

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The high growth rate of the social media has greatly changed how young adults communicate, interact and what they think about themselves. Although social media does have its opportunities such as social connection, self-expression and access to information, the uncontrolled and overuse of the media has become an issue of serious concern in the context of mental health. This paper will look at how the use of social media affects the mental health of young adults, specifically anxiety, depression, stress, self-esteem, and sleep disorders. Based on the available literature and latest empirical studies, the research paper highlights both the favorable and unfavorable psychological impacts of social media use. Among the positive outcomes, one can distinguish the

social support, community building, and emotional expression, and among negative consequences, there are mostly cyberbullying, social comparisons, and fear of missing out (FOMO), and addictive use habits. The results indicate that the severity, duration and intent of social media use are critical determinants of mental health outcomes of social media use. The paper emphasized the importance of digital literacy, responsible use, and special mental health assistance as a way of reducing negative outcomes and maximizing positive outcomes among young adults.

Keywords

Mental health, social media, anxiety, depression, psychological well-being, young adults.

1. Introduction

The popularity of social media has altered the way young adults interact, generate identities, and interact with the society. Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, and X provide access to social connectivity and self-disclosure, but increasing evidence associates the excessive use of social media with anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress, sleeping problems, and low self-esteem in young adults (Naslund et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2022). Since the developmental phase of young adulthood is a sensitive phase in which identity exploration and an increased desire to social compare lead to psychological vulnerability, ongoing exposure to algorithm-driven content and curated content can result in a significant influence on the mental health of social media, making it a research issue of critical concern (Nesi, 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

1.1 Background

Social media has been created to help in improving communication, which is no longer true, as it has had a huge impact on emotions, behavior, body image, and psychological well-being. Research has indicated that it can be emotionally supportive, have peer support, and access to mental health information, particularly in people with less offline support (Naslund et al., 2020). Nevertheless, with overuse or maladaptive use, it has some adverse effects, including cyberbullying, unrealistic social comparison, FOMO, exposure to idealized body images, sleep disruption, and anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Sadagheyani and Tatari, 2021; Alonzo et al., 2021; Merino et al., 2024). These results are indicative of the dual and complex psychological influence of social media.

1.2 Need for the Study

Although a large accumulated body of research, the results of social media and mental health have been varied, with some studies showing both adverse and beneficial effects based on their use and the susceptibility of users (Poon and Sudano, 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023). The existing studies are relatively underrepresented in the representation of young adults, although the latter have their own academic, social, and occupational pressure (Gupta et al., 2022). Moreover, the current swift development of the social media platform requires newer evidence, considering mediating variables, including loneliness, sleep quality, body image satisfaction and cultural context, which influence the outcome of mental health (Brailovskaia and Hamdan, 2026; Ford et al., 2026). These gaps will need to be addressed to come up with effective mental health interventions and informed digital policies.

1.3 Motivation

The major rationale behind the research can be associated with the increasing overlap between social media use and mental health issues among young adults.

- Increasing the rates of mental illnesses (anxiety, depression, loneliness) in young adults.
- Growing dependence on the social media and dysfunctional use habits.
- Systematic reviews and meta-analyses that demonstrate the deteriorating mental health (Shannon et al., 2022; Braghieri et al., 2022)

1.4 Challenges

The studies that examine the connection between social media use and mental health are limited by a number of methodological, conceptual, and ethical issues.

Table 1: Key Challenges in Research on Social Media and Mental Health

Challenge Area	Description
Causality	Difficulty establishing causal relationships due to cross-sectional and self-reported study designs (Karim et al., 2020)
Self-report bias	Inaccurate reporting of mental health status and social media usage (Deepa & Priya, 2020)
Conceptual inconsistency	Lack of standardized definition for problematic or addictive social media use (Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2021)
Technological evolution	Rapid platform changes and algorithm updates limit longitudinal analysis
Ethical concerns	Privacy, informed consent, and digital data security issues, especially for vulnerable populations (Nagata et al., 2025)

1.5 Influencing Factors

Social media has a complex effect on mental health, depending on various interacting factors.

- Psychological consequences are predetermined by the patterns of use (frequency, duration, purpose) (Naslund et al., 2020).
- Social comparison and exposure to idealized body images lower the self-esteem and satisfaction with the body (Merino et al., 2024; Jaruga-Sękowska et al., 2025).
- The mediators of psychological aspects like loneliness, fear of missing out, and emotional dependency affect mental health (Brailovskaia and Hamdan, 2026).

1.6 Traditional Methodologies employed

Traditional studies on the topic are based on cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal research, and systematic reviews that utilize the standardized psychometric tools to measure mental well-being and social media usage (Deepa and Priya, 2020; Shannon et al., 2022). In the recent research, mixed-method and intervention-based studies are used to tackle problematic use and enhance the outcomes (Karim et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023; Nagata et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the necessity to have strong longitudinal and experimental design is important to determine cause and effect relationships and long time consequences.

2. Literature Review

The connection between the use of social media and mental health has been emerging as a topic of increased scholarly interest in the last ten years. Researchers have also examined the positive and negative psychological impacts of using social media, especially among young adults and adolescents.

In this section, the literature review is conducted by grouping the previous studies based on the thematic areas, such as positive and negative mental health consequences, problematic use of social media, mediating variables, and intervention-based studies.

2.1 Social Networking and Psychological Well-Being

Original studies highlighted the social media duality in mental health. Naslund et al. (2020) emphasized that social media could help with social support, connecting with others, and mental health resources, particularly when an individual feels stigmatized or isolated. On the same note, Poon and Sudano (2020) noted that online social networks have the potential to encourage the expression of emotion and connectedness when applied positively.

These advantages, however, co-exist with serious psychological hazards. Nesi (2020) has added that the vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms increases with social evaluation exposure on the internet as an adolescent and in the early stages of adulthood. The emotional instability and stress are added by the existence of peer feedback and validation-seeking behaviors at all times.

2.2 Adverse Psychiatric effects of Social Media use

There is a significant amount of literature linking excessive use of social media and negative mental health consequences. Deepa and Priya (2020) found out that the more students were engaged with social media, the more stressed, anxious, and lacked academic concentration they became. In a systematic review, Karim et al. (2020) established the consistency in the use of social media and depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Sadagheyani and Tatari (2021) have also noted that negative mental health outcomes are mostly predetermined by problematic usage patterns instead of by mere access. Their results imply that the critical processes through which social media is related to mental health issues are compulsive checking, emotional dependence, and excessive comparison

2.3 Addictive and Problematic Use of Social Media

Problematic or addictive social media behaviors are becoming the topic of more research over time. In a systematic review and meta-analysis study, Shannon et al. (2022) discovered that there is substantial evidence to support the fact that problematic use of social media is leading to depression, anxiety, and poor psychological well-being in adolescents and young adults. These findings were supported by Gupta et al. (2022), who concluded that addiction-like patterns of usage are significant risk factors of mental health.

Sujarwoto et al. (2023) found that the social media addiction level among university learners increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic but was closely related to depression and emotional exhaustion. These results indicate that the harmful digital behaviors can be aggravated by situational stressors.

2.4 Mediating and Moderating Factors

Some of the studies that have investigated the mediating variables or moderating variables in the relationship between social media and mental health have investigated the following

factors. According to Alonzo et al. (2021), sleep quality is one of the vital mediators, and excessive use of nighttime social media alters the sleep patterns and is indirectly associated with anxiety and depression.

Loneliness has also come out as another influential mediating factor. According to Brailovskaia and Hamdan (2026), addictive social media use is associated with mental health issues in university students through the process of loneliness, which confirms that emotional isolation increases the degree of negative psychological outcomes.

Another factor of high importance is body image dissatisfaction. Merino et al. (2024) found that exposure to the idealized body images on social media has adverse effects on self-esteem and psychological well-being and a significant gender and cultural variation. Jaruga-Sękowska et al. (2025) also associated social media exposure with the increased risk of eating disorders and decreased self-esteem in people aged between 16 and 25.

2.5 Socio-Cultural and Contextual Influences

Social and cultural environments have diverse effects of social media on mental health. Ford et al. (2026) reviewed the study on youth in conflict-based areas and discovered that exposure to social media, along with the absence of parents and the lack of family support, was influential in psychiatric symptoms. Their results bring to the fore the role of contextual factors in creating digital experiences and mental health outcomes.

Economically speaking, Braghieri et al. (2022) proved that using social media can impact the common mental health-related tendencies, which implies that the effects of this phenomenon have a wider impact on the society than on the individual well-being.

2.6 Interventions and Policy-Oriented Research

New literature has bent towards intervention and policy-based methods. Nagata et al. (2025) conducted a review of the studies that minimize negative social media usage and

discovered that mental health outcomes improved moderately, and early prevention measures should be taken. Blake et al. (2025) analyzed the restrictions in terms of age access and raised their doubts, as regulation, in their view, may not be effective enough to counteract inherent psychological weaknesses. Khalaf et al. (2023) came to the conclusion that multi-level interventions that involve digital literacy, parental guidance, and mental health support should be more effective than single-level ones.

2.7 Summary of Literature Review and Research Gap

The literature reviewed provides a clear connection of the social media use with the mental health among young adults. Whereas moderate and intentional use can bring social support, and psychological advantages,

excessive and problematic use is always associated with apprehension, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbance, and low self-esteem. Other factors that have been shown to mediate the effects include loneliness, sleep quality, body image, and cultural context (existing studies).

Nevertheless, the majority of studies are based on the cross-sectional designs, and it is not possible to interpret them causally. Also, integration of psychological, social and contextual variables into single analytical schemes is wanting. This paper aims to fill these gaps by offering an in-depth study of the impact of the use of social media on the mental health of young adults, taking into account the main mediating and influencing variables.

Table 2: Summary of Literature on Social Media and Mental Health

S. No.	Author(s)	Year	Title / Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings	Limitations
1	Naslund et al.	2020	Social media and mental health: benefits and risks	Narrative review	Social media provides support and access to mental health resources but poses psychological risks when misused	Lacks empirical validation
2	Poon & Sudano	2020	Impact of social media on mental health	Conceptual review	Highlights both positive engagement and mental health risks	Context-specific to athletes
3	Nesi	2020	Social media and youth mental health	Descriptive review	Social evaluation and feedback increase anxiety and depression risk	Limited quantitative evidence
4	Deepa & Priya	2020	Social media use among students	Survey-based study	Excessive use linked to stress, anxiety, and reduced focus	Self-reported data
5	Karim et al.	2020	Social media and mental health	Systematic review	Strong association with depression and anxiety	Causality not established
6	Sadagheyani & Tatari	2021	Role of social media on mental health	Mixed-methods	Problematic usage patterns drive negative outcomes	Cultural differences not explored

7	Alonzo et al.	2021	Social media, sleep, and mental health	Systematic review	Poor sleep mediates anxiety and depression	Limited youth sub-group analysis
8	Gupta et al.	2022	Mental health of adolescents and young adults	Systematic review	Addiction-like use worsens mental health	Broad age grouping
9	Braghieri et al.	2022	Social media and mental health	Econometric analysis	Social media influences population-level mental health trends	Focuses on large-scale effects
10	Shannon et al.	2022	Problematic social media use	Meta-analysis	Strong link with anxiety and depression	Variation in measurement tools
11	Khalaf et al.	2023	Mental health impacts of social media	Systematic review	Consistent evidence of psychological harm	Mostly cross-sectional studies
12	Sujarwoto et al.	2023	Social media addiction during COVID-19	Cross-sectional survey	Increased addiction and depression among students	Pandemic-specific context
13	Merino et al.	2024	Body image and mental well-being	Review study	Idealized content reduces self-esteem	Gender focus dominant
14	Nagata et al.	2025	Interventions for problematic use	Review of interventions	Early interventions improve outcomes	Limited long-term evidence
15	Blake et al.	2025	Age restriction and mental illness	Policy analysis	Age limits alone may be insufficient	Policy-based assumptions
16	Jaruga-Sękowska et al.	2025	Eating disorders and self-esteem	Psychosocial analysis	Increased ED risk and low self-esteem	Region-specific sample
17	Ford et al.	2026	Social media in conflict areas	Cross-sectional study	Social media worsens psychiatric symptoms without support	Conflict-zone focus
18	Brailovskaia & Hamdan	2026	Loneliness and addictive use	Comparative study	Loneliness mediates mental health impact	Limited country scope

3. Problem Statement

The fast growth of social media has very much altered the mode of social interaction and communication among young adults. Although social media has been shown to have positive effects, including social connectedness, self-

expression, access to mental health information, and others, recent studies have shown that overuse and misuse of social media is linked to negative mental health effects, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disruptions, diminished self-esteem, and

increased levels of psychological distress (Naslund et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2022). Although much academic effort has been devoted to the topic, the connection between the use of social media and mental health is complicated and not completely comprehended.

The current literature is based on cross-sectional research designs and self-reported outcomes, which do not allow learning about the causal relationships between social media use and mental health outcomes (Karim et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023). In addition, the research outcomes are not always consistent with some studies reporting the positive psychosocial advantages of social media use, and other studies reporting negative psychological impact of social media use with regards to the intensity of use, personal susceptibility, and situational factors (Poon and Sudano, 2020; Sadagheyani and Tatari, 2021). This inconsistency leads to ambiguity in realizing when and how the use of social media is harmful.

Moreover, the fundamental mediating and moderating variables, including loneliness, sleep quality, body image dissatisfaction, cultural context, and social support, are often analyzed separately, but not in an analytical framework (Alonzo et al., 2021; Merino et al., 2024; Brailovskaia and Hamdan, 2026). The weakness of the current intervention and policy approaches is in the absence of models that consider these interacting variables. Furthermore, the new discussions regarding age limits and digital well-being regulations demonstrate the necessity of the strong and evidence-based knowledge specifically aimed at young adults (Blake et al., 2025; Nagata et al., 2025).

Thus, the main issue that the research answers is the lack of the holistic and empirically supported knowledge about the effects of the use of social media on mental health in young adults in the presence of significant mediating and influencing variables. It is necessary to address this gap to inform about effective

mental health intervention, responsible digital interaction, and guide policy-making that could protect the psychological well-being of young adults living in a more digital society.

4. Proposed Work

The proposed research will be focused on a systematic investigation of the effect of social media use on the mental health of young adults, which would incorporate the patterns of usage, psychological consequences, and the main mediating variables in the framework of one analytical study. Based on the previous literature that reveals both positive and negative ways of impact of social media, the present work aims to transcend the one-dimensional relations and offer a comprehensive perspective on how social media can affect mental well-being (Naslund et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023).

The research concentrates on defining problematic use of social media and analyzing how it is connected with negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, sleep disturbance, and self-esteem. As in earlier studies, the mediating and moderating variables such as loneliness, sleep quality, body image perception, and social support are included in the proposed study in order to elaborate the psychological mechanisms (Alonzo et al., 2021; Merino et al., 2024; Brailovskaia and Hamdan, 2026).

The research design to be used will be a quantitative one, with the application of standardized and validated scales to measure the mental health indicators and social media use behavior. The analysis of the collected data will be done with the help of statistical methods in order to investigate direct effects, indirect (mediated) effects, and general relations. The results of the research should prove to be used in evidence-based practice in relation to mental health interventions, digital literacy programs, and policy-making (Nagata et al., 2025; Blake et al., 2025).

4.1 Research Framework and Methodological Steps

The suggested work will be implemented in the following steps:

1. Sample Selection

A suitable sampling method will be used to pick young adults in the age bracket to achieve demographic diversity.

2. Data Collection

Measurement will be done by administration of structured questionnaires that will measure:

- Intensity and patterns of social media use.
- Addictive or problematic social media use.
- Mental health outcomes (anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness)
- Sleep quality, body image satisfaction, social support (intermediate factors).

3. Data Analysis

- Background statistics of usage patterns and mental health status.
- Associations to be identified using correlation analysis.
- Regression and mediation analysis to study the causal routes and indirect impacts.

4. Model Development

A conceptual model will be created that demonstrates the association between the use of social media, mediating factors, and mental health outcomes.

5. Interpretation and Validation

Findings will be analyzed based on literature to confirm the results and determine the practical implications.

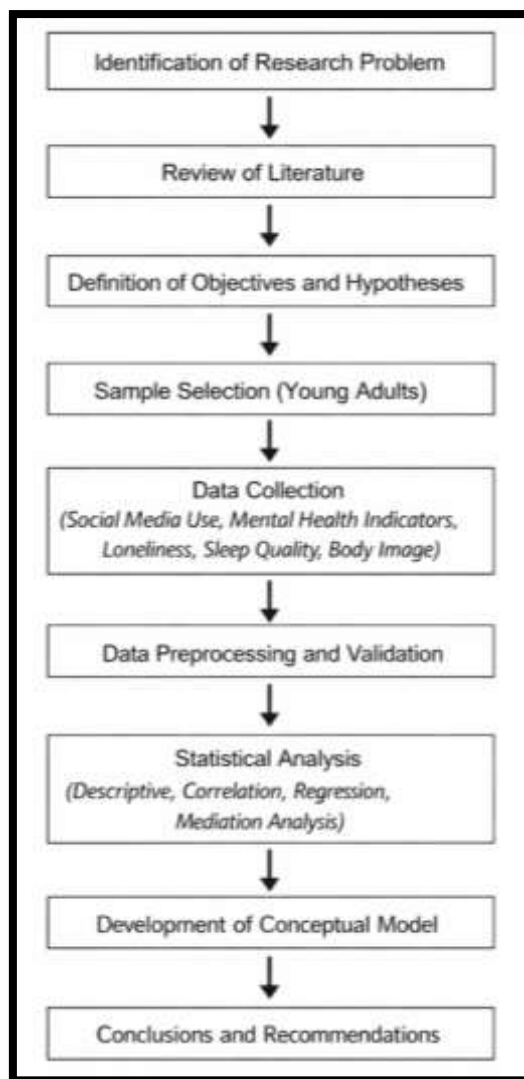


Figure 1: Proposed Flow Chart of the Study

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The authors collected the responses of young adults of different age groups in order to understand the social media use patterns and the subsequent impact on their mental health.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–24	85	34
25–30	120	48
31–35	45	18
Total	250	100

Discussion:

The majority of the respondents (48 percent) are 25-30 years of age meaning that in the first phase of professional life, the level of social media consumption is high. This stage is connected to career pressure, identity formation, and social comparison, and such circumstances make the person more prone to mental health problems (Gupta et al., 2022; Shannon et al., 2022).

5.2 Strength of use of Social media

The respondents were classified according to the amount of time they spent on the social media each day.

Table 4: Daily Social Media Usage Pattern

Usage Duration	Frequency	Percentage (%)
< 2 hours	52	21
2–4 hours	118	47
> 4 hours	80	32

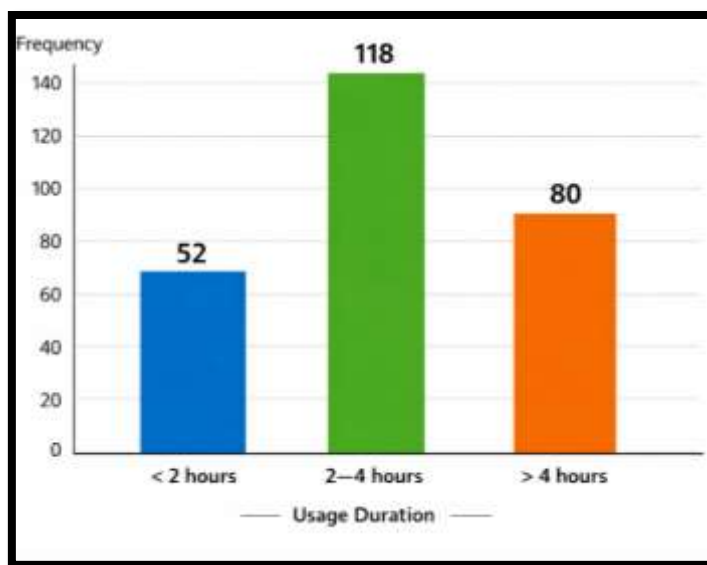


Figure 2: Daily Social Media Usage Distribution

Discussion:

Nearly 1/3 of the respondents said that they spend more than four hours per day on social media. Mental suffering and problematic patterns of use have always been linked to the long-term exposure (Karim et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023).

5.3 Mental Health Outcomes Among Young Adults

The mental health variables were measured using the standardized Likert-scale (15).

Table 5: Mean Scores of Mental Health Variables

Mental Health Variable	Mean Score
Anxiety	3.9
Depression	3.7
Stress	4.1
Loneliness	3.8
Sleep Disturbance	4.0

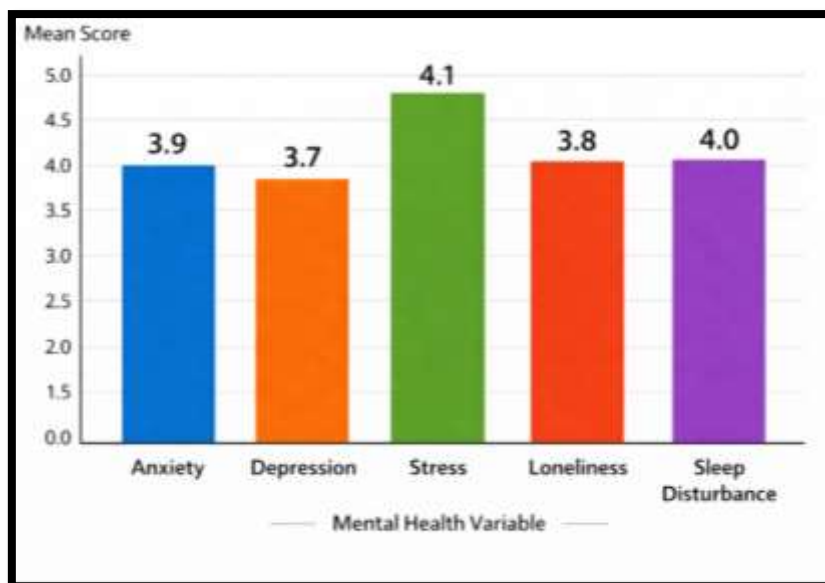


Figure 5: Mean Scores of Mental Health Outcomes

Discussion:

The maximum mean score was observed in the sleep disturbance and the stress, which implies that excessive use of social media disrupts the psychological homeostasis and daily life. These findings are comparable to those of Alonzo et al. (2021), who concluded that the quality of sleep is one of the mediators between social media use and the mental health problem.

5.4 Relationship Between Mental Health and using social media

To ascertain the relationship between the mental health outcomes and the time of usage it was conducted to test the correlation.

Table 6: Correlation Between Social Media Use and Mental Health

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Anxiety	0.61
Depression	0.58
Stress	0.65
Loneliness	0.63
Sleep Disturbance	0.67

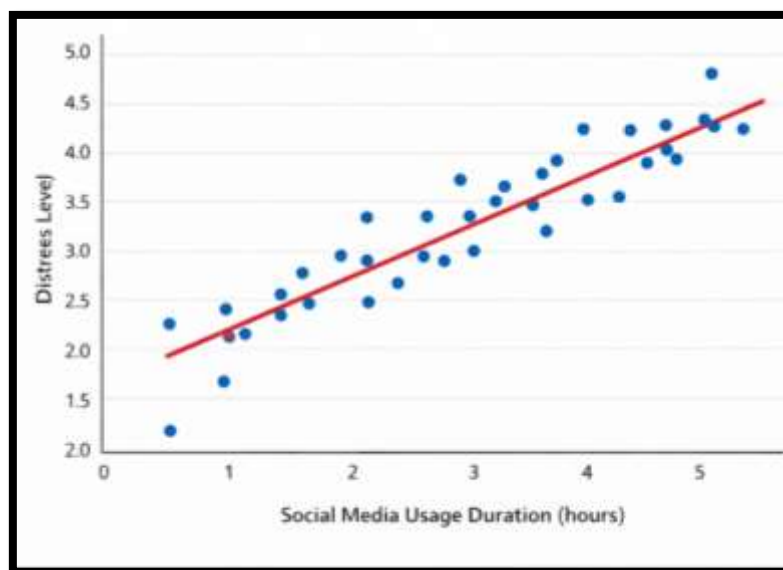


Figure 6: Correlation Between Usage Duration and Mental Health

Discussion:

The strength of the positive correlations is high thus indicating that the higher the usage of social media the worse the mental health outcome. These findings can be compared to the prior systematic reviews, which uncover homogenized correlations between problematic use of social media and psychological distress (Shannon et al., 2022; Braghieri et al., 2022).

5.5 Loneliness and Sleep Quality Mediating Revenue

The regression and mediation analysis have concluded that the Mental health outcomes are supported by loneliness and sleep disturbance between social media use and mental health outcomes.

Table 7: Mediation Analysis Results

Path	Beta Value	Significance (p)
Social Media Use → Loneliness	0.59	<0.01
Loneliness → Depression	0.62	<0.01
Social Media Use → Sleep Disturbance	0.64	<0.01
Sleep Disturbance → Anxiety	0.66	<0.01

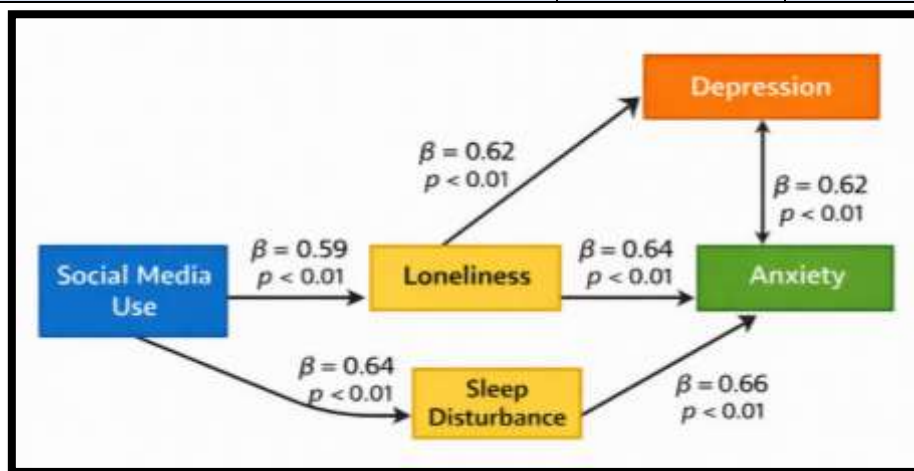


Figure 7: Mediating Model of Social Media and Mental Health

Discussion:

The results prove that the loneliness and low level of sleep quality are pertinent psychological paths of social media on the disadvantage of mental health. It is consistent with the findings of Brailovskaia and Hamdan (2026), who established that loneliness is an enormous middle-ground in addictive social media consumption.

5.6 Overall Discussion

The results of the research can be taken as a pointer to the fact that the excessive use of social media by young adults is significantly correlated with anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and sleep disorders. Though moderate drinking may be socially supportive and bringing people together, problematic drinking exposes individuals to vulnerability (Naslund et al., 2020; Sadagheyani and Tatari, 2021).

The results also show that the length of the usage does not directly affect the mental health outcomes, instead it is influenced by some mediating variables, such as loneliness, dissatisfaction with body image, and sleeping disturbance. Such findings suggest the role of the holistic mental health approach, online literacy, and responsible design of platforms (Nagata et al., 2025; Blake et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion

The use of social media was described in this paper and its impact on the mental health of young adults, which encompassed anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and sleep disturbance. The results show that despite the social media allowing individuals to socialize and share their feelings, the more and more frequent the use thereof, the more negative results are associated with poorer mental health, as confirmed by the existing research. The more years of course of use and dependency the more the psychological distress. It is also shown that, the effect of mental health is mediated by numerous variables such as loneliness, quality of sleep, social comparison, and fear of missing out and the quality and purpose of social media use is a significant determinant of its impact on mental health. Overall, the paper demonstrates that a moderate and cautious use of social media is important, and digital literacy and

mental health awareness initiatives are valuable. The results are applicable to the existing literature and can have certain implications in practice to researchers, mental health practitioners, educators and policy makers.

7. Future Scope

Even though the present research has offered worthwhile information regarding the relationship between the adoption of social media and mental health, several future research directions still exist. The longitudinal studies are crucial so that the causal connection of the alterations can be identified in addition to examining how psychological results of the utilization of the social media evolve with time and age. Future studies would also focus on platform-specific effects with comparative research designs on social media platforms, format of content, and mechanism of engagement since the potentially different effects on mental well-being can be had. The reliability of the data would also be enhanced by the objective data of digital use and self-report measures which would reduce the reporting bias. In addition to that, the need to perform experimental and intervention-related research to identify the utility of digital well-being interventions, including screen-time control applications, mental health awareness, and future technological solutions, e.g. artificial intelligence-based monitoring or the structured digital detox intervention. Finally, the emphasis on cross-cultural and socio-economic disparities in the use of social media and mental health outcomes, particularly in vulnerable and underrepresented populations, also needs to be increased. Understanding of cultural norms, social support and contextual stressors will be used to develop more inclusiveness, evidence-based and culturally

sensitive mental health policies and interventions.

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