

## **Mental Health and Social Media Use: Assessing Psychological Well-Being in the Digital Age**

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### **Abstract**

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has reshaped communication, identity formation, and daily social interaction, raising important questions about mental health in the digital age. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, and information sharing. At the same time, excessive or unregulated use has been associated with anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, and reduced self-esteem, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The relationship between social media engagement and psychological well-being, focusing on factors such as screen time, online comparison, cyberbullying, and digital validation. While social media can enhance social support and community belonging, it may also contribute to emotional distress through exposure to idealized content and constant connectivity. The impact varies depending on individual resilience, usage patterns, and contextual factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, and offline social networks.

**Keywords:** Mental health, Social media use, Psychological well-being, Digital behavior, Anxiety and depression

### **Introduction**

The digital age has transformed how individuals communicate, build relationships, and construct personal identity. Social media platforms have become central to everyday life, especially among adolescents and young adults. Applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok enable users to share experiences, maintain social connections, and access information instantly. While these platforms offer opportunities for engagement and self-expression, their widespread use has raised concerns about their potential impact on mental health. Psychological well-being encompasses emotional stability, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and the ability to manage stress. In recent years, researchers have increasingly examined how digital environments influence these dimensions. On one hand, social media can foster a sense of belonging, social support, and community participation. Online spaces allow individuals to connect with like-minded peers, seek advice, and maintain relationships across geographical boundaries. For many users, these interactions enhance feelings of connectedness and social inclusion. On the other hand, excessive or unregulated use may contribute to negative psychological outcomes. Constant exposure to curated and idealized representations of others' lives can lead to social comparison and reduced self-worth. Features such as likes, comments, and follower counts may encourage validation-seeking behavior, potentially increasing anxiety and stress. Cyberbullying, online harassment, and sleep disruption linked to prolonged screen time further complicate the relationship between social

media use and mental health. The effects of social media are not uniform. Individual differences, including personality traits, coping mechanisms, and offline support systems, influence how digital interactions are experienced. Additionally, the distinction between active engagement, such as meaningful communication, and passive consumption, such as scrolling through feeds, plays a significant role in psychological outcomes.

### **Conceptualizing Psychological Well-Being in the Digital Context**

Psychological well-being traditionally refers to a person's overall emotional health, life satisfaction, sense of purpose, and ability to manage stress. Classic models distinguish between hedonic well-being, which emphasizes happiness and pleasure, and eudaimonic well-being, which focuses on meaning, personal growth, and self-realization. In the digital era, these dimensions remain relevant, but they are increasingly shaped by online environments and mediated forms of social interaction. In the context of social media use, psychological well-being must be understood as both an internal state and a socially influenced experience. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok provide spaces where identity is curated, relationships are maintained, and feedback is quantified through likes, shares, and comments. These features introduce new dynamics into self-perception and social validation, directly influencing emotional stability and self-esteem. Digital contexts blur the boundaries between public and private life. Users continuously navigate visibility, comparison, and performance. For some individuals, online expression enhances confidence, belonging, and creativity. Positive feedback and supportive communities can strengthen perceived social support, which is closely linked to mental well-being. For others, exposure to idealized representations and constant evaluation may heighten anxiety, loneliness, or inadequacy. Conceptualizing well-being in digital settings also requires attention to behavioral patterns. Active engagement, such as meaningful communication and content creation, may promote social connection and empowerment. In contrast, passive scrolling and comparison-driven consumption may reduce life satisfaction. Therefore, the quality of digital interaction often matters more than the quantity of screen time. Furthermore, psychological well-being in the digital age is influenced by algorithmic systems that shape what users see. Personalized feeds can reinforce existing interests but may also intensify exposure to specific themes, including unrealistic body standards or polarizing content. Understanding well-being thus involves examining both individual psychological processes and the structural design of digital platforms. Psychological well-being in the digital context is multidimensional and dynamic. It reflects the interaction between personal resilience, social experience, and technological environment. A comprehensive understanding requires integrating traditional psychological frameworks with contemporary insights into digital behavior and online social structures.

### **Patterns of Social Media Use: Active vs. Passive Engagement**

Understanding the impact of social media on mental health requires distinguishing between different patterns of use. Not all engagement produces the same psychological outcomes. Researchers commonly differentiate between active and passive use, as these behaviors influence well-being in distinct ways. Active engagement involves direct interaction with others. This includes posting content, commenting, messaging, sharing experiences, and participating in online discussions. On platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, active users

communicate intentionally, seek feedback, and maintain social ties. Such interactions can strengthen perceived social support, foster belonging, and reinforce identity expression. When communication is meaningful and reciprocal, it often contributes positively to emotional well-being. passive engagement refers to consuming content without direct interaction. Scrolling through feeds, viewing stories, or observing others' posts without responding are common examples. Passive use may expose individuals to curated and idealized portrayals of others' lives. Repeated exposure can encourage social comparison, potentially lowering self-esteem and increasing feelings of inadequacy or loneliness. Unlike active communication, passive consumption offers limited opportunities for social connection. The psychological impact of these patterns also depends on context and intention. For instance, active posting driven by validation-seeking may increase anxiety if feedback is perceived as insufficient. Similarly, passive browsing may not always be harmful; it can provide entertainment or relaxation when approached mindfully. Therefore, the distinction between active and passive use is not inherently positive or negative but shaped by motivation and individual vulnerability. Algorithmic design further influences engagement patterns. Platforms such as TikTok curate personalized feeds that encourage continuous scrolling, often reinforcing passive consumption. Auto-play features and infinite scrolling mechanisms extend screen time and reduce natural stopping points, shaping user behavior in subtle ways. the relationship between social media and psychological well-being is closely tied to how individuals use these platforms. Active, meaningful interaction tends to support social connectedness, while prolonged passive engagement may increase comparison-driven distress. Recognizing these patterns is essential for developing healthier digital habits and balanced online experiences.

### **Social Comparison, Body Image, and Self-Esteem**

Social comparison is a natural psychological process through which individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others. In digital environments, this process is amplified by constant exposure to curated images, achievements, and lifestyles. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are built around visual presentation, making appearance and performance highly visible and easily comparable. This continuous exposure can significantly influence body image and self-esteem. Many users present idealized versions of their lives through filtered photographs, edited videos, and selective sharing. Such portrayals often highlight beauty, success, and happiness while minimizing everyday struggles. When individuals compare themselves to these polished representations, they may experience upward social comparison, perceiving others as more attractive, accomplished, or socially accepted. Repeated comparison of this kind can reduce self-worth and increase dissatisfaction with one's body or lifestyle. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to these effects. Developmental stages characterized by identity formation and peer evaluation intensify sensitivity to feedback and appearance-based validation. Metrics such as likes, comments, and follower counts function as public indicators of approval, reinforcing external validation as a measure of self-value. In some cases, this dynamic contributes to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and body image concerns. However, social comparison does not always produce negative outcomes. Exposure to relatable or diverse representations can promote empowerment and positive identity formation. Online communities that celebrate body positivity, cultural diversity, and authentic self-expression may strengthen self-esteem rather than undermine it.

The impact therefore depends on the nature of the content consumed and the psychological resilience of the individual. Algorithmic systems further complicate this relationship by amplifying visually engaging or popular content, which may prioritize conventional beauty standards. As a result, users may encounter repeated reinforcement of narrow ideals unless they actively curate their feeds. social comparison within digital platforms plays a central role in shaping body image and self-esteem. While social media can provide supportive spaces for identity affirmation, it can also intensify comparison-driven distress when exposure to idealized imagery becomes constant and uncritical. Promoting digital literacy and mindful engagement is essential to mitigating these risks and supporting psychological well-being.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between social media use and psychological well-being in the digital age is complex and multifaceted. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have transformed communication, identity expression, and social interaction. They offer meaningful opportunities for connection, community building, and creative engagement. At the same time, they introduce new pressures linked to social comparison, validation-seeking, cyberbullying, and prolonged screen exposure. Distinguishing between active and passive engagement highlights that not all digital participation has the same psychological impact. Meaningful interaction and supportive online communities can enhance well-being, while excessive passive scrolling and comparison-driven consumption may contribute to anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and body image concerns. Individual differences, including resilience, self-regulation, and offline support systems, further shape these outcomes. Importantly, user behavior unfolds within algorithmically structured environments that influence what content is encountered and how long engagement continues. Viewer autonomy exists alongside technological mediation, making digital literacy and mindful usage essential components of mental health promotion. Ultimately, social media is neither inherently harmful nor entirely beneficial. Its impact depends on patterns of use, personal vulnerability, and platform design. A balanced approach that encourages intentional engagement, critical awareness, and supportive digital communities can help foster psychological well-being in an increasingly connected world.

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