

# The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

Pescaru Cristina Maria and Pescaru Maria\*

*The National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest (NUSTPB), Pitești University Centre, Romania*



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### \*Corresponding author

Pescaru Maria, The National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest (NUSTPB), Pitești University Centre, Romania

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### Abstract

This article explores the intricate relationship between social media usage and mental health, identifying both its positive and negative implications. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have emerged as powerful tools for community support, raising awareness, and enhancing mental health education. At the same time, they also pose risks, such as addiction, anxiety, depression, body image disturbances, and cyberbullying. The article also examines the broader societal impact of social media, including its influence on public discourse, behavior, and social norms. Additionally, it addresses the potential treatments for social media addiction, both psychological and pharmacological, and provides an overview of the psychological effects of prolonged social media use, which can lead to various mental health disorders over time. The article concludes with practical recommendations for promoting healthier social media habits, thereby maximizing its benefits while minimizing potential harms.

### Introduction

Social media has become a ubiquitous part of modern life, fundamentally altering how people communicate, share, and connect. While these platforms offer numerous benefits, such as fostering communities and raising awareness about mental health issues, they also come with significant risks. Research indicates that excessive social media use can lead to mental health problems, including addiction, anxiety, depression, and issues related to body image [1]. This article aims to explore both the positive and negative effects of social media on mental health through various studies and real-life examples.

### Positive Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

a) **Facilitating Social Support and Building Communities** Social media platforms serve as virtual spaces where people can connect with others who share similar experiences, fostering communities that provide emotional support and understanding. For instance, websites like The Mighty cater to individuals facing health challenges, allowing them to share their stories and offer encouragement. A study by Naslund et al. [1] found that participation in online support groups reduced feelings of isolation and increased self-efficacy among individuals with severe mental illnesses.

**Case Study 1:** TikTok's #HereForYou Campaign In 2020, TikTok launched the #HereForYou campaign to promote mental health resources and support among its users. This initiative encouraged people to share their personal experiences with mental health challenges, creating a more supportive and less stigmatized environment. Research by the Center for Media and Child Health [2] indicated that the campaign led to a 25% increase in users seeking mental health information and support, highlighting the potential of social media campaigns to positively impact mental health awareness.

b) **Enhancing Awareness and Education** Social media platforms have played a crucial role in increasing awareness of mental health issues and breaking down the stigma that often surrounds them. Many influencers and organizations use these platforms to disseminate information about mental health conditions, symptoms, and coping mechanisms. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) [3] reported that its social media campaigns reached over 50 million people, resulting in a 30% increase in calls to their helpline.

**Case Study 2:** Bell Let's Talk Initiative Launched in 2010, the Bell Let's Talk initiative in Canada is a prominent social media campaign aimed at raising awareness about mental health. Using platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, the campaign encourages individuals to share their experiences and engage in open discussions about mental health. Since its inception, Bell Let's Talk has generated over 1 billion interactions and raised more than \$100 million for mental health programs [4]. A study published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry (2019) found that the campaign significantly increased public awareness and reduced stigma in Canada [5].

**Improving Access to Mental Health Services** Social media has expanded access to mental health services by connecting users with professionals and offering remote support options. Online therapy platforms like BetterHelp and Talkspace use social media to reach people who may be reluctant to seek help through traditional means. A review by Ali et al. [6] demonstrated that social media-based interventions, including online cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness programs, were effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, particularly among younger populations.

**Case Study 3:** Digital Mental Health Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became an essential tool for providing mental health support when in-person services were limited. A study by Gao et al. published in JAMA Network Open examined the rise in digital mental health consultations in China, noting a 50% increase during the pandemic, with social media playing a significant role in this shift. The study underscored the importance of social media in reaching isolated individuals and offering timely mental health support.

## Negative Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

a) **Addiction and Dependency** Excessive use of social media has been linked to addictive behaviors, particularly among younger users. Research by Andreassen et al. [7] found a correlation between problematic social media use and increased levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances. The study revealed that users who spent more time on social media experienced greater psychological distress.

**Case Study 4:** The Facebook Addiction Case Griffiths et al. [5] documented a case involving a young adult who developed a dependency on Facebook, spending over eight hours daily on the platform. This behavior led to severe anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) was used to help the individual overcome their addiction, resulting in significant improvements in both mental health and academic outcomes. This case highlights the potential dangers of social media addiction and the effectiveness of targeted psychological interventions.

b) **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment** Social media can also serve as a breeding ground for cyberbullying and online harassment, both of which can have severe mental health repercussions. The Cyberbullying Research Center [8] reported that 37% of adolescents have experienced cyberbullying, which is associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

**Case Study 5:** Amanda Todd and the Consequences of Cyberbullying Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager, became a tragic symbol of the devastating impact of cyberbullying. After enduring persistent online harassment and extortion, Amanda posted a YouTube video sharing her experiences, hoping to raise awareness and seek help. Unfortunately, the bullying continued, ultimately leading to her suicide in 2012. Her case sparked international conversations about the need for stronger protections against cyberbullying and the role of social media companies in safeguarding users [9].

## Psychological Aspects of Social Media Use and Associated Mental Health Disorders

Social media use can significantly affect psychological well-being, influencing emotions, cognition, and social behavior. While social media can provide positive reinforcement and social support, it can also lead to various mental health disorders over time.

a) **Social Comparison and Self-Esteem Issues** Frequent exposure to curated and idealized images on social media often encourages individuals to compare themselves with others, which can negatively impact self-esteem. Those who engage in constant social comparison on these platforms are more likely to experience feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and low self-worth. Prolonged engagement in such comparisons may contribute to the development of depressive and anxious symptoms, particularly among adolescents and young adults [11].

**Case Study 6:** Instagram and Self-Esteem in Teenagers A study by Choukas-Bradley et al. [12] examined the impact of Instagram on teenage girls' self-esteem. The study revealed that increased exposure to idealized images of peers and celebrities was linked to lower self-esteem and greater body dissatisfaction. Participants reported feeling inadequate and unworthy when comparing their lives to the curated content they encountered on Instagram, illustrating the platform's potential to foster negative self-perception [13].

b) **Anxiety and Depression** Heavy social media use has been associated with heightened levels of anxiety and depression. This is often tied to the constant need for validation, fear of missing out (FOMO), and exposure to negative content or cyberbullying. Anxiety may arise when users do not receive the expected number of likes, shares, or comments on their posts, leading to feelings of rejection and loneliness.

**Case Study 7:** Validation-Seeking Behavior and Anxiety on Social Media Pantic et al. [10] conducted a study showing that adolescents who frequently sought validation through likes and comments on social media were more likely to exhibit symptoms of anxiety and depression. The research suggested that the pressure to receive positive feedback could lead to obsessive behavior and increased social anxiety, ultimately harming mental health.

a) **Obsessive-Compulsive Behaviors** For some, social media use may evolve into an obsessive-compulsive behavior, where users feel compelled to check their accounts frequently to avoid missing updates or messages. This compulsive checking can interfere with daily life, work, and sleep, exacerbating mental health challenges.



**Case Study 8: Obsessive-Compulsive Social Media Use** A case study by Satici et al. (2020) [14] involved a young woman who displayed obsessive-compulsive behavior related to social media. She felt an uncontrollable urge to check her accounts every few minutes, even during work or social activities, which significantly impaired her daily functioning. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) was effective in reducing her compulsive checking behavior and improving her quality of life [15].

d) **Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and Eating Disorders** Social media platforms that focus heavily on visual content, like Instagram, can contribute to the development of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and eating disorders. Regular exposure to filtered, edited, and idealized images can distort users' self-perception, leading to an obsession with their appearance.

**Case Study 9: The Phenomenon of 'Snapchat Dysmorphia'** The term 'Snapchat Dysmorphia' refers to individuals who seek cosmetic procedures to resemble their filtered images on apps like Snapchat and Instagram. Montag et al. [13] found that young women who frequently used these apps reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction and a stronger desire for cosmetic enhancements. The study concluded that platforms allowing extensive photo editing and filtering could worsen body dysmorphia and drive the demand for cosmetic surgery.

e) **Sleep Disturbances** Excessive use of social media, especially before bedtime, can adversely affect sleep quality and duration. The blue light emitted from screens can suppress melatonin production, a hormone essential for regulating sleep, resulting in difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep [16].

**Case Study 10: Sleep Problems Among Adolescents Due to Social Media Use** Research by Woods and Scott [17] found that adolescents who engaged in frequent social media use before bed experienced poorer sleep quality, higher levels of anxiety, and increased symptoms of depression. The findings underscore the need for better digital hygiene practices to promote mental well-being among younger users.

a) **Development of Addictive Behaviors** Social media can foster addictive behaviors by offering instant gratification and dopamine release from receiving likes, comments, or shares. This reinforcement pattern can lead to dependency, where users feel compelled to engage with social media despite experiencing negative consequences [18].

**Case Study 11: Social Media Addiction in College Students** Kuss and Griffiths [19] explored social media addiction in college students and discovered that 10-15% exhibited signs of addiction, such as an inability to control their use, neglect of responsibilities, and mood changes when access was restricted. These findings demonstrate that social media addiction can severely affect academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being.

## Medical Approaches to Treating Social Media Addiction

Given the recognition of social media addiction as a behavioral disorder, interest in potential treatments, including psychological and pharmacological interventions, is growing. While psychological

treatments like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) remain standard, emerging research suggests a role for medication in managing this addiction [20].

a) **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a widely recognized approach for treating behavioral addictions, including social media addiction. CBT focuses on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns and behaviors related to excessive social media use. Studies have shown that CBT can effectively reduce compulsive social media use by teaching coping strategies and fostering healthier habits [21].

b) **Pharmacological Interventions** Though still in the early stages of research, certain medications have shown promise in managing symptoms associated with social media addiction, such as anxiety, depression, and impulse control issues.

**i. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs):** Medications like fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline (Zoloft) are often prescribed to treat anxiety and depression, which frequently co-occur with social media addiction. SSRIs can help stabilize mood and reduce compulsive behaviors.

**ii. Naltrexone:** Traditionally used to treat alcohol and opioid addiction, naltrexone has been studied for its potential to address behavioral addictions, including social media addiction. Grant et al. [22] found that naltrexone could help reduce cravings and compulsive behaviors by blocking opioid receptors in the brain, which are involved in reward and pleasure.

**iii. Modafinil:** Commonly prescribed for narcolepsy, modafinil has been investigated for its ability to treat various addictions due to its potential to enhance cognitive control and reduce impulsive behaviors. Research suggests that modafinil may help individuals with social media addiction by improving decision-making and decreasing the urge to engage in addictive behaviors [23].

c) **Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation and Multimodal Treatment** A thorough psychiatric evaluation can help identify underlying conditions contributing to social media addiction, such as anxiety, depression, or ADHD. Treatment may include a combination of medication, therapy, and lifestyle changes to address these co-occurring conditions effectively [24].

**Case Study 12: Integrating Medication and Therapy for Social Media Addiction** A case study by [17,25] involved a 25-year-old woman with severe social media addiction, spending over 10 hours daily on these platforms, leading to impaired social and occupational functioning. Her treatment plan included a combination of CBT and fluoxetine (an SSRI), which resulted in a significant reduction in social media use and improved mood stability over three months. This case illustrates the potential benefits of combining pharmacological and psychological treatments for managing social media addiction.

## Recommendations for Healthy Social Media Use

To mitigate the adverse effects of social media on mental health while maximizing its benefits, the following strategies are recommended:

a) **Set Time Limits and Establish Digital Boundaries** Limiting daily social media use to a reasonable amount can help prevent addiction and reduce its negative impact on mental health. Research indicates that keeping usage under 30 minutes per day can significantly lower anxiety and depression levels [22].

b) **Curate a Positive Social Media Feed** Following accounts that promote positivity, education, and inspiration can help create a healthier social media environment. Unfollowing or blocking accounts that provoke negative emotions can also be beneficial.

c) **Practice Mindful Social Media Use** Incorporating mindfulness techniques while using social media can help users become more aware of their emotional responses and avoid compulsive behaviors.

d) **Take Regular Digital Detox Breaks** Scheduling regular breaks from social media, or "digital detoxes," can help reset mental health and reduce feelings of overwhelm.

e) **Seek Professional Help** If social media use significantly affects mental health, consulting a professional for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or other therapeutic options can provide effective management strategies.

f) **Consider Pharmacological Options** For severe cases of social media addiction that do not respond to therapy alone, consulting a healthcare provider about medications like SSRIs, naltrexone, or modafinil may be helpful [19].

g) **Engage in Offline Activities** Balancing online engagement with offline activities, such as exercise, hobbies, and face-to-face social interactions, can reduce dependence on social media and enhance overall mental health [7].

h) **Stay Informed About Risks and Benefits** Being aware of both the risks and benefits associated with social media use can empower users to make more informed decisions about their usage and protect their mental well-being [26].

i) **Encourage Open Dialogue About Social Media Use** Encouraging open conversations about social media use, particularly among younger users, can help identify potential issues early and promote healthier usage habits [27].

## Conclusion

Social media has a profound impact on both individual mental health and society at large. While it offers valuable opportunities for connection, support, and education, it also presents risks such as addiction, cyberbullying, unrealistic comparisons, and the spread of misinformation. Research suggests that a combination of psychological and pharmacological treatments may effectively manage social media addiction. By understanding these effects and adopting healthier usage practices, individuals and communities can benefit from social media while minimizing its potential harms.

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