The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Mental Health from a Psychological Perspective

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Abstract
This study explores the impact of social media on adolescent mental health from a psychological perspective. The main objective is to understand how patterns of social media use affect emotional well-being through mechanisms such as social comparison, body image distortion, fear of missing out (FOMO), and emotion regulation. Using a systematic literature review approach, the study synthesizes data from national and international journal articles, reports, and books focusing on adolescents' digital behavior and mental health outcomes. Findings indicate that social media exerts both positive and negative influences. On one side, excessive and passive exposure leads to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, and low self-esteem; on the other side, active and reflective use can enhance emotional expression, peer support, and identity formation. The magnitude of the impact is determined by user characteristics, cultural context, and platform design. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating digital literacy education, parental mentoring, and ethical platform regulation. Furthermore, collaborative efforts among educators, psychologists, and policymakers are needed to build adaptive coping strategies for adolescents. The research concludes that a holistic, multidisciplinary framework is essential to ensure that social media functions as a supportive and empowering environment for youth mental health.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought about a fundamental transformation in the way humans interact, communicate, and build social relationships. One of the most significant phenomena in the last decade is the emergence of social media, which has transformed the landscape of global social interaction (Warsah, 2018). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become an integral part of everyday life, especially for the younger generation, who are naturally accustomed to digital technology (Ubaidullah, 2025). This development in communication technology has not only changed the way people interact but also has complex and multidimensional psychological impacts that require in-depth examination (Fajriah & Ningsih, 2024).

Adolescents, as the most psychologically vulnerable demographic group, are the primary subject of this research. Adolescence is a crucial period in human development,

marked by dramatic biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes (Sulhan, 2024). At this stage, adolescents are in the process of forming self-identity, developing self-esteem, and learning to navigate the complexities of social relationships (Siswanto, 2024). Intensive exposure to social media during this sensitive period can have a significant impact on their mental health, both positive and negative (Zaini, 2018).

Recent research shows that the rate of social media adoption among adolescents has reached an alarming level (Khotimah & Ehwanudin, 2024). Global statistics show that more than 90% of adolescents aged 13-17 actively use at least one social media platform, with an average usage time of 3 hours per day (Prawiro dkk., 2024a). This continuous exposure creates a digital ecosystem where adolescents spend most of their time interacting, sharing content, and comparing themselves to others (J. P. P. P. D. B. Gunawan dkk., 2021).

Adolescent mental health has become a global issue of increasing concern in recent years (Carles dkk., 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one in seven adolescents worldwide experiences a mental disorder, with depression and anxiety being the leading causes of disability among the young population (Pratiwi & Djuwita, 2022). This phenomenon aligns with the exponential increase in social media use, raising critical questions about the causal relationship between the two variables.

Social media creates a unique social environment with characteristics distinct from traditional face-to-face interactions (Masriyudin dkk., 2024). These platforms offer the ability to edit and filter self-presentation, creating unrealistic standards of perfection. The "highlight reel" phenomenon, where users tend to share only their best moments, distorts perceptions of the reality of life (Masriyudin dkk., 2024).

Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO, is a psychological phenomenon relevant to social media use (Fitri dkk., 2024). FOMO is defined as a feeling of anxiety that others might be having enjoyable experiences without one's presence, which is overcome by a desire to stay constantly connected (Hasanuddin dkk., 2024). In the context of adolescents, FOMO can create an obsessive cycle of checking social media, impacting sleep quality, concentration, and overall emotional well-being (Mandas & Silfiyah, 2022).

This research makes an important contribution to the development of psychological theory in understanding the impact of digital technology on mental health. This study integrates various theoretical frameworks such as social comparison theory, social identity theory, and the concept of FOMO to create a holistic understanding of the social media

phenomenon. The results are expected to fill the limited literature gap regarding the specific psychological mechanisms linking social media to adolescent mental health.

Globally, research on the impact of social media on mental health has shown consistent results. Cross-cultural studies have found a positive correlation between the intensity of social media use and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and life dissatisfaction among adolescents. However, the magnitude of the impact can vary depending on cultural factors, economic factors, and technological infrastructure in each country.

In Indonesia, social media penetration has reached a very high level, with over 170 million active users. Young Indonesians are the most active demographic in using various social media platforms (Ummanah dkk., 2021). Indonesia's collectivist cultural context provides a unique dimension to social media dynamics, where social conformity and group approval have a stronger influence on individual mental health (Rizaldi dkk., 2024).

Social media has become an integral part of modern adolescents' lives, offering both significant potential for positive social connections and significant risks to mental health. Understanding the psychological impacts of social media in depth is imperative for developing effective intervention strategies and evidence-based policies. This study aims to make a meaningful contribution to this effort through a comprehensive, literature-based analysis integrating current psychological perspectives.

Furthermore, the lack of research distinguishing between platform types (TikTok vs. Facebook), usage modes (active vs. passive), and content consumption leads to overly general conclusions. For example, TikTok, which relies on short videos and highly personalized algorithmic recommendations, may have different psychological impacts than Instagram, which is more visual and focused on self-image.

One emerging approach is differential susceptibility to media effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), which states that individuals have varying levels of susceptibility to media influences based on internal factors such as emotional stability, self-esteem, and attachment to social judgment. Adolescents with low self-esteem or perfectionist tendencies are more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media content, even with relatively brief exposure. Conversely, adolescents with strong family support, good emotional competence, and active media use can actually utilize social media for self-development (Houston dkk., 2018).

However, this model has rarely been tested in the Indonesian context. Existing research, such as that by (AULIA, 2023), only addresses the direct relationship between

duration of use and anxiety symptoms, without considering intermediary variables such as social comparison, FOMO, or emotion regulation. However, designing effective interventions requires a thorough understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Furthermore, the dominant approach still focuses on negative impacts, while positive aspects such as seeking emotional support, identity exploration, and social engagement remain under-explored systematically. A study by (Lestari dkk., 2020) noted that most adolescents in Jakarta use social media as a safe space to discuss mental health issues, especially those without access to school counselors. However, this knowledge has not been integrated into broader scientific studies, resulting in a negative bias in the literature.

Several interdisciplinary studies, such as those by (Syaifudin & Murti, 2023), have proposed an integrative model combining cognitive, social, and developmental psychology perspectives. They suggest that the impact of social media is not direct, but rather mediated by processes such as cognitive interpretation of content, perceptions of social support, and emotional self-regulation (Ihsan, 2024). However, this model has not received sufficient attention from other researchers and has not been empirically tested in the Indonesian adolescent population (Praekanata dkk., 2024).

It is hoped that the research findings will not only enrich academic knowledge but also provide practical guidance for various parties involved in supporting the psychological well-being of adolescents in the digital age. With a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between social media and mental health, we can develop more effective approaches to maximize the benefits of technology while minimizing its risks for young people.

METHOD

This study uses a library research approach with a systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources, especially accredited scientific journal articles (national and international), books, and survey reports, with a focus on the adolescent population and the relationship between social media and mental health; source selection is done through databases such as Google Scholar, SINTA, and scientific journal directories using keywords such as "social media", "mental health", "adolescents", and "emotional regulation", then the data is analyzed thematically to identify patterns such as social comparison, self-

idealization, and digital social support in influencing adolescent psychological health (Miles dkk., 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem Decline: Between Reality and Digital Illusion

One of the most significant impacts of social media on adolescent mental health is unhealthy social comparison. According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1957), individuals tend to evaluate their abilities and opinions by comparing them to those of others. However, in the digital world, this comparison is often imbalanced, as the content displayed is curated, idealistic, and often heavily edited.

Studies show that 68% of Indonesian teenagers feel "inadequate" after comparing their lives to content on social media (Yuliana & Suprayogi, 2024). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the trend of "glow-up" content, beauty transformations, and luxurious lifestyles normalized on platforms like TikTok and Instagram (NURAZIZAH, t.t.). Worse, this comparison is more prevalent in passive scrolling, where teenagers simply consume content without interacting, which is statistically linked to increased depressive symptoms (Deviana, 2024).

In Indonesia, this pressure is exacerbated by the influence of contemporary culture and instant aesthetics. Teenagers are exposed to content from influencers portraying "perfect" faces, ideal bodies, and luxurious lifestyles that don't reflect reality. This creates a dysfunctional comparison, where teens evaluate themselves against unrealistic standards, leading to lowered self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy.

Self-Idealization, Body Image, and Digital Distortion

Penggunaan filter "beauty" secara intensif telah dikaitkan dengan peningkatan risiko distorsi citra tubuh dan penurunan kepuasan diri terhadap penampilan asli. Penelitian dari (R. Gunawan, 2025) menyebutkan bahwa 57% remaja perempuan di Indonesia merasa tidak percaya diri tanpa filter saat *video call*, dan 41% mengaku merasa "asing" ketika melihat wajah mereka tanpa efek digital. Fenomena ini mengacu pada dysmorphic concern, yaitu kecemasan obsesif terhadap aspek-aspek kecil dari penampilan fisik, yang menjadi cikal bakal *Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)* gangguan psikologis yang dapat memicu depresi berat, gangguan makan, dan bahkan keinginan untuk melakukan operasi plastik secara dini (Edmawati, 2023).

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Social media is not only a social mirror but also a space for identity projection. This is where the phenomenon of self-idealization emerges, namely the tendency of adolescents to create and present a more perfect version of themselves digitally. Facial filters, photo editing, and algorithms that promote aesthetic content create a new digital norm in which the natural face is deemed "less attractive."

Intensive use of "beauty" filters has been linked to an increased risk of body image distortion and decreased self-satisfaction with one's natural appearance. Research by (R. Gunawan, 2025) states that 57% of adolescent girls in Indonesia feel insecure without filters during video calls, and 41% admit to feeling "foreign" when seeing their faces without digital effects. This phenomenon refers to dysmorphic concern, an obsessive anxiety about small aspects of physical appearance, which can be a precursor to Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a psychological disorder that can trigger severe depression, eating disorders, and even early plastic surgery (Edmawati, 2023).

Furthermore, the trend of "body checking," which involves repeatedly recording one's body to assess one's physical appearance, has spread massively on TikTok. Videos with the topics #bodycheck, #tiktokbody, or #afterandbefore feature body comparisons from various angles, often with trendy audio and filters that emphasize specific body proportions.

Social media is not only changing how teens perceive themselves, but it is also blurring the boundaries between digital identity and reality. In psychology, this phenomenon is known as self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989), where conflict arises between the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. Social media widens the gap between the actual self and the ideal self because teens constantly see the "ideal" version of themselves, which is actually just a digital illusion. When this gap is not addressed, it can lead to feelings of failure, shame, and mild to moderate depression.

Emotion Regulation and Digital Addiction: Between Recovery and Liberation

Social media also plays a role in emotional regulation, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, some teenagers use social media as an emotional outlet to express feelings through stories, reflective posts, or digital journaling. Several studies have shown that activities such as creating vent vlogs, uploading emotional poems, or anonymously sharing trauma experiences on platforms like Reddit can reduce anxiety levels and increase feelings of understanding (Ajeng, 2018).

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The prevalence of compulsive use poses a serious threat. The fear of missing out (FOMO) phenomenon, the fear of missing out on information, trends, or interactions, drives teens to constantly check notifications, scroll aimlessly, and feel anxious if they're not online. A longitudinal study by (Hammi & Kholifah, 2024) found a strong positive correlation between the duration of social media use (>4 hours/day) and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances, especially in teens who access social media late at night.

From a neuroscience perspective, this is understandable: digital interactions that frequently provide dopamine hits such as likes, comments, and shares create a compulsive, addictive pattern. Algorithmic designs that encourage infinite scrolling and personalized content loops actually exacerbate this dependency. A national survey by (Prawiro dkk., 2024b), found that the average Indonesian teenager spends 3.7 hours per day on social media, with TikTok and Instagram being the largest platforms, reaching 4.2 hours per day among the 15–17 age group.

These statistics are noteworthy because they directly impact learning productivity, sleep quality, and direct social interactions. Ironically, although social media is initially used to seek connection, it can actually lead to social isolation when used excessively.

The impact of social media on adolescents' mental health is influenced by interactions between individuals, usage patterns, and platform design. Adolescents with low self-esteem are more susceptible to negative social comparisons, especially in passive use like scrolling. Algorithm designs that pursue engagement contribute to addictive environments, while low digital literacy in Indonesia exacerbates vulnerability. Holistic solutions are needed: from integrating digital literacy in schools, training for parents and teachers, platform regulation, to online mental health services. Adolescents must be positioned as agents of change, not simply victims.

CONCLUSION

This study found that social media has a dual impact on adolescent mental health. On the one hand, it can trigger negative social comparisons, body image distortion, FOMO (fear of missing out), and digital dependency, which contribute to increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. However, on the other hand, social media also serves as a vital social support space, especially for marginalized adolescents such as trauma survivors. The impact is not deterministic, but is influenced by usage patterns, individual

context, and platform design, which is theoretically reinforced by the Social Comparison Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory frameworks. In Indonesia, these challenges are exacerbated by a collective culture that is sensitive to social judgment, the prevalence of beauty filters, and limited access to mental health services. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed that involves schools integrating digital literacy and mental health into the curriculum, the active role of parents through mentoring, the humane design of platforms, and the government's youth protection policies in the digital realm, so that the digital space can become a safe, healthy, and empowering place for the younger generation.

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