

Research Paper

Dark Side of Social Networking Addiction with Special Reference to Mental Health Hazards

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ABSTRACT

Social media is one of the most powerful tools available in hands of people to connect with World. Over the last two decades drastic improvement has been observed in social media, in terms of quantity, quality, and utility. In present era the increased usage of social networking among adults is a matter of concern for parents, society and researchers. Apart from various benefits, the excessive use of social networking sites made the people addicted to such an extent that it adversely affects them. Researches indicate that excessive use of social media can be related to depression and anxiety. Addressing the relationship between social networking addiction and mental health, the literature search from PubMed, Web of Science and Google Scholar has been done. The aim of present study is to explore the mental health hazards of social media and potential strategies for their mitigation.

Keywords: *Addiction, Mental Health, Social Networking, Young users*

Social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram Facebook, YouTube, Google, and Twitter have transformed the way people socialize and connect in today's world, enabling individuals to form relationships and interact with others across different nations and cultures. These platforms require users to generate a personal profile to engage in communication with others.¹

Social media refers to “electronic communication tools (like websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which users establish online communities to exchange information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos” Merriam-Webster (2014).

By 2021, over 4.3 billion people—more than half of the world's population—were active on social media, with the average user dedicating about two and a half hours per day to these platforms (GWI, 2021). Recent studies revealed that the total of social media users increased by 227 million over the previous year, reaching 4.70 billion by early July 2022.²

A common trend today is the excessive use of social media. Platforms that permit user interaction through Web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, online games,

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YouTube, blogs, and other virtual spaces, are considered social media. These platforms are growing rapidly and provide easily accessible outlets for entertainment and communication, especially among young people.

Individuals aged 16 to 24 are the most engaged social media users, making up 91% of all internet users. Young people involve with social media for various purposes, including networking, entertainment, information sharing, seeking support, and accessing health-related content (RSPH, Y.).³ Because of the negative assessments surrounding social media, children and teenagers are increasingly using mobile devices in their bedrooms to browse the internet and engage with social media without parental oversight. Policymakers and public health experts have expressed concerns regarding the possible effects of social media on young people's mental well-being. (Lenhart, A. et al).⁴ certainly social media's amusing and beneficial impacts have made it an essential component of many people's lives. However, excessively use can lead to mental health problems. People who are absorbed in social media often experience decreased productivity, as they tend to be less focused on important tasks.⁵ Bannink et al. (2014) Emphasize that cyberbullying, characterized by aggressive behavior on digital platforms, especially the internet and social media, is a major concern affecting today's youth.⁵ It can include actions such as sharing harmful content online, making threats, intimidating others, or posting images and videos designed to inflict emotional harm.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to explore the intricate relationship between young adults' social media usage and its implications for mental health. To achieve this objective, the researcher conducts a comprehensive analysis of existing literature on the defining characteristics of social media, the overall mental well-being of young adults, and emerging theoretical frameworks at both individual and societal levels that may elucidate the link between social media addiction and mental health outcomes in young users.

Benefits of Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNS) have changed how people connect, enabling the sharing of information, opinions, interests, and relationships in this` digital era. These platforms provide a variety of benefits, from reunite with old friends to promoting businesses and exchanging ideas. According to Glazzard and Stones (2020), social media provide young people to portray a positive self-image and engage in meaningful self-expression.⁶ It also serves as a space for sharing creative content and showcasing interests and passions.⁵ This is especially valuable for young individuals from minority groups or rural areas, where forming offline social connections may be more challenging. Social networking can foster the development of a positive identity in young people and offer them opportunities to explore a variety of interests.

1. Enhanced Communication and Connectivity

One of the most evident benefits of social networking services is the ability to connect with people globally. Platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter enable users to communicate instantly, no matter their location (Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007)).⁷ This enhanced connectivity facilitates the exchange of ideas, fosters collaboration, and strengthens relationships.

2. Information Sharing and Awareness

Social networking platforms are potent tools for sharing knowledge and raising awareness on various issues. Sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are particularly important for delivering real-time updates, coordinating relief efforts, and mobilizing support during public emergencies or natural disasters (Sutton, J. N. 2008).⁸

3. Business Promotion and Networking

Social networking platforms offer businesses unparalleled opportunities for branding, customer engagement, and marketing. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest facilitate visual product promotion, whereas LinkedIn functions as a central space for professional networking and recruitment (Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. 2010).⁹ Additionally, targeted advertising features enable businesses to reach specific demographics, thereby maximizing Return on Investment.

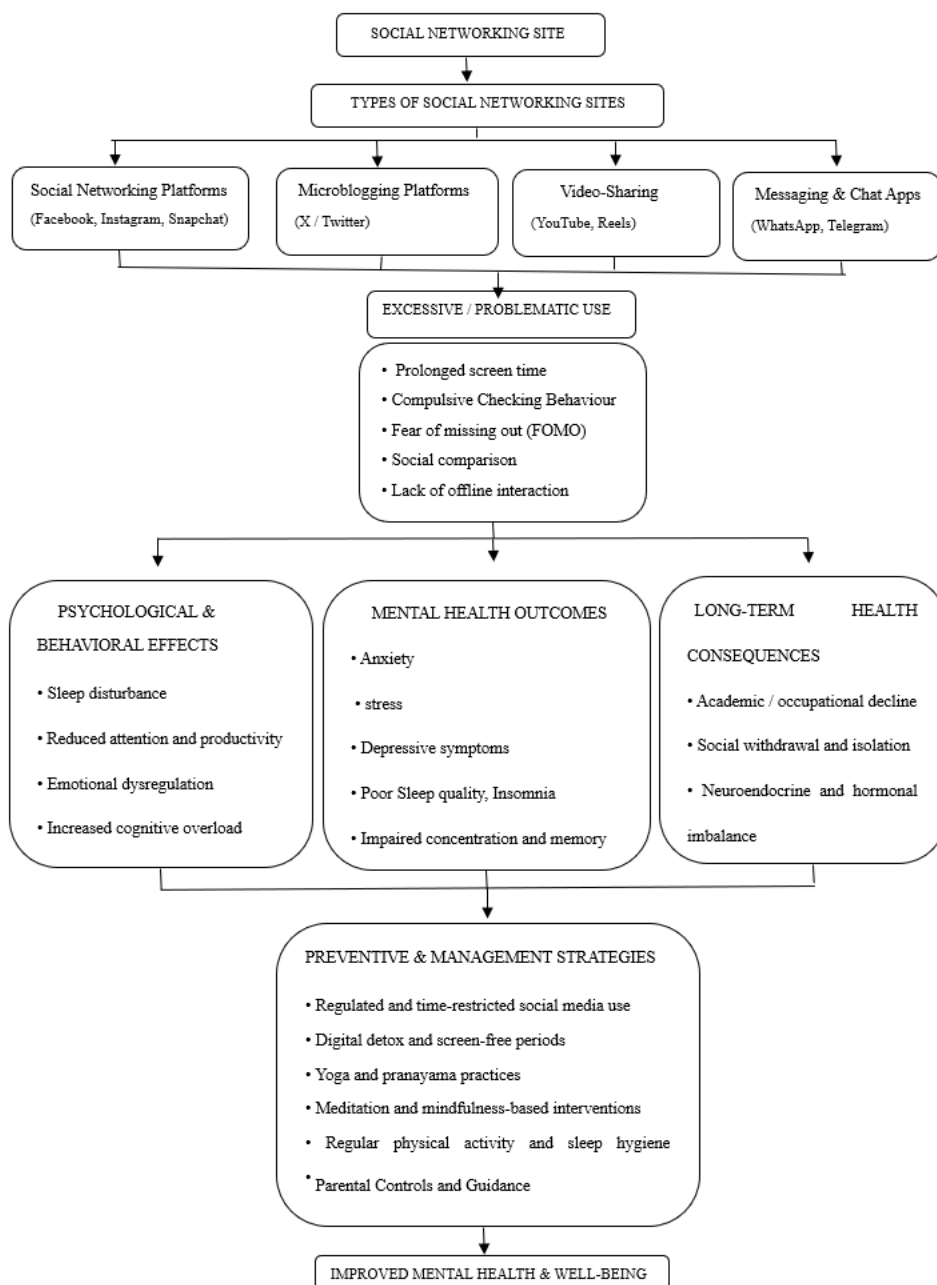
4. Educational and Learning Opportunities

Social networking platforms have transformed education by offering spaces for skill enhancement, resource exchange, and collaborative learning. Tools like Edmodo and Schoology are utilized by teachers and educational organizations to distribute study materials, deliver online courses, and engage students in dynamic, interactive learning experiences (Greenhow, C. et al 2009).¹⁰

5. Cultural Exchange and Diversity

Social media platforms foster cultural exchange by linking individuals from different backgrounds, enabling them to share experiences and embrace diversity. Websites like YouTube serve as channels for highlighting cultural traditions, artistic talents, and expressions, fostering global understanding and appreciation (Fuchs, C. 2015).¹¹

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What Is Social Networking Addiction? Causes And Symptoms

Every innovation comes with both positive and negative aspects. Social media addiction refers to its overuse, which can disrupt daily routines, social interactions, and professional life. Addiction stems from a repeated behavior or concept that previously provided satisfaction and is anticipated to offer new gratification (Monterosso, D. 2019).¹² Social media addiction is characterized by both tolerance and withdrawal symptoms. People often present an idealized portrayal of themselves and their lives on social media, which may encourage others to engage in unhealthy comparisons. These comparisons often result in lowered self-esteem, as people perceive their own lives as less successful or fulfilling compared to the curated images online. Studies indicate that those addicted to social media tend to believe others are happier and more successful, and this constant comparison in the digital space can negatively impact mental health.

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Causes (Kuss, D. J., & Griffiths, M. D. (2017).¹³

1. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): The fear of missing out on social events or important information shared on social media can drive excessive use, as individuals strive to stay constantly connected.
2. Escapism and Coping Mechanism: Individuals may use social networking as a way to escape from real-life problems or stressful situations, seeking comfort or distraction online.
3. Reward System Activation: Social networking platforms are designed to trigger the brain's reward system through likes, comments, and other forms of positive feedback, reinforcing addictive behaviour.
4. Social Comparison: Social comparison, in which people negatively compare their own lives to those of others, can result from a continuous exposure to other people's lives on social media. This can lead to low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy.
5. Peer Pressure: Social pressure to conform to online trends and behaviours can contribute to addictive social media use, as individuals seek approval and acceptance from their online peers.

Symptoms (Andreassen, C. S. 2017)¹⁴

1. Neglect of Real-Life Activities: Neglecting real-life activities and relationships in favour of spending time online, leading to social isolation and withdrawal from offline interactions.
2. Pre-occupation with social media: Constantly thinking about social media, planning the next online interaction, or being preoccupied with thoughts of what is happening on social networking platforms.
3. Excessive Time Spent Online: Utilizing a significant amount of time on social networking platforms to the detriment of other responsibilities, such as work, school, or personal relationships.
4. Anxiety and Distress: Experiencing anxiety or distress when unable to access social media, indicating a dependence on online interactions for emotional well-being.
5. Failed Attempts to Cut Back: Unsuccessful attempts to reduce or control social media use, indicating a lack of control over the behaviour.
6. Decline in Academic or Work Performance: A noticeable decline in academic or work performance as a result of excessive time spent on social media.

Mental Health Hazards

Mental health is characterized as individual's capability to recognize their own abilities, solve issues in daily life, function successfully at work, and significantly improve the lives of those around them (World Health Organization. 2004).¹⁵ In this article, We thoroughly reviewed and integrated relevant studies on the impact of social media on mental well-being. While both positive and negative effects have been observed, research findings indicate that social media use does not necessarily lead to a decline in mental health functioning (Berryman, C. et al 2018).¹⁶ A study found no significant correlation between prolonged social media usage and the prevalence of mental health disorders (Coyne, S. M., Rogers, A. A. et al 2020).¹⁷

Studies suggest that young individuals who spend more than two hours daily on social networking sites are at a higher risk of experiencing psychological distress and other adverse mental health effects. Research further indicates that social media use among youth may be linked to issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

Anxiety

The connection between social media and compulsive behaviour has been reported by various studies. The Net and I Generation, also known as the virtual generation, are said to frequently check the messages on their social networking applications (Drouin, M., Kaiser, D. H. 2012).¹⁹ A study determined that four out of the five most frequently used social media platforms exacerbate feelings of anxiety among young individuals (Rosen, L. D., Whaling, K. 2013).²⁰ According to (Rothberg, M. B., Arora, A. 2010 and Benrouba, F., & Boudour, R. 2023) indicates that 45% of adult British citizens become anxious when they are unable to access their social media accounts. Research indicates that younger generation feels agitated when they were not able to access messages of their social networking applications apart from their counterparts, giving rise to Phantom vibration syndrome (PVS). This is nothing but the perception of an addict person regarding the vibration of his cell phone.^{21,22} Any victim of PVS reflects obsession of frequent checking of social messages exhibits manifestation of anxiety caused by cell phones.

Stress

Nowadays, nobody is free from the social media environment. Some people draw comparisons between their lives and their friends' flawless lifestyle. Social media addiction has skyrocketed in modern era and once someone logs on, it can be tough to stop using it. The theory states that the more time you spend on social media, the more miserable you get (Strickland, A. (2014)).²³ It also says that using Facebook and Twitter and other social networking sites doesn't help pupils focus and cope with stress. Investigated the effects of social media on teenagers' mental health, both positive and negative (Kaur, R. & Bashir, H. (2015)).²⁴ Positive consequences include learning possibilities, improved communication, sociability, and access to health information. Negative features include weariness, tension, sexting, cyberbullying, melancholy, emotional repression, and a reduction in intellectual capacity. Another study conducted by Park, Song & Lee (2014) stated that social media application like Facebook is positively associated with acculturative stress of college students.²⁵ Therefore, we can conclude that excessive usage of social media can adversely effect on mental health of the younger generation.

Depression

People who develop an addiction to social networking sites are more likely to experience depression compared to those who do not. Excessive social media use can have severe consequences, beginning with anxiety and potentially leading to depression. Terms like 'SNS addiction' and 'problematic SNS use' have been associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Park, N., Song, H. et al 2014), Giota, K. G., & Kleftaras, G. (2013), (Green, T., Wilhelmsen, T. et al 2016) and (Hong, F. Y., Huang, D. H. 2014) ^{22, 26, 27,28}, although associations most likely are bidirectional in nature. Rosen et al., (2013), corroborated that people who consumed most of their time engaging in online activities and managing their online personas on social networking sites had signs of serious depression.²² Research conducted by Davila et al. (2012) reveals that younger generations with relatively severe symptoms of depression are linked to fewer good and more negative social contacts.²⁹ A later study examined the relationship between depression and social media use across various platforms in a large, nationally representative group of young adults. The results indicated a strong association between social media usage and increased depression levels (Lin, L. Y., Sidani, J. E. 2016).³⁰ Another study conducted by Ni et al. (2020) investigated social media use and other risk factors for potential anxiety and depression in Wuhan, China, among medical professionals as well as the general public.³¹

Insomnia

Insomnia is a sleep disorder. In today's world, insomnia or sleep deprivation is increasingly common among teenagers. Screen exposure to electromagnetic radiation has been linked to reduced melatonin production, disrupting the circadian rhythm and causing sleep disturbances.³² A recent meta-analysis on internet addiction and sleep problems highlighted that advancements in digital technology and the widespread use of devices such as smartphones and tablets can interfere with sleep.³³ Studies indicate that 76.4% of people who spend over three hours a day on electronic devices have reported experiencing low sleep quality.³⁴

These disruptions in sleep have been connected to various physical health issues and diminished psychosocial well-being, including reduced academic performance.³⁵ Spending too much time on screens can have adverse psychological effects. Behavioral addictions, including gaming disorder, have been associated with activities such as gaming, social media use, and online streaming. Moreover, studies suggest a connection between excessive screen use and an increased risk of certain mental health issues.³⁶

Suggestions:

The main solution for social media addiction is the controlled use of internet, setting up limits and mitigating the adverse effects of social networking. It requires a multifarious approach that combines individual efforts, societal interventions, and technological solutions:

- 1. Digital Detox Programs:** Encourage people to take part in digital detox programs, which involve cutting off from social media for a set time period. Research reveals that these pauses can result in a decrease in stress and an enhancement in wellbeing (Oulasvirta, A., Rattenbury, T. (2012)).³⁷
- 2. Educational Programs:** Implement educational programs to raise awareness about the signs of social networking addiction and its potential consequences. This can empower individuals to make informed decisions about their online activities.¹⁵
- 3. Technological Solutions:** Include functions on social networking sites that encourage responsible use, like daily usage caps and reminders for breaks. Studies suggest that these kinds of interventions can assist users in regaining greater control over their online conduct (Lam, L. T., Peng, Z. W. (2009)).³⁸
- 4. Parental Controls and Guidance:** Educate parents on the importance of monitoring and guiding their children's online activities. Parental involvement and setting limits on screen time have been associated with lower levels of internet addiction among adolescents.
- 5. Spiritual Practices:** Practices such as meditation, prayer, mantra chanting, and regular yoga and pranayama can help stabilize the mind, reducing the inclination to engage excessively with social networking sites (Sharma, B., Pant, K. (2020)).^{14, 32}
- 6. Stop using technology during night.**
- 7. Restricting technology use during mealtimes or other social occasions.**
- 8. Reducing the amount of time users spend in front of screens. displaying alerts to consumers when their screen time has surpassed acceptable limits.**
- 9. Responding quickly in response to abuse reports. Generating content to educate service users about safe and responsible social media use.**

CONCLUSION

In today's world, social networking sites have quickly gained traction by offering a distinctive method for interacting with individuals and society on a large scale. While these

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platforms provide many advantages, such as communication, information sharing, business promotion, and cultural exchange, it is crucial to utilize them wisely. Multiple research studies have shown that excessive use of social networking sites can negatively impact the mental health of young people. Practical suggestions have been provided to help reduce their reliance on these platforms in order to promote better mental well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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