberbullying on social media are being facilitated by a number of key factors more so the anonymity these platforms offer.³⁵ Unlike face-to-face interactions, these platforms provides bullies with more anonymity. Bullies can hide behind their online personas and recruit others to facilitate the bullying. Cyberbullying and victimization have been linked to mental challenges more so among young people. Some researchers have found that cyberbullying on social media affects an individual's well-being. According to Giumetti and Kowalski, cyberbullying on these platforms among youths and young adults affects well-being.¹⁰ It contributes to psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and lower levels of life satisfaction. Viner et al. also found that frequent use of these platforms increased the risk of mental issues.³⁶

The association between using social platforms and mental problems could also be attributed to online multitasking. Technology has encouraged multitasking with people using multiple screens at the same time.³⁷ Some studies have found that multitasking on different online platforms increases the risk of mental issues. According to Becker et al., media multitasking was a predicting factor for self-reported depression and social anxiety.³⁸ This was even after controlling for factors such as personality and overall media use. Similar findings were established by Li and Fan et al. who found media multitasking to lead to increased risk of depression and anxiety among college students.³⁹ Multitasking was also shown to increase the risk of depression, narcissism, mania, antisocial disorder, paranoid disorder, and compulsive disorder.³⁷ Online multitasking also affects an individual's attention span. It is highly disruptive which makes it difficult to concentrate. Poor concentration can affect different aspects of an individual's life such as work and school leading to poor performance. Poor performance in these aspects can lead to psychological distress.

Although a link has been made between excessive social media use and mental problems, there are some studies that show that it has the opposite effect. According to Deters and Mehl, posting

Facebook status updates decreased loneliness.⁷ It decreased loneliness because it made people feel more connected and in touch with their friends on a daily basis. Social media was also seen as a tool of social support for sexual minority and heterosexual youth.⁶ For marginalized youth, social media can be used for mental health interventions. Social media offers an opportunity to establish supportive resources for young people struggling with mental challenges.⁵ Additionally, social media can be used to provide online peer support among individuals with mental illness and promote engagement and retention in mental health services.⁴⁰ Online discourses about mental illness can be beneficial. Social media platforms can provide an avenue for people struggling with mental health problems to open up about their struggles and connect with people going through similar struggles. Such interactions can have positive outcomes for individuals struggling with mental issues.

Evidently, the findings on the impact of social media on mental health are mixed. Some studies have found that excessive social media usage increases the risk of mental issues more so depression and anxiety while others find social media usage leads to positive mental health in terms of social support.^{18, 41} Therefore, whether these platforms are responsible for leading to mental issues is still an area of contention. The link between social platforms and mental health problems is not straightforward. Different factors contribute to the association which means that controlling for these factors can lead to a positive social experience on these sites. For instance, the association between excessive social media use, poor quality sleep, and poor mental problems can be addressed by using social media responsibly and avoiding it before bedtime. Avoiding multitasking can also lead to positive mental health outcomes. Other aspects that can be controlled include being more physically active, having face-to-face interaction, and internalizing experiences in a positive manner. Controlling for these factors while using social platforms can lead to a positive experience. For instance, using these sites as a source of peer support for those struggling with mental health problems can improve people's experiences. Social platforms are also increasingly being used as a source of information. Positioning these sites to offer mental health information and resources to those struggling with mental health issues can lead to positive outcomes. mental health clinicians can also use these sites to reach out to people struggling with mental health problems. However, caution is needed to avoid misguiding information that may have negative consequences.

Conclusion

As highlighted in this review, social media sites have become an integral aspect of people's lives today more so young adults. In some instances, social media use has been problematic with excessive use increasing the risk of mental health. Some of the common mental health disorders associated with excessive use of social platforms are depression, anxiety, loneliness, social media-related fatigue, unhappiness, and increased risk of alcohol use. Several factors increase the risk of developing mental health disorders for individuals using social media excessively. Some of these factors include sedentary behavior, poor sleep patterns, cyberbullying and victimization, multitasking, and internalizing online experiences. Others have a high risk of developing mental health problems because they neglect important aspects of their lives such as real-life social interactions. However, the link between use of social platforms and increased risk of mental health is not straightforward. Although there are associations, some studies have found social media to have a positive effect on mental health. Using social sites to seek support and share lived experiences with mental problems has been shown to have a positive effect. Social platforms can also be used to seek information and as a source of peer support. All these are crucial for individuals struggling

with mental health issues. However, social media needs to be used in a way that it does not become problematic. Excessive use has a negative effect. Other than leading to addiction, it can increase the risk of developing mental problems. Therefore, there is a need to use social media responsibly to minimize negative effects on mental health.

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