



# **Social Media and Mental Health: An Analysis of Usage Patterns and Psychological Outcomes**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Social media has become a ubiquitous part of daily life, influencing how people communicate, connect, and perceive themselves and the world. This study examines the complex relationship between social media usage and mental health, focusing on the mental health impacts of highly visual platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as patterns of active and passive use. Findings indicate that prolonged and passive exposure to idealized content can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction, particularly among young adults and adolescents. In contrast, active engagement and platforms encouraging social interaction can foster support and positive mental health outcomes. The paper suggests strategies for healthier social media use, alongside potential recommendations for social media companies to mitigate mental health risks associated with their platforms.

Keywords: social media, mental health, body image, appearance comparison, adolescents, passive vs. active use, Instagram, TikTok, anxiety, depression

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## **1. Introduction**

The widespread adoption of social media platforms has transformed the ways individuals interact, particularly young adults and adolescents who constitute the majority of social media users. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, which prioritize visual content, allow users to curate idealized representations of themselves and their lives. While these platforms offer opportunities for self-expression and connection, they also expose users to relentless social comparison and sometimes unrealistic beauty standards. This paper aims to explore the psychological effects of social media use, with a particular focus on mental health outcomes like anxiety, depression, and body image issues.

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## **2. Literature Review**

### **Social Media Use and Mental Health**

Numerous studies have documented the association between social media use and various mental health outcomes. For instance, research from the American Psychological Association (APA) highlights that while social media provides avenues for social connection and support, it also increases the risk of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, especially when users engage passively

Prolonged exposure to idealized images and lifestyles on highly visual platforms has been shown to contribute to negative social comparisons, self-objectification, and low self-esteem. Adolescents and young adults appear particularly vulnerable to these impacts, given their developmental stage and heightened sensitivity to social validation.

### **Passive vs. Active Use of Social Media**

Research has suggested a distinction between passive and active social media use. Passive use, such as scrolling through feeds without interaction, is linked to negative emotional states due to social comparison and envy. Conversely, active engagement—such as posting, commenting, and direct messaging—has the potential to foster positive connections and improve mood. According to studies published in 2024, users who actively engage with supportive communities on social media report better mental health outcomes than those who passively consume content

### **Effects of Highly Visual Content on Body Image**

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which emphasize photos and videos, have been associated with body dissatisfaction, particularly among young women. The curated, idealized images frequently displayed on these platforms foster appearance-based comparisons that can exacerbate insecurities and contribute to disordered eating behaviors. Exposure to “thinspiration” or “fitspiration” content—images promoting thin or muscular body types—intensifies the risk of developing negative body image and low self-esteem. However, some studies suggest that exposure to “body positivity” and “body neutrality” content on social media can counteract these effects by promoting diverse and realistic body types, though this effect can be inconsistent

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## Methodology

The research utilizes a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis of survey data with qualitative interviews. The sample consists of 500 young adults aged 18-24, selected from a diverse demographic background. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire assessing their social media habits, including time spent on different platforms, type of content viewed, and level of interaction. Mental health outcomes were measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21) and a self-esteem scale. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to explore their personal experiences with social media.

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## 3. Results

### Time Spent and Mental Health Outcomes

The study found a positive correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and increased levels of anxiety and depression. Users who reported more than three hours of daily social media use scored significantly higher on the DASS-21 for anxiety and depressive symptoms. Those who primarily used highly visual platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, were more likely to report body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

### Passive vs. Active Engagement

Passive users, or those who primarily scroll through content without engaging, reported greater mental health difficulties compared to active users who regularly posted or interacted with friends. The qualitative data revealed that passive users felt overwhelmed by idealized portrayals of others' lives, which led to feelings of inadequacy. In contrast, active users, particularly those who received positive reinforcement from their social networks, reported greater self-worth and emotional well-being.

### Content Type and Body Image Concerns

Participants frequently exposed to "idealized" body content were more likely to report body image concerns. Conversely, those exposed to "body positive" or "body neutral" content experienced temporary improvements in self-acceptance. However, these effects were not consistent, as some participants reported feeling pressured even by "positive" content due to continued emphasis on appearance.

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## 4. Discussion

The results suggest that while social media can foster community and self-expression, it also presents significant risks to mental health, especially when usage is passive or focused on appearance-based content. The study supports the notion that social comparison, particularly with idealized images, can lead to anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of intentional and mindful social media use and indicate potential areas where social media platforms could implement features to promote mental health, such as encouraging active engagement or providing resources for mental well-being.

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## 5. Conclusion

This study underscores the complex relationship between social media and mental health. Highly visual platforms, when used passively, pose risks for mental health due to the likelihood of social comparison and exposure to idealized images. Conversely, active and intentional engagement on social media can yield positive social support and well-being. Future research should explore interventions that encourage healthier social media use and examine the long-term effects of various types of content on mental health.

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