

**RESEARCH PAPER****Exploring the Profound Impact of Social Media, Self-Identity and Mental Health in Today's Digital Age****¹Dr. Kashifa Yasmeen*, ²Hassan Imran and ³Tayyeba Ahmad**

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Corresponding Author kashifa@uosahiwal.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the impact of social media on self-identity and mental health, focusing on anxiety and depression among young adults. As social media became integral to daily life, understanding its effects on mental well-being, particularly among vulnerable groups, was essential. Using a quantitative approach, researchers analyzed responses from $n=300$ young adults aged 18-30 through structured surveys measuring social media usage, self-esteem, social comparison, anxiety, and depression. Findings indicated that females experienced higher anxiety and depression levels than males, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds faced greater mental health challenges. Factors like lower self-esteem and increased social comparison were linked to poorer outcomes. The study underscored the need for targeted interventions addressing gender and socioeconomic disparities, advocating for future research to explore longitudinal effects and include diverse populations for enhanced generalizability.

Keywords: Social Media, Self-Identity, Mental Health, Anxiety, Depression, Young Adults, Socioeconomic Status

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape, social media has become an integral part of daily life for billions of individuals across the globe (Muzaffar, et. al., 2019). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok not only facilitate communication but also shape the way users perceive themselves and interact with others. This digital connectivity allows for the sharing of experiences, thoughts, and emotions, fostering a sense of community and belonging. However, as these platforms become increasingly ubiquitous, they also raise critical questions about their impact on self-identity and mental health. The dual nature of social media—offering both connection and potential harm—has sparked widespread debate among researchers, mental health professionals, and users alike (Bhandari, 2022).

The integration of social media into everyday life is not merely a trend; it represents a fundamental shift in how people engage with each other and themselves. While social media enables users to maintain relationships across vast distances and share personal narratives, it also encourages constant comparison to others. This can lead to a distortion of self-perception and contribute to feelings of inadequacy. The question of how these platforms affect the formation of self-identity and overall mental health has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in psychological and sociological research (Appel, 2020).

The rapid evolution of technology has significantly altered social interaction. According to recent statistics, over 4.9 billion people worldwide use social media, with a substantial portion of this demographic being young adults and adolescents ((Muzaffar, et. al., 2020; Orben et al., 2020). This age group is particularly susceptible to external influences as they develop their identities during crucial formative years. The interaction between social media usage, self-identity formation, and mental health outcomes is complex and

multifaceted. Studies indicate that while social media can enhance social support and promote self-expression, it can also lead to negative outcomes such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and diminished self-esteem (Davies et al., 2020).

A significant body of research highlights the potential adverse effects of social media on mental health. For example, the phenomenon of "social comparison"—where individuals evaluate their own worth based on the perceived success and happiness of others—has been linked to increased anxiety and depression. Users often present curated versions of their lives, which can distort reality and lead to unrealistic expectations (Brtnicky et al., 2021). This environment can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly for those who already struggle with mental health issues. On the other hand, social media can also serve as a platform for support and connection, particularly for individuals who may feel marginalized or isolated in their offline lives. As such, understanding the duality of social media's impact on self-identity and mental health is crucial for developing effective interventions and promoting healthier online behaviors.

Despite the vast amount of time individuals spend on social media, there remains a significant gap in understanding its nuanced effects on self-identity and mental health. The increasing prevalence of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders among young people has coincided with the rise of social media, prompting researchers to investigate potential correlations. Some studies suggest that excessive social media use can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, driven by constant exposure to curated, idealized representations of others' lives. Conversely, there are arguments that social media can provide critical support networks, especially for marginalized individuals seeking community. The dichotomy of these effects necessitates a thorough investigation to illuminate the true impact of social media in today's digital age (Coyne, et al., 2020).

The problem is further complicated by the lack of comprehensive frameworks that account for the diverse experiences of social media users. Factors such as culture, socioeconomic status, and individual personality traits may play significant roles in how social media affects self-identity and mental health. Addressing these complexities is essential for a holistic understanding of the issue (Yadav et al., 2023).

Literature Review

As social media continues to permeate everyday life, it is imperative to explore its multifaceted effects on self-perception and psychological well-being. Numerous studies indicate that social media can foster both positive and negative outcomes. For instance, platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been found to enhance social connectivity and provide avenues for self-expression. Young adults often use these platforms to share personal narratives, seek validation, and form communities around shared interests or identities (Bates, 2020). Research suggests that these connections can lead to increased feelings of belonging and support, particularly for marginalized groups who may find solace in online communities that affirm their identities. However, the potential negative effects of social media cannot be overlooked (Inagaki, 2021). A significant body of literature has established a link between social media use and adverse mental health outcomes, particularly regarding anxiety and depression. One of the most discussed phenomena is "social comparison," where individuals evaluate themselves against the curated lives of others, often leading to feelings of inadequacy. Studies have shown that exposure to idealized representations of peers can diminish self-esteem and increase feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms has been associated with heightened psychological distress among young users, contributing to a deterioration in mental health (Ademiluyi et al., 2022). The dual nature of social media as both a source of support and a potential trigger for mental health issues highlights the complexity of its impact on self-identity.

Demographic factors also play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between social media and mental health. Research indicates that certain groups, such as young women and LGBTQ+ individuals, may be more vulnerable to the negative impacts of social media due to societal pressures and expectations. For instance, studies have shown that young women are more likely to engage in social comparison and experience body image issues as a result of their social media interactions. Additionally, cultural and socioeconomic factors can influence how individuals experience and respond to social media. Lower socioeconomic status may limit access to supportive online networks, exacerbating feelings of isolation and negatively impacting mental health.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain in the literature. There is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects of social media on self-identity and mental health, as much of the current research relies on cross-sectional data. Furthermore, while platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been extensively studied, emerging platforms such as TikTok warrant further investigation to understand their unique impacts on user experiences. Additionally, there is a lack of diverse perspectives, particularly research focusing on non-Western populations or individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds. This lack of inclusivity in existing studies limits the generalizability of findings and highlights the necessity for broader research efforts (Berryman, 2018).

To frame this exploration, two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant: Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, which can be particularly applicable in understanding how online affiliations shape self-identity. Meanwhile, Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that individuals engage with media to fulfill specific needs, providing insights into the motivations behind social media usage and its impact on mental health. By applying these frameworks, researchers can better analyze the intricate dynamics between social media engagement, self-perception, and psychological well-being (Chan, 2017).

In addition to the primary research question, several sub-questions guide this exploration: How do specific social media platforms differ in their impact on self-identity and mental health? What coping strategies do young adults use to navigate the challenges posed by social media? How do cultural and societal factors influence the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes? Addressing these questions will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in the interplay between social media, self-identity, and mental health.

Material and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. This approach was particularly suited for exploring the complex interplay between social media usage, self-identity, and mental health. By combining numerical data analysis with qualitative insights, the research aimed to capture a comprehensive view of how social media affected individuals in both measurable and experiential ways.

Research Design

The research utilized a cross-sectional design, which allowed for the collection of data at a single point in time. This design was effective in identifying relationships between variables, such as social media usage, self-identity, and mental health outcomes. Through this design, the study facilitated comparisons across different demographic groups, yielding insights into variations in experiences and impacts based on factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of young adults aged 18 to 30 who actively used social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. A **stratified sampling technique** was employed to ensure diversity in the sample, capturing variations in demographics. The sample size was projected to be approximately 300 participants for the quantitative survey, with about 20 individuals selected for qualitative interviews. This stratification allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how different groups experienced social media's impact on self-identity and mental health.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through two primary methods:

Surveys. An online questionnaire was developed to gather quantitative data on social media usage, self-identity, and mental health status. The survey included validated scales, such as:

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to assess self-esteem.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale (GAD-7) to evaluate anxiety levels.

Additional items focused on frequency and type of social media usage, as well as perceived impacts on self-identity and mental health.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic information and social media usage patterns, while inferential statistics (e.g., correlation and regression analyses) were utilized to identify relationships between social media use, self-identity, and mental health outcomes. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and insights from participants' responses. This mixed-methods analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research questions, integrating findings from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were crucial in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, their rights, and any potential risks associated with their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with personal identifiers removed from all data. The study adhered to ethical guidelines established by an institutional review board (IRB), ensuring that the rights and welfare of participants were protected throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study are categorized into quantitative findings derived from the surveys and qualitative insights obtained from the interviews.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-22	120	40.0
23-26	90	30.0

27-30	90	30.0
Gender		
Male	120	40.0
Female	150	50.0
Non-Binary	30	10.0
Socioeconomic Status		
Low	100	33.3
Middle	150	50.0
High	50	16.7

The demographic data from the study participants (N = 300) reveals a diverse sample crucial for understanding the impact of social media on self-identity and mental health. Among the participants, 40% were aged 18-22, a demographic particularly relevant as they navigate significant developmental stages. Gender representation included a majority of females (50%), followed by males (40%) and non-binary individuals (10%), allowing for insights into gender-specific experiences. Additionally, socioeconomic status varied, with 50% of participants classified as middle class, 33.3% as low, and 16.7% as high. This diverse representation enables a comprehensive exploration of how age, gender, and socioeconomic factors intersect with social media usage and its psychological impacts.

Table 2
Social Media Usage Patterns and Impact on Mental Health (n = 300)

Social Media Platform	Average Daily Use (hours)	Users Reporting Anxiety (%)	Users Reporting Depression (%)
Facebook	1.5	45.0	30.0
Instagram	2.5	60.0	55.0
Twitter	1.0	40.0	35.0
TikTok	1.8	55.0	50.0

Table 2 summarized average daily use of different social media platforms and the percentage of users reporting mental health issues. The data on social media usage reveals significant correlations between average daily time spent on platforms and mental health outcomes. Instagram users averaged 2.5 hours daily, with the highest rates of anxiety (60%) and depression (55%). TikTok users followed closely with 1.8 hours and 55% reporting anxiety and 50% depression. Facebook users averaged 1.5 hours, showing moderate mental health concerns (45% anxiety, 30% depression), while Twitter users, spending the least time at 1.0 hour daily, reported anxiety in 40% and depression in 35%. This highlights the need to explore how specific platform features contribute to these psychological issues.

Table 3
Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Mental Health Outcomes

Variable	Mean (SD)	Correlation with Anxiety (p-value)	Correlation with Depression (p-value)
Self-Esteem	3.2 (0.8)	-0.45	-0.48
Social Comparison	4.0 (0.9)	0.50	0.55
Frequency of Social Media Use	3.6 (1.0)	0.35	0.40

Table 3 indicated the significant correlations between social media usage patterns and mental health outcomes. The correlation data reveals significant relationships between self-esteem, social comparison, social media use, and mental health outcomes. Higher self-esteem (mean = 3.2, SD = 0.8) was strongly linked to lower anxiety (-0.45, $p < 0.01$) and depression (-0.48, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, social comparison (mean = 4.0, SD = 0.9) showed strong positive correlations with anxiety (0.50, $p < 0.01$) and depression (0.55, $p < 0.01$), indicating that greater social comparison increases mental health issues. Additionally, frequent social media use (mean = 3.6, SD = 1.0) was associated with higher levels of anxiety (0.35, $p < 0.01$) and depression (0.40, $p < 0.01$). Overall, these findings highlight the complex interactions between these variables and mental health.

Table 4
Regression Analysis of Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes

Predictor Variable	B (Standard Error)	β (Beta)	p-value
Self-Esteem	-0.65 (0.10)	-0.40	< 0.001
Social Comparison	0.55 (0.12)	0.38	< 0.001
Time Spent on Social Media	0.30 (0.08)	0.25	< 0.01

Table 4 shows the results of a regression analysis indicating that self-esteem and social comparison significantly predicted anxiety and depression among participants. The regression analysis highlights the impact of self-esteem, social comparison, and time spent on social media as predictors of mental health outcomes. Self-esteem demonstrated a significant negative effect, with a coefficient of -0.65 (SE = 0.10) and a beta of -0.40 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that higher self-esteem is strongly associated with lower anxiety and depression levels. Conversely, social comparison had a positive effect, with a coefficient of 0.55 (SE = 0.12) and a beta of 0.38 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that increased social comparison is linked to higher mental health issues. Additionally, time spent on social media showed a coefficient of 0.30 (SE = 0.08) and a beta of 0.25 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that greater engagement with social media is also associated with worse mental health outcomes. Collectively, these findings underscore the significant roles of self-esteem and social comparison in influencing mental health, particularly in the context of social media use.

Table 5
Group Differences in Mental Health Outcomes by Gender and Socioeconomic Status

Variable	Male	Female	Non-Binary	Low SES	Middle SES	High SES
Anxiety (Mean, SD)	3.4 (1.1)	4.2 (0.9)	3.9 (1.0)	4.0 (1.2)	3.5 (1.0)	2.8 (0.8)
Depression (Mean, SD)	3.1 (1.0)	4.0 (1.1)	3.5 (1.0)	4.1 (1.2)	3.2 (0.9)	2.5 (0.7)

Table 5 presented group differences in anxiety and depression scores by gender and socioeconomic status, revealing significant disparities among different demographics. The data on anxiety and depression by demographic variables shows significant differences. Males reported a mean anxiety score of 3.4 (SD = 1.1), while females had a higher mean of 4.2 (SD = 0.9). Non-binary individuals scored 3.9 (SD = 1.0). Regarding socioeconomic status (SES), low SES participants had an anxiety mean of 4.0 (SD = 1.2), higher than middle SES (3.5, SD = 1.0) and high SES (2.8, SD = 0.8). For depression, males scored 3.1 (SD = 1.0), females 4.0 (SD = 1.1), and non-binary individuals 3.5 (SD = 1.0). Low SES individuals reported a mean depression score of 4.1 (SD = 1.2), significantly higher than middle SES (3.2, SD = 0.9) and high SES (2.5, SD = 0.7). These findings indicate that both gender and socioeconomic status significantly influence anxiety and depression levels.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a complex and multifaceted relationship between social media usage, self-identity, and mental health among young adults. Participants who reported high levels of social media engagement also exhibited a greater tendency toward negative self-perception and increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. This suggests that while social media serves as a platform for connection, it can also intensify feelings of inadequacy and comparison. Qualitative interviews provided rich personal narratives illustrating how constant exposure to curated content—where peers often present idealized versions of their lives—can lead to significant emotional distress. Participants described experiences of feeling inferior when comparing their real lives to the highlight reels of others, thereby reinforcing existing insecurities.

Conversely, some participants highlighted the positive aspects of social media, noting that it provided vital support networks and avenues for self-expression. For instance, many reported finding communities that validated their experiences and identities, particularly in contexts of marginalization. This duality—where social media can be both a source of distress and a tool for connection—emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of its impact on young adults' self-identity and mental health.

These results align closely with existing literature that emphasizes both the positive and negative effects of social media. Prior studies have extensively documented the detrimental effects of social comparison on self-esteem, supporting the notion that exposure to idealized portrayals of life can lead to heightened anxiety and depression. For example, research has indicated that individuals, especially women and LGBTQ+ youth, are more likely to experience body image issues and self-esteem challenges due to social media interactions. Conversely, the positive aspects noted by participants resonate with research indicating that social media can facilitate connection and community, especially for marginalized groups seeking affirmation and support. This study contributes to the discourse by illustrating that the effects of social media are not uniform; rather, they are contingent upon individual circumstances, including demographic factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

The integration of social media into daily life has transformed the way individuals interact and perceive themselves. This study highlighted the intricate ways in which social media influences self-identity and mental health, revealing both its benefits and drawbacks. As digital connectivity continues to evolve, ongoing research and proactive measures will be essential in navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by social media in the lives of young adults. By fostering a deeper understanding of these dynamics, we can create environments that support positive self-identity and mental health in an increasingly digital world.

Recommendations

To address the complex relationship between social media use, self-identity, and mental health among young adults, targeted interventions are recommended. Educational programs should focus on promoting digital literacy, helping individuals critically evaluate social media content and its impact on self-esteem. Additionally, mental health support services should be integrated into social media platforms to provide resources for users experiencing anxiety and depression. Community initiatives could foster safe spaces for young adults to share their experiences, promoting resilience and connection. Furthermore, parents and educators should encourage open discussions about social media's influence, emphasizing self-acceptance and healthy comparison practices. Finally, ongoing research should explore the long-term effects of social media use across diverse demographics to inform effective strategies for mitigating its negative impacts while leveraging its potential for positive social connections.

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