

## **EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH**

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**ABSTRACT:** Social media is now a defining feature of modern adolescence, and it shapes the way young people connect, communicate, and construct their sense of self. This paper evaluates the influence of social media on adolescent mental health through a conceptual literature review that synthesizes findings from recent studies published between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on *Social Comparison Theory* and *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model*, the paper explores both the beneficial and detrimental psychological effects of online engagement. Social media enables social support, self-expression, and identity exploration. However, it also exposes adolescents to cyberbullying, body image pressures, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FOMO), which may cause an increase in anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. The review emphasises the importance of parental guidance, digital literacy, and structured interventions in promoting a balanced approach to social media use. By joining psychological and ecological perspectives, the paper concludes that healthy social media engagement depends on context, moderation, and the presence of supportive systems surrounding the adolescent.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Adolescent Mental Health, Social Comparison Theory, Ecological Systems Model, Digital Wellbeing, Cyberbullying, Self-Esteem.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The increasing use of social media has extensively transformed the communication, socialization, and identity-building processes of adolescents in an electronically connected world. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) have become integral to everyday adolescent life, providing avenues for creative expression, maintaining friendship bonds, building identities, and much more are activities performed on these platforms by young adolescents. The adolescent works as both a mirror and a window onto their online world, thereby reflecting the adolescent's self-image while providing some glimpses of the social reality of others. Given this, concerns have grown about how the platforms have adverse effects or infringements upon adolescent well-being during these very crucial stages of adolescent development.

Adolescence is an important period wherein pressures and emotions run high, with acceptance from peers being the greatest requirement. The World Health Organization (2023) states that one in seven adolescents worldwide has a mental disorder. Among the different illnesses, depression and anxiety are predominant in this age group. A possible explanation for this increment is that social media

places some stress on adolescents with idealized images, peer validation systems, and cyber interactions, all of which may enhance stress and insecurity (Uhls et al., 2021; Wang & Zhang, 2022). The immediacy of digital communication dissolves the barrier between online and offline world, thereby putting adolescents in a tough spot where they cannot regulate their emotional response to virtual feedback.

Theories and findings surrounding social media and mental health speak to a complex connection. Moderate use of social media is regarded as good for enhancing social ties, developing a sense of belonging, and promoting civic engagement (Frison & Eggermont, 2022). However, when social media usage is intolerable or unregulated, it disrupts sleep, brings about social comparisons, feelings of depression, and also anxiety (Twenge, 2023; Boer et al., 2021). The relationship is thus non-linear and depends on the respective individual, context, and behavior; an interplay of factors such as the purpose behind usage, type of platform, or even family or school environment.

The dialogue remains particularly urgent in low- and middle-income contexts like Nigeria. The use of social media among Nigerian adolescents has quickly soared with increasing smartphone access and affordable data plans. Yet, digital mental health awareness and parental supervision are still limited (Eze et al., 2023). Many Nigerian adolescents rely on social media as the main source of information and validation, mostly without the digital literacy that would enable them to critically evaluate online content. Hence, their mental health suffers from misinformation, unrealistic beauty standards, and cyberbullying, concerns that are global while reflecting local nuances.

This literature survey determines the effect that social media has on the mental health of adolescents by synthesizing empirical and conceptual research across the years 2015 – 2025. Employing Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979), this paper examines the mechanisms of social interactions and environmental systems that influence the emotional experiences of adolescents online. This review seeks to make clear the positives and negatives associated with social media use, highlighting the joint responsibility of parents, educators, and policymakers to ensure that there is a healthy engagement and emotional resilience among youth.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Positive Psychological Influences of Social Media on Adolescents**

Social media is a double-edged sword that is not without its risks but can nonetheless be considered a developmental tool for adolescents if used wisely and in moderation. Today, researchers agree on the view that the digital platforms offer indispensable areas for identity testing, emotional support, and communication of adolescents, especially during a phase of life when the peers are the most important and self-identity is being defined. Frison and Eggermont (2022) indicate that the usage of social networks helps the formation of a community among teenagers, so they are able to maintain ties and shape their personal identities through two-way content and interaction. For youngsters who are subject to social isolation or suffer from being outsiders in off-line environments, such digital spaces can be a form of mental escape.

The issue of self-image and character development is completely important in the life of a young person. TikTok, Instagram, etc., are the social media platforms used by adolescents, where they can consider their self-image, show different sides of their character, and get opinions of their peers in case of doubt (Coyne et al., 2023). Although this activity is facilitated by technology, it can lead to the development of the person's awareness and originality, provided that the technological aspect is supported by a positive social atmosphere. Studies corroborate that the small door of online communities can be readily opened for young persons who feel weak because of mental health issues, sexuality and being part of a minority group; thus, stigma is reduced and resilience is increased (Anderson & Jiang, 2022).

Online networking not only makes the sharing of information on mental health resources and peer-support empowerment for the adolescents possible, but it also makes it easy. Most of the youngsters are turning to digital platforms for mental health-related topics such as anxiety, depression, or body image. More often than not, they find stories that are most relatable and support the idea of help-seeking behaviours (Merrill & Hunt, 2024). The offer of online counselling programs, mental health talks, and awareness campaigns has expanded the horizon for psychosocial education, particularly in cases where the mental health services are not very accessible. For the youth in Nigeria who often find it hard to access mental healthcare, social media is a way that connects them to information as well as informal emotional support (Eze et al., 2023).

In addition, social media has become a significant tool for increased civic and social participation. The younger generation makes use of the internet not only for fun but also for social/political activities, campaigning and global citizenship. Different movements, such as climate justice campaigns and mental health awareness hashtags, have gradually given the youth not only a sense of empowerment but also of being morally right (Kim & Sohn, 2022). This engagement can also be a way of strengthening one's ability to empathize, developing a sense of social responsibility and being accepted as part of the world, among other aspects that are closely related to the positive psychological outcomes.

### **Negative Psychological Influences of Social Media on Adolescents**

Adolescents have already recognized the negative mental health impacts of social media alongside its numerous benefits. The primary concerns reported consist of low self-esteem, lack of satisfaction with one's body, cyberbullying, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FOMO) among others. The issues mentioned above are aggravated by the relentless accessibility and visibility that are inherent to online communication.

There is an increasing body of research that links excessive social media use to body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues, particularly among young women (Marengo et al., 2022). The prevalence of the idealized beauty and the use of photo-editing applications reinforce the setting of the bar unrealistically high when it comes to self-comparisons. When adolescents judge their worth against the seemingly perfect lives of others that are shown online, they might internalise feelings of being inadequate, which can lead to emotional distress or even eating disorders (Twenge, 2023). Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) convincingly accounts for this process, as it states that people

compare themselves to others for self-evaluation and when these comparisons involve unachievable online images, the outcome is often lowered self-evaluation and increased anxiety.

Cyberbullying is another psychological issue that has a serious effect on adolescents. Online anonymity allows harassment, rumour-mongering, and exclusion to the extent that they can cause depression, loneliness, and even suicidal ideation among those who are affected (Baldwin & Dhir, 2023). The people who are bullied online mostly experience a longer period of stress as compared to those bullied in the traditional way because online attacks are continuous and public, unlike the latter, which takes place discreetly and ends with the conclusion of the bullying episode. In Nigeria and other developing countries, the inadequacy of digital literacy and poor legal enforcement exacerbate the situation by denying victims access to assistance (Eze et al., 2023).

Moreover, it can be said that the use of social media has now become habitual and along with that, the fear of missing out (FOMO) and social anxiety. Adolescents who are always checking what others are up to mostly think or assume that their lives are less interesting, thereby creating a loop of anxiety and compulsive checking behaviours (Beyens et al., 2021). This emotional involvement can disrupt not only academic performance but also social life and the quality of sleep. Research indicates that kids who are engaged with screens late at night experience poorer quality sleep and are more likely to be awake during the day with depressed mood; thus, nighttime screen time is strongly associated with daytime sleepiness, which in turn is a symptom of depression (Scott & Woods, 2024).

It has come to pass that the issue of algorithmic reinforcement is perhaps the most controversial where the application algorithms continually show the teenage users the same emotionally charged and/or idealized content. Gradually, such exposure can limit their perspective and increase their negative feelings, which can range from jealousy to despair (Wang & Zhang, 2022). The addictive nature of social media spreads the cycle of passive scrolling and instant reward, thus losing the ability to control one's emotions, which in turn leads to an addiction (Kuss et al., 2023). The evidence coming from various studies points in the same direction that the effect of social media on teens is not only a function of the content but also the intensity, intent, and emotional development.

### **Balancing Perspectives**

Recently, studies have been calling for a balanced view of the impact of social media. Boer et al. (2021) propose that there is a non-linear relationship between online activities and mental health. When the internet is used moderately and properly, it can be therapeutic, but when it is used excessively and compulsively, it can be detrimental. This points to the fact that social media per se does not have negative implications, it is only when it is used carelessly or unregulated that the situation arises. One of the results of the application of digital mindfulness, which implies the thoughtful and reflective manner of using online platforms, is that the risks are reduced while the benefits for growth are increased.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory states that people judge their competence, attractiveness, and self-esteem by comparing themselves to others. Most of the time, such comparisons occur without awareness and serve the purposes of self-appraisal and identity formation. In the era of the internet, social media compels this tendency as it constantly gives adolescents unlimited access to curated, idealised content. Each "like," comment, and post is a possible source of social judgment.

It is agreed in recent studies that teenagers automatically set themselves to a higher standard by comparing themselves to others who seem to be more attractive, successful, or popular than they are (Vogel et al., 2022). The comparisons may elicit feelings of inadequacy, envy, and self-derision, which are all strongly linked to anxiety and depression (Marengo et al., 2022). Among the social interactive features, such as follower counts and engagement on social media, metrics are the hardest to resist because they create urgent needs for approval and performance, thereby reinforcing an outside-in self-worth (Twenge, 2023).

Yet, the theory helps to understand the positive side as well. Suppose adolescents are to meet role models or groups that provide support for growth. In that case, they may become less strict in their comparisons with, or may even join, others, thus gaining motivation, self-acceptance, and resilience. For example, following mental health promoters or body positivity advocates may lead to the breaking down of barriers of vulnerability and the fostering of self-kindness (Coyne et al., 2023). Therefore, Social Comparison Theory is like a two-sided coin, indicating that comparison on platforms can either be harmful or empowering, and this depends on the context, intent, and interpretive framework.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model**

Although Social Comparison Theory focuses on internal psychological processes, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model situates adolescent social media use within a multi-layered social environment. The model views human development as occurring through mutually influencing interactions between individuals and various environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In the microsystem level, interaction occurs between adolescents and their parents, friends, and teachers, and it influences the attitudes of the kids toward the use of social media. To mitigate the negative impacts of exposure to the online environment, effective parental monitoring and open communication can benefit children, while hostile or neglectful parenting may increase their vulnerability (Eze et al., 2023). The influence of the environment is more indirectly evident in the case of the mesosystem, for instance, when home and school connect through the youngsters' use of the Internet and how they respond to digital norms. Schools that consider digital literacy programmes as part of their curriculum can help students learn critical thinking skills that enable them to deal with online pressures more effectively.

In the exosystem, the macro-level social institutions, such as the media industry and the community networks, have a secondary impact on the experiences of the adolescents. The design of algorithms, advertising models, and moderation rules for online content can either help or exploit the psychology of adolescents (Wang & Zhang, 2022). In the macrosystem, the interplay of cultural values and economic conditions dictates how societies perceive and manage digital participation. In a collectivist society like Nigeria, adolescents experience social media differently, as it can be both a tool for global belonging and a source of cultural tension (Eze et al., 2023).

The chronosystem recognises the changes in technology over time and youth behaviour. The psychological meanings attached to social media evolve as the platforms develop and usage patterns shift. For example, the use of social media by early adolescents may be mainly for the purpose of gaining peer acceptance, while in a subsequent stage, the focus may be on identity consolidation or networking for career (Uhls et al., 2021). This sensitivity to time shows that the impact of social media on mental health is dynamic and not fixed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a conceptual literature review design as a means to assess the role of social media on the mental health of teenagers. A conceptual review, as opposed to empirical research, which relies on firsthand data collection, methodically summarises credible existing evidence to describe theoretical viewpoints, emerging developments within a field, and identifies areas where further research efforts are needed. This approach is primarily advised for studying adolescent digital behaviour, as it involves rapidly evolving technological and psychological factors that necessitate a comprehensive interpretation rather than isolated data collection.

### **Design and Scope**

The review primarily included articles published in peer-reviewed journals, reports, and books from 2015 to 2025, with a focus on the most recent research from 2021 to 2025, to ensure its relevance to current digital trends. Sources were gathered primarily from academic databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, as well as trusted institutional reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF. The search process used a combination of key terms like “social media,” “adolescent mental health,” “cyberbullying,” “body image,” “self-esteem,” “social comparison,” “digital wellbeing,” and “psychological resilience.”

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The criteria for including studies were as follows:

1. They were about adolescents aged 10 to 19;
2. They were looking at the psychological, emotional, or behavioural effects of social media use;
3. They provided insight, either conceptual, theoretical or empirical, that was relevant to adolescent wellbeing;
4. The studies were published in English and in reputable peer-reviewed journals.

Articles and commentaries that did not have a theoretical foundation were left out, along with publications outside the chosen timeframe unless they were of historical importance, such as Festinger's 1954 work or Bronfenbrenner's 1979 publication.

### **Analytical Approach**

A thematic synthesis method was employed for the analysis. After the literature that was considered relevant had been collected, the recurring ideas were identified and sorted into larger themes, reflecting both the positive and negative impacts of social media on the mental health of adolescents. The different themes were then analyzed through the lens of Social Comparison Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model in order to be able to present a unified conceptual comprehension of the phenomenon.

The interpretive process was based on conceptual depth rather than quantitative aggregation, and thus aimed to uncover the underlying psychological mechanisms and environmental factors that are responsible for the trends that have been observed. Through this qualitative analysis, researchers were able to compare diverse contexts, gaining insights from studies conducted in wealthy and lower-income countries, including Nigeria.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The paper is solely based on secondary data from publicly available sources thus no ethical clearance was required. However, all the materials that were referenced were properly cited in accordance with the APA 7th Edition guidelines to ensure academic integrity and transparency.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of existing literature suggests that the connection between social media use and mental health in teenagers is complex and involves many different factors. As a result, social media does not function solely as a purely negative or positive instrument; instead, it mirrors the psychological needs, social environments, and developmental phases of its users. The reason is that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to social feedback and identity signals at this stage, thus, their online presence is at the same time formative and fragile. The combination of the individual vulnerability, their social environment, and the type of the digital platform will decide if social media is the source of empowerment or suffering.

The Social Comparison Theory perspective suggests that adolescents are living through a constant digital exposure that consists of curated content online and of course self-evaluating going on simultaneously. The process is prominent in the image-based platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, where even the most superficial things like appearance, lifestyle, and popularity are displayed very openly. According to the literature, adolescents who compare themselves with those perceived as better, that is upward comparison, usually suffer the consequences of their actions by having a lower self-esteem, more anxiety, and even depressed feelings (Marengo et al., 2022; Twenge, 2023). The impact gets worse with the very nature of the social media which through algorithms keeps on enforcing and reinforcing the brand imagery and the cues for popularity-selective hence creating a

more intense feeling of inadequacy. However, the young people experiencing community types who are focusing on authenticity, self-acceptance, struggle, or sharing are likely to feel belonging and validated. This bifold nature is such that the psychological effect of comparison is not determined merely by exposure but also by the interpretive lens through which young people dissipate it.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model has advanced this argument by looking at the whole process in terms of the various environmental layers shaping the experiences of adolescents. At the microsystem level, parental, peer, and teacher influences are key factors. In the case of the young person whose parents talk openly about social media and put limits that are reasonable, and also practice fair use, he/she will be less likely to face the negative psychological consequences of excessive online participation (Eze et al., 2023). In the same way, unstable peer networks that are hard to support with emotional resources can put people through a difficult time when they face negative online encounters. On the other hand, unsupervised or very competitive peer groups can often reinforce the losing patterns of digital comparison and exclusion.

The mesosystem, representing the interactions among various environments such as home, school, and peer groups, plays an important role in the overall situation. Schools that provide digital literacy and psychosocial education not only promote the successful use of social media but also develop in the young people the ability to think critically and thus interpret online content in an objective manner. In Nigeria, for example, where young people are projected to be the majority of internet users in the next few years and digital mental health literacy is non-existent, and therefore, integrating such programs into the school curricula may be one way to bring down misinformation and help adolescents build emotional resilience. These measures would be especially effective in a sociocultural setting in which parental oversight is frequently challenged due to generational differences in technology access and use.

In the exosystem and macrosystem contexts, adolescent digital life experiences are determined mainly by the wider societal structures e.g. government policy, media regulation, and cultural values. Countries with strong child protection measures and online safety campaigns report lower incidences of cyberbullying and online exploitation (Baldwin & Dhir, 2023). However, in the areas of lax regulation and poor enforcement, the young ones are more exposed to the darker side of the internet. This is the case for Nigerian adolescents, who get to experience through cyberspace bullying, swindling, and exposure to unpleasant content without any recourse for help (Eze et al., 2023). The lack of proper mental health support systems on the ground only makes the situation worse, as their vulnerability is multiplied.

The latest contributing factor is one that deals with the time factor, and that is the chronosystem, which considers changes in the long run. The psychological value of social media changes in line with platforms, algorithms, and social norms. For instance, the early users of Facebook and Instagram were looking at it as an outlet for text-based and static sharing, while today's teens are manoeuvring through the fast-paced, short-form, video-based platforms that add to the communication's attractiveness the instant feedback of popularity. This has led to the inversely proportional relationship between connectivity and performance pressure in the case of the current generation of adolescents. The growing use of TikTok and X (Twitter) among Nigerian youths acts

as a double-edged sword; while it fosters cultural integration with global youth, it also increases their vulnerability to digital pressures such as influencer marketing and seeking validation online.

What is more, the findings from the literature review indicate that the context plays a moderating role in the outcomes. Factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, parental education, and cultural expectations influence how teenagers perceive and interact with the digital world. For example, teens in caring family environments may consider social media a tool for self-expression and social learning, while those experiencing neglect or peer rejection might see it as a surrogate for their real-world socialization, thus falling into the trap of harmful interactions (Coyne et al., 2023). Hence, the measures aiming at enhancing adolescents' digital wellbeing should be gradually phased out from the stringent policies and transited into the holistic approaches that develop emotional literacy, parental involvement, and digital skills.

## **Conclusion**

The prevalent use of social platforms by adolescents affects their psychological health, with both positive and negative consequences. The review presents social media as a double-edged sword, demonstrating its potential to influence emotional and social development and identity exploration positively, but also its role in elevating anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, and social comparisons. Therefore, appreciating the dual influence of social media is crucial, and its application should be viewed as a combination of psychological and social factors that are constantly shifting and influenced by both internal and external factors.

In light of Social Comparison Theory, the paper argues that the continuous display of perfect online images forces youngsters to engage in upward comparisons, which often leads to self-hate, lower self-esteem, and negative moods. On the other hand, it also showed that being in the company of good people and being part of affirming communities online can strengthen one's resilience, empathy, and self-acceptance. The primary factor influencing mental health outcomes is how online content is interpreted, rather than the content itself.

The review consistently highlighted that adolescents' digital interactions are shaped by the interplay of various interconnected systems, including family, peers, societal perspectives, and technological resources, as described by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model. The relationship between these systems either reduces or increases the dangers connected with social media usage. In the case of Nigeria, where digital literacy and parental supervision are still low, the priorities are building collaborations between families and schools, implementing policies for cyber protection, and increasing awareness of mental health issues.

In the end, social media is neither entirely bad nor entirely good; it all comes down to how it is used, its interpretation, and its integration into social systems. Teenagers will have the opportunity to flourish if they happen to use social media in places that promote balance, self-examination, and friendships instead of competition. The mental health future of adolescents in the digital age will be determined by society's ability to develop technology-oriented environments that prioritise both psychological well-being and connectivity.

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