

The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Well-being and the Addiction Behaviors It Causes

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Abstract. Social media offers both potential benefits for well-being and risks of addiction, and plays a major role in adolescent life. This paper reviews current research to explore the links between social media use, well-being in adolescents, and the development of addictive behaviors. It shows how usage patterns, differences between active and passive use, individual traits, and social factors influence the outcome of internet usage. This review finds that when adolescents use social media in active and genuine ways, such as sharing real personal content, it can support well-being by meeting basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In contrast, passive use often leads to unfavorable comparisons and short-term drops in mood, especially in those already at risk. Addiction to social media develops from a mix of personal factors (weak self-regulation or poor coping skills), negative life pressures (family problems, bullying, or school stress), and features of the platforms themselves (algorithmic feeds, endless scrolling, and reward systems) that promote repeated, entertainment-based use. This review concludes that social media's effects depend on context. A wide approach is needed to address the risks, which includes teaching digital skills, offering offline support systems, and promoting healthier platform designs. Future research should take a long-term view, include more diverse cultural groups, and use a mix of research methods to understand these complex relationships better.

Keywords: Social Media, Well-being, Adolescent, Addiction

1. Introduction

In recent years, the internet has brought significant changes to people's lives. With the rapid development of social media, the number of adolescents actively engaged in its use continuously increases. Across the world, teenagers are spending a lot of time on various platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Research shows that the psychological and behavioral effects of social media vary significantly across individuals. While using social media can increase the sense of well-being of teens, it also poses addictive risks. Some adolescents benefit from social media, feeling supported and finding a space to express themselves. Others experience negative outcomes, including symptoms of depression, reduced attention spans, and signs of addiction [1,2]. These outcomes can lead to serious issues in everyday life, including bad academic performance and strained interpersonal relationships [3,4]. Long-term studies show that both internal and external factors, such as harmful thinking patterns or stressful home environments, can increase the risk of social

media addiction. This is especially true for vulnerable groups, including adolescents in rural areas or those left behind by migrating parents [4,5].

Although many studies have explored these topics, some key questions remain unanswered. One issue is that the overall effect of social media is still unclear. Moreover, research lacks a unified theory. Some models, such as I-PACE, include biological, psychological, and social factors. But no model fully explains how social media can both support well-being and lead to addiction [1]. As a result, it is challenging to develop effective interventions.

This paper aims to achieve three objectives. First, it will summarize current research on the double-edged nature of social media, showing how it can both help and harm. Second, it will try to connect different theories by combining ecological, cognitive-behavioral, and motivational viewpoints. Third, it will suggest possible interventions that takes individual differences into account. The paper is organized to start from identifying terms, progressing to the link between social media, well-being, and addiction, and then finally to what these findings mean for future research, policy, and mental health care.

2. The meaning of these terms: social media, well-being, and addiction

2.1. Social media and platform diversity

Social media are online platforms where users can create content, communicate with others, and join virtual communities [6,7]. However, these platforms differ in design, purpose, and how people interact on them. The differences, ranging from image-based posts to discussion forums, have varying effects on adolescents.

For example, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok mainly contain visual content and push people to post the perfect version of themselves. As a result, some users may feel pressure or dissatisfaction when they compare their daily lives to the photoshopped, idealized pictures and lifestyles [2,8]. In contrast, other platforms such as WhatsApp and YouTube focus more on communication and video sharing. These platforms generally place less importance on personal image and are more supportive and offer learning opportunities [2,8].

These differences mean that social media does not affect all users in the same way. The effects, whether on well-being, addiction, or risk of victimization, depend heavily on which platforms adolescents use and how they use them.

2.2. Well-being

Well-being is a broad concept involving emotional, cognitive, and developmental dimensions. For adolescents, well-being cannot be separated from the process of forming a stable identity. According to Diener et al's studies, subjective well-being (SWB) is generally understood as consisting of two components [7,9]. Cognitive, which involves a person's overall judgment of how satisfied they are with their life; and affective, which includes both positive and negative effects: pleasant emotions such as joy, happiness, contentment, and unpleasant ones such as sadness, anxiety, and anger.

This multidimensional understanding of SWB is widely accepted in the literature [9]. Researchers often draw a clear line between two types of well-being: cognitive well-being and affective well-being. One centers on reflective evaluations, such as life satisfaction, the other concerns the emotional quality of daily experiences, including the valence (positive or negative) and intensity of those emotions [2]. More recently, studies have drawn attention to momentary affective well-being, which captures temporary emotional states, such as how happy or stressed someone feels in the

moment, as a key way to measure adolescents' immediate emotional responses to social media use [2].

Higher levels of SWB are linked to positive outcomes, such as strong social relationships, better health, and greater overall life success [9]. In examining the effects of social media, researchers focus on how different usage patterns relate to the specific elements of SWB: general life satisfaction, the frequency of positive emotions, and the reduction of negative emotions. This method demonstrates how social media influences teens' perception of the quality of their lives.

2.3. Social media addiction

Social media addiction refers to compulsive and dysfunctional use of social media that disrupts the life of individuals in academic, interpersonal, and emotional areas. This concept is often defined using two related frameworks: a behavioral perspective and a cognitive model.

From a behavioral point of view, addiction is measured through established standards. These include withdrawal symptoms (feeling upset when access is blocked), tolerance (spending more time online to feel satisfied), loss of control (failing to reduce use despite trying), and conflict (negative consequences for school, relationships, or well-being). Tools like Young's Internet Addiction Test can assess these behaviours [3-5].

From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, addiction originates from warped beliefs. The cognitive-pathology model by Davis explains distorted thinking patterns. These addiction-driving beliefs include thinking that they are only accepted online or that the internet is the only way to cope. These beliefs are responses to stressful or negative life experiences and serve as mediators between those experiences and addiction. In this model, cognition is the central link between life context and behavior [5].

3. Impact of social media on adolescents

Studies show that the effects of social media on adolescent well-being are not uniformly positive or negative. Instead, current research points to a complex and varied relationship. This relationship depends largely on how adolescents use social media, their individual psychological traits, and the broader social and cultural settings in which they live. Findings from several studies reveal multiple pathways through which social media may improve, reduce, or have little effect on adolescent well-being.

3.1. Positive pathways: active use and personal sharing

Social media can support adolescent well-being when they use it actively and intentionally. Sharing personal content, such as thoughts or creative work, can provide benefits like improved moods, feelings of competence, and social connection, thereby satisfying social needs. Zhou and colleagues demonstrated this connection in a large study of Chinese adolescents [10]. The study's database contains results from a large number of adults aged 18 to 44 (N=7,667), covering most of the country. Their results showed that teens who frequently posted personal content on platforms like WeChat Moments or QQ Space reported greater satisfaction. They felt that they had more control over how they presented themselves and the choices they made online and reported increased feelings of competence. The encouraging feedback they received from others also enhanced their communication skills. In addition, they experienced stronger connections to others and developed a deeper sense of belonging.

These psychological needs come from Self-Determination Theory, which explains how people are motivated and enhance well-being through positive feelings. Interestingly, the positive effect of self-disclosure was significantly stronger among boys than girls, which may be caused by boys feeling more restrained by social norms that require them to suppress their emotions [10]. Social media is a more accepting space for emotions, where they can have support and encouragement they might not receive offline.

Another study also demonstrates the positive relation between social media usage and well-being. Mao's meta-analysis combines results from 43 studies that were selected based on the standards set by the PRISMA Statement (Note: Original text said "PRIMA", but it is a known typo for "PRISMA") [10]. She found a consistent, though modest, positive connection between authentic self-presentation (showing one's true self) or positive self-presentation (highlighting good qualities without deception) and higher well-being. The average correlation was small ($r = 0.179$), but the trend was clear. Adolescents who shared real or positive aspects of their lives reported greater life satisfaction and more positive emotions. These types of sharing may increase well-being by giving adolescents a sense of control, visibility, and positive feedback from others.

3.2. Negative or neutral pathways: passive use, social comparison, identity challenges

In contrast, passively using social media by scrolling mindlessly without interaction and thought can have negative effects. Beyens et al.'s study explored this pattern using experience-sampling, which collects real-time reports of feelings and behaviors [2]. Over one week, 63 participants completed brief surveys six times daily, reporting their recent social media activity and current happiness levels. Each teen focused on their top three platforms from a list of five common ones (WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and game chat), with questions tailored to both active and passive use. The short surveys were mainly completed (83.2%) and yielded over 2,100 real-time data points. This design tracks short-term mood changes in natural settings, with sampling scheduled around school routines to improve participation. While using a single-item measure for happiness does not allow for many distinctions, it can take samples frequently without overburdening participants. The findings showed wide individual differences: about 44% experienced no clear emotional shift after passive use. However, 10% consistently felt worse. The main cause appeared to be social comparison. When adolescents viewed idealized images or posts from peers, such as vacation photos, achievements, or attractive appearances, they often felt envious or inadequate, or feared that they were missing out on trends. Adolescents who were already sensitive to social comparisons were more likely to be affected. Reactions vary across individuals; 46% of participants actually felt better after passive use. The study emphasized that the emotional impact of passive scrolling varies significantly across adolescents and highlighted the need for further research on long-term effects and different populations.

Social media may also influence adolescent well-being indirectly. An important developmental task during adolescence is one's identity. While social media platforms allow teens to explore themselves in new ways, they also make it challenging for them to form a coherent identity. Qu et al. examined this mechanism in depth through structural equation modeling (SEM) with a large adolescent sample ($N=2634$) [6]. They found that social media use did not directly predict life satisfaction. Instead, its effects depended on which identity state it influenced. Specifically, they found that increased social media use strengthened both achievement-oriented identity (positive) and diffused identity (negative). As a result, the conclusion is that using social media could potentially enhance life satisfaction by bolstering an achievement identity state, but also undermine life satisfaction by reinforcing a diffused identity state.

In some cases, social media encouraged adolescents to explore different roles and commit to personal values, which helped them develop what the researchers called an “achievement identity”, which fosters resilience and emotional stability. In other cases, however, social media contributed to confusion and avoidance, leading to a state known as “diffusion identity.” Adolescents in this state often lacked a clear direction and sense of self, which was linked to lower well-being.

These findings show that social media can play both positive and negative roles. It can help adolescents discover who they are by exposing them to new ideas and communities. However, it can also overwhelm them with conflicting messages, present conformity issues, or stop them from reflecting upon who they are. In such cases, identity development may stall, which would negatively affect their well-being.

3.3. Moderating factors: gender, culture, and use patterns

The effects of social media are not the same for everyone. Its impact is shaped by several factors such as gender, cultural background, and how it is used.

Gender shapes how social media affects well-being. In Zhou et al. 's study, the positive effects of active self-disclosure are more significant for boys [10]. This may be because boys have fewer offline spaces where they can express personal feelings. Social media may fill this gap by offering emotional safety and social feedback.

Cultural background also influences the relationship between social media and well-being. The positive connection between self-presentation and well-being was stronger in collectivist cultures, such as China or Japan, where the average correlation was $r = 0.244$ [9]. In contrast, the effect was weaker and statistically insignificant in individualist cultures, such as the United States or Western Europe, where the correlation was only $r = 0.052$, which is statistically insignificant. In collectivist cultures, social approval and harmony are highly valued, so successful self-presentation can lead to stronger support and higher well-being. In individualist cultures that value uniqueness and authenticity, positive effects may only occur when online sharing seems genuine.

The type and purpose of social media use also matter. Studies by Beyens et al., Zhou et al., and Mao all emphasize this distinction. Moreover, when examining active users, the type of content being shared is important [2,9,10]. Mao found that higher well-being was linked to authentic and positive sharing. Moreover, adolescents who frequently used social media to vent negative emotions or ruminate experienced lower well-being, with a correlation of $r = -0.255$. This data shows that the emotions that online content expresses matter, and active use is not always beneficial.

3.4. Limitations and areas for future research

Although these studies offer valuable findings, there still remain several limitations. Firstly, as Mao pointed out, most studies are based in Western or East Asian countries [9]. There is a lack of data from other regions such as Africa, South America, or the Middle East. Researchers need sufficient data to summarize global patterns. Self-reported data is another concern. Most studies rely on adolescents to report how they use social media and their feelings afterward. Therefore, results can be affected by inaccuracies resulting from memory errors or teens' desire to conform to social expectations. To improve reliability, researchers can combine self-reports with objective data like app usage tracking. A further limitation is the use of broad and sometimes oversimplified categories. Many studies label behavior as active or passive, but this can hide important differences, for example, what kind of content adolescents view, why they use social media, and the nature of their supportive or harmful online interactions. These are all details that matter when categorizing their

actions and should be explored more carefully in future research. Finally, there is the challenge of identifying causality. It remains difficult to say whether certain social media behaviors cause changes in well-being, or whether adolescents with higher or lower well-being simply use social media in different ways. More longitudinal studies and controlled experiments are needed to understand cause-and-effect relationships.

4. Impact factors for social media addiction

The deep integration of social media into the everyday lives of adolescents has raised growing concern about its potential to foster addictive behaviors. To understand this issue, we need to analyze empirical findings on risk factors, explore theoretical frameworks, and note the limitations of current research.

Research consistently shows that a complex mix of personal vulnerabilities and environmental circumstances influences social media addiction in adolescents. Personal traits such as weak self-control and underdeveloped thinking skills make it harder for young people to manage their usage time. Many find it hard to stop checking their phones compulsively even when they know no new messages are coming [1,11]. These difficulties occur because their prefrontal cortex is still underdeveloped.

Unfortunate events in life can produce feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Adolescents who use social media to mitigate negative emotions caused by real-life issues may develop maladaptive thinking patterns. They may believe that only the online world can fulfill psychological needs such as belonging or self-esteem [1,5,8]. For example, adolescents separated from their families (left-behind children) often feel bad about themselves and seek close connections online [5]. Anxiety and emotional dysregulation further heighten the risk. Teens with social anxiety or emotional difficulties may see social media as a seemingly safe space. This negatively affects their emotional regulation by trapping them in a reliance cycle [5,11].

In addition, stressful family environments marked by conflict, harsh parenting, neglect, low cohesion, or poor communication strongly correlate with social media addiction. In homes lacking warmth and support, adolescents are more likely to seek connection and validation online [3,5,12]. Positive parenting, however, may be a barrier against addiction even when other negative factors are present [5].

Cyberbullying often creates significant distress and is associated with withdrawal from social activities and online dependency, which leads to social media addiction. Addicted teens may also be more prone to victimization due to frequent online presence and risky behaviors such as commenting and posting controversial opinions. Conversely, those already affected may retreat further into online spaces as a coping strategy, increasing their addiction risk [8]. Offline bullying also drives teens toward digital environments for comfort.

Problems related to schools matter as well. Adolescents who feel left out at school, do poorly in class, or face high academic stress may turn to social media to regain control or find distractions. Apps that offer gaming or social interaction make this even easier [3,12]. The actions of their peers on social media intensify these effects, as adolescents often mimic actions in their immediate social circles. When excessive use becomes common within a friend group or when teenage social life shifts predominantly online, the risk of addiction grows [1].

Moreover, platform characteristics and usage patterns are crucial. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat use infinite scrolling, algorithmic personalization, notifications, ephemeral content, and visible likes and followers. These features are designed to trigger dopamine responses and make it hard to stop browsing [8]. How adolescents use social media also matters. There is a

difference between using social media for entertainment use, such as gaming, passive browsing, and social interaction, and for education, such as learning or information seeking. The former has a high risk of addiction, while the latter does not [11]. Moreover, spending too much time on social media negatively affects sleep and offline interactions with other people [3,8,11]. Patterns that allow anonymity or reduced social cues, such as anonymous comments or disappearing messages, increase the risk of disinhibited behavior. Platforms like WhatsApp illustrate how interactions where users feel that are private can foster more intense and sometimes compensatory engagement [8].

Finally, developmental phases matter. Chen et al. highlight that risk peaks around early adolescence (roughly ages 12 to 14) as identity exploration, peer influence, and sensitivity to comparison increase [12]. Sun et al. confirm that the risk for developing problematic social media use is highest during this period [3].

4.1. Theoretical perspectives: development of addiction

Several theoretical models help explain how these factors coalesce into addictive patterns. The Bio-Psycho-Social Model connects biological predispositions (dopamine-driven reward responses and impulsivity), psychological vulnerabilities (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and emotion regulation issues), and social factors (family stress, peer influence, bullying, and whether technology is readily available) [1]. It describes addiction as a product of these interacting forces, including neurobiological reward sensitivity, emotional vulnerability, and social stressors, reinforced by random rewards and behavior driven by cues.

The cognitive-behavioral theory posits a chain from external stressors such as family conflict, being left behind, or bullying to maladaptive beliefs about online and offline worlds [5]. Thoughts like “I am only accepted online,” or “the online world is better,” keep teens glued to social media. The temporary relief from this habit reinforces negative beliefs, trapping the user in a loop reinforced by negative emotional relief and cognitive distortions.

Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the interaction of behavior, cognition, and environment in addiction development. Specifically, adolescents learn addictive behaviors through observation of peers or influencers (environment). This observational learning leads them to expect positive outcomes (cognition), such as likes, a form of substitute reinforcement where seeing others rewarded motivates their behavior. If they also believe they lack control over usage, they are more likely to develop addictive patterns (behavior) [1,11]. Similarly, the Compensatory Internet Use Theory suggests that adolescents turn to social media to fulfill unmet psychological needs (e.g., competence, autonomy, connection) arising from stressors, trapping the user in a loop reinforced by negative emotional relief and cognitive distortions [1].

4.2. Research limitations and future needs

Several important limitations shape current understanding of addiction. First, no standardized diagnostic criteria exist. Researchers use diverse scales such as the Internet Addiction Test (IAT), the Chinese Internet Addiction Scale (CIAS), and other clinical tools with different conceptual focuses that make comparisons across studies complicated [4].

Sampling issues also limit generalizability. Many studies rely on urban, school-based samples. Rural adolescents, school dropouts, and clinical populations are often neglected; cultural specificity, especially from studies in China, limits generalizability to other contexts [3,11,12].

Research design often relies on cross-sectional surveys, which reveal associations but cannot establish causal direction. It remains unclear whether predispositions drive addiction or if addiction

worsens personal vulnerabilities [9,11]. Self-report instruments are vulnerable to bias and social desirability, especially in measuring sensitive topics like addiction or family conflict [3].

The rapidly changing digital platforms pose additional challenges. Features and trends of information, such as viral memes in short videos, evolve quickly and make older findings less relevant. Finally, much research focuses on pathology and “screen time,” often neglecting positive or balanced uses of social media [1].

5. Discussion & suggestions

Recent research shows that the effects of social media on adolescents are two-way and depend heavily on context. Personal characteristics strongly affect how adolescents respond to digital environments. Factors such as genetic risk, insecure attachment styles (like anxious or avoidant patterns), and negative thought patterns (such as low self-worth or distorted thinking) make some adolescents more likely to develop internet addiction or become targets of cyber victimization. These vulnerabilities do not act alone but interact with online experiences in ways that increase risk [1,5].

The surrounding environment also plays an important role. Harsh or punitive parenting, being bullied, and weak emotional connections, especially with fathers, are linked to higher chances of problematic internet use [3,12]. On the other hand, supportive friendships, strong family ties, and a positive school climate help reduce the risk. These protective factors offer adolescents emotional support and promote healthier online habits.

The design of social media platforms seems to be the main cause of cyberbullying rather than user anonymity. Apps that focus on pictures, like Instagram, and those with constant messaging, like WhatsApp, are linked to higher risks for teens who already use social media too much. However, apps like Snapchat and YouTube seem to have fewer risks [9]. This goes against older ideas that blamed anonymous use for most online harm. Instead, it shows that features like suggested content and constant access can also cause problems.

In families, kind and understanding parenting helps teens avoid using social media as a way to handle stress [5]. When parents use social media with their children, it helps build trust and improve digital skills. This shared use also shows teens how to behave well online [2]. A close relationship with the father, especially in early teenage years, is linked to better control of emotions and less use of unhealthy digital habits [12].

Schools should establish programs that match the age and needs of students. For example, they can ensure students in all grades have regular physical activity, which can help balance long hours spent on screens [12]. Curricula should contain media education, which can include thinking skills such as assessing resources and handling emotions, and how to analyze internet content. These courses may help prevent young people from becoming addicted to social media [8].

Governments should implement more policies that require platforms to follow clear safety rules. These rules could limit features that keep users hooked, such as endless scrolling, autoplay, and random rewards. Governments and communities should also establish safe online spaces that are well-supervised and provide engaging learning or recreational activities. National reports suggest these kinds of spaces can help protect teens from harmful online content [3].

Future studies should use more longitudinal studies to track changes in online behavior and mental health over time and into adulthood, as done by Chen et al. [12]. Researchers should also use methods such as fMRI to investigate the impact of different platforms on brain functions. For example, comparing the effects of TikTok’s algorithm with WeChat’s messaging could reveal how neural patterns differ when using different kinds of platforms. Cultural differences also need more

attention. Doğan et al. 's model of platform risk should be tested in both individualist and collectivist societies to see how cultural values shape digital experiences [8]. Intervention studies should assess whether programs like cognitive training or better access to supervised online spaces work across different income levels and social backgrounds. When experimenting with the placebo effect, researchers should ensure the placebo is valid. Finally, they can develop and employ standards for quantifying platform features (e.g., notification frequency, scroll depth, personalization intensity) via Application Programming Interface (API) access or screen-capture analysis, enabling empirical testing of their links to both well-being outcomes and addictive behaviors identified in theoretical models.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows that the relationship between social media use, adolescent well-being, and addiction is complex and depends on context. When adolescents use social media actively and authentically, it can support their well-being by meeting psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It also offers valuable outlets for self-expression, especially for groups who face restrictions in offline settings. However, passive use and exposure to idealized content can lead to harmful social comparisons, negative emotions, and identity confusion. These effects are not uniform; they depend on factors such as gender, individual vulnerabilities (low self-control or negative thinking), cultural background, and how social media is used (platform, purpose, and content).

The risk of developing social media addiction also results from a combination of factors. First is individual vulnerabilities such as poor executive function, emotional dysregulation, and negative beliefs. Second is stressful environments like family conflict, harsh parenting, bullying, and academic pressure. Moreover, platforms include design features such as infinite scroll, personalized feeds, and reward-based algorithms. These elements often work together, turning social media into a coping mechanism and reinforcing compulsive use, especially for entertainment.

This complexity shows why simple claims that social media is either good or bad are inadequate. Effective responses to unhealthy social media use must address multiple levels. This paper provided suggestions regarding families, schools, and policy-making.

Future research should use long-term studies to explore causal links, include diverse cultural and demographic groups, and combine self-reports with objective data. Neuroscience can help reveal how different platforms affect brain function. Research must also assess which interventions are most effective in different settings.

By moving beyond simple narratives and recognizing the interaction between individuals, context, and technology, this study lays the groundwork for practical strategies. These strategies should aim to reduce screen time and help adolescents build healthier relationships with digital media, support parents and teachers, and encourage responsible platform design that maximizes benefits and minimizes harm.

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