



The relationship between social media and anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Social media usage has become ubiquitous, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter shaping how individuals interact, communicate, and perceive themselves and others. However, the relationship between social media and anxiety is complex and multifaceted. This paper provides an extensive review of the mechanisms linking social media to anxiety, including social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying, and sleep disturbances. Additionally, demographic differences in social media usage and anxiety outcomes, such as age, gender, and cultural background, are explored. The impact of different types of social media platforms, including visual vs. text-based platforms, on anxiety levels is examined. Despite the negative associations, social media also offers positive aspects, such as social support, access to mental health resources, and positive interactions that can reduce anxiety. Quantitative and qualitative research findings on social media usage and anxiety levels are reviewed, highlighting the bidirectional relationship between social media addiction and anxiety. Interventions and coping strategies, such as digital detox, mindfulness, and parental education, are discussed, along with the role of policy and regulation in managing the negative impacts of social media. Finally, future directions in research, including emerging trends in social media, technological advancements, and ethical considerations, are outlined to guide future studies and interventions aimed at promoting digital well-being.

Keywords: Social media, anxiety, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, cyberbullying, demographics, fear of missing out (FOMO).

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. These platforms facilitate communication, content sharing, and interaction across vast distances, allowing users to stay connected with friends, family, and communities. Popular platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and LinkedIn, among others [1]. The prevalence of social media usage varies significantly across different age groups. Adolescents and Young Adults (13-29 years) exhibit the highest engagement with social media, with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat being particularly popular among teenagers and young adults. Adults (30-49 years) also use social media extensively, primarily for networking, professional purposes, and staying informed about current events. Platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn are more commonly used among this demographic. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health conditions, characterized by excessive fear or worry that can significantly impair daily functioning. There are several types of anxiety disorders, including Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) [2], Panic Disorder, Phobias, and Separation Anxiety Disorder. Common symptoms of anxiety disorders include emotional symptoms such as persistent worry, physical symptoms like increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, dizziness, fatigue, headaches, and gastrointestinal issues, and behavioral symptoms like avoidance of anxiety-inducing situations, difficulty concentrating, restlessness, and sleep disturbances [3]. The relationship between social media usage and anxiety is complex and multifaceted. Social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying and online harassment, sleep disturbances, information overload, and addictive use patterns are some mechanisms that can contribute to anxiety levels. Social comparison can result in feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and increased anxiety. FOMO can lead to a sense of missing out on experiences, while cyberbullying and online harassment can cause stress, fear, and anxiety. Sleep disturbances can occur due to excessive use of social media before bedtime, while information overload can overwhelm users and contribute to anxiety [4].

Mechanisms Linking Social Media to Anxiety

Social media has become a significant part of modern life, shaping how individuals interact, communicate, and perceive themselves and others. However, it can also negatively impact mental health, particularly regarding anxiety. Social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying and online harassment, and disruptions in sleep patterns are some mechanisms that contribute to anxiety. Social comparison can lead to feelings of

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inadequacy, low self-esteem, and heightened anxiety. FOMO, on the other hand, is fueled by the fear of being left out, the desire to stay connected, and the anticipation of exciting events happening elsewhere [5]. Addressing FOMO involves promoting mindfulness and focusing on the present moment rather than seeking validation or reassurance from social media. Cyberbullying and online harassment are sources of anxiety, as they involve the use of digital platforms to intimidate, threaten, or harass others. These behaviors can have severe consequences for mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness. Addressing cyberbullying requires a multi-faceted approach involving education, prevention, and intervention. Lastly, social media can disrupt sleep patterns, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Excessive use of social media before bedtime can interfere with sleep quality and duration, leading to sleep disturbances and resultant anxiety. Addressing sleep disturbances involves promoting healthy sleep hygiene practices, limiting screen time before bedtime, creating a relaxing bedtime routine, and optimizing the sleep environment for restful sleep.

Demographic Differences

Social media's impact on anxiety varies across different demographic groups, including age, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Adolescents are the most frequent users of social media platforms, with platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok being particularly popular. However, excessive use has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and social isolation in this age group. Adults also use social media for networking, professional development, and staying connected with friends and family, but excessive use or negative experiences can still contribute to anxiety [6]. To address age-related differences in social media-induced anxiety, tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs and concerns of each age group is essential. For adolescents, promoting digital literacy, healthy coping strategies, and supportive peer networks can help mitigate the negative impact of social media on mental health. For adults, promoting mindfulness, setting boundaries around social media use, and seeking social support can be beneficial in managing anxiety related to social media. Gender differences also play a role in social media usage patterns and anxiety outcomes. Women tend to use social media more frequently than men, engaging in activities such as sharing personal information, connecting with others, and seeking social support. Anxiety outcomes may stem from differences in online behaviors, social comparison tendencies, and susceptibility to cyberbullying. Addressing gender differences involves recognizing the unique challenges and stressors faced by individuals of different genders, promoting positive body image, fostering supportive online communities, and implementing policies to combat cyberbullying and harassment. Addressing cultural and regional variations in social media-induced anxiety requires a culturally sensitive and contextually relevant approach. Collaborating with local community leaders, mental health professionals, and policymakers can help tailor interventions to address the unique needs and concerns of diverse cultural and regional populations.

Types of Social Media Platforms and Their Impact

Social media platforms have varying features, content types, and user interactions, which can impact anxiety levels. Instagram, a visually oriented platform, is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression due to its emphasis on appearance and lifestyle. Facebook, a multifaceted platform, facilitates social connections but also presents opportunities for social comparison and exposure to negative news and content. Studies have found mixed results regarding Facebook's impact on anxiety, with some suggesting passive consumption may be linked to increased anxiety while active engagement and social support may have positive effects on mental health.

Twitter, a microblogging platform, is fast-paced and can be overwhelming for some users, leading to anxiety and stress. Its focus on trending topics and real-time updates may contribute to fear of missing out (FOMO) and heightened arousal. TikTok, a video-sharing platform, fosters comparison and competition among users striving for likes, views, and followers, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt [7].

Visual social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat prioritize images and videos as the primary means of communication, often presenting unrealistic representations of individuals' lives. This focus on appearance, lifestyle, and material possessions can lead to feelings of insecurity, envy, and comparison, leading to heightened anxiety levels. Text-based social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit rely on written content for communication and interaction, but they also present challenges related to misinformation, online harassment, and cyberbullying. Understanding the differences in anxiety levels associated with different social media platforms is crucial for individuals, parents, educators, and mental health professionals. Promoting digital literacy, fostering healthy online habits, and cultivating supportive offline relationships are essential steps in managing social media-induced anxiety effectively.

Positive Aspects of Social Media

Social media has both positive and negative effects on mental health. It offers opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences, interests, and challenges, providing a sense of belonging and understanding. Online peer support groups and forums allow individuals with anxiety to share their stories, struggles, and coping strategies, fostering empathy, validation, and solidarity. Anonymous support is also available on social media platforms, allowing users to engage anonymously without fear of judgment or disclosure of their identity. This global reach expands the pool of potential supporters and resources, increasing the

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likelihood of finding relevant information and guidance [8]. Social media platforms serve as valuable repositories of mental health information, resources, and support services, empowering individuals to educate themselves about anxiety and access professional assistance when needed. Mental health organizations, advocacy groups, and professionals use social media to disseminate accurate information, raise awareness about anxiety disorders, and share evidence-based strategies for managing symptoms. Crisis intervention services and suicide prevention resources are available on many social media platforms, providing immediate support and guidance to individuals experiencing acute anxiety or crisis situations. Online therapy services have made mental health support more accessible and convenient for individuals with anxiety. Positive interactions on social media can promote well-being and alleviate anxiety symptoms. Engaging in meaningful interactions with friends, family, and supportive communities can foster feelings of connectedness, belonging, and social support, which are essential protective factors against anxiety and depression. Sharing accomplishments and moments of joy with social networks can enhance self-worth, self-confidence, and resilience, counteracting negative thoughts and self-doubt associated with anxiety.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research Findings

Quantitative research studies have found a positive correlation between social media usage and anxiety levels, with higher levels of anxiety reported among those who spend more time on social media platforms. Excessive use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat has been linked to heightened anxiety symptoms, particularly among young adults and adolescents. Social comparison, a common behavior facilitated by social media, has been identified as a significant predictor of anxiety. Cyberbullying and online harassment have been found to have detrimental effects on mental health, including anxiety symptoms. Sleep disturbances have been linked to increased anxiety levels and daytime impairment. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, provide valuable insights into users' lived experiences with social media and anxiety. These insights include the pressure to present a polished image, fear of missing out (FOMO), negative social comparisons, and the positive role of online communities in providing support, empathy, and validation to individuals struggling with anxiety [9]. Online support groups, forums, and peer-led initiatives offer a sense of belonging and camaraderie that can alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness associated with anxiety disorders. Overall, understanding the complex interplay between social media usage and anxiety is crucial for effective mental health interventions.

Social Media Addiction and Anxiety

Social media addiction is a compulsive and excessive engagement with social networking platforms that disrupts daily functioning, relationships, and mental well-being. It shares similarities with other behavioral addictions like gambling or internet gaming disorder. Symptoms of social media addiction include preoccupation with social media, loss of control, withdrawal symptoms, neglect of responsibilities, escaping reality, straining personal relationships, and negative consequences such as sleep disturbances, decreased productivity, academic or work-related problems, financial difficulties, and mental health issues like anxiety and depression. The relationship between social media addiction and anxiety is bidirectional, with each phenomenon exacerbated in a cyclical manner. Excessive social media use as a coping mechanism for anxiety can lead to increased feelings of anxiety and dependency on online validation and feedback. The negative impact of social media addiction on anxiety levels can be exacerbated by the constant exposure to curated images, idealized lifestyles, and comparison with others, fueling feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and fear of missing out (FOMO). The addictive nature of social media platforms can disrupt stress response systems and exacerbate physiological arousal, leading to chronic anxiety [10]. Social media addiction may also interfere with healthy coping mechanisms for managing anxiety, such as exercise, relaxation techniques, or face-to-face social interactions. As addicted individuals become increasingly reliant on online validation and instant gratification, they may neglect offline activities that promote mental well-being and resilience, further exacerbating anxiety symptoms.

Interventions and Coping Strategies

Digital detox is a period of intentional disconnect from digital devices and online activities, aiming to reduce screen time, limit exposure to digital stimuli, and cultivate healthier habits around technology use. It has gained popularity as a strategy for managing technology-related stress and anxiety. Research suggests that taking breaks from digital devices can have several benefits for mental well-being, including reduced anxiety levels, improved sleep quality, enhanced focus and concentration, and greater overall life satisfaction. To manage social media-induced anxiety, individuals can use mindfulness practices such as meditation, deep breathing exercises, body scans, and mindful movement. Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies (CBT) can be used to identify and challenge maladaptive thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors associated with anxiety. In the context of social media-induced anxiety, CBT interventions may involve cognitive restructuring, exposure therapy, behavioral activation, and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Parental and educational approaches can help children and adolescents navigate social media and manage anxiety effectively. Parents can foster open communication, set boundaries, role model healthy technology habits, monitor and supervise online activities, and promote offline connections [3, 4]. Schools and educators can also promote digital literacy, online safety, and mental health

awareness among children and adolescents. Educational strategies include integrating digital citizenship education into school curricula, offering media literacy programs, incorporating social-emotional learning programs, and implementing bullying prevention initiatives.

Policy and Regulation

Policy interventions are crucial in managing the negative impacts of social media on mental health, including anxiety. Governments, regulatory bodies, and policymakers play a crucial role in developing and implementing policies that protect individuals from harmful content, promote responsible platform behavior, and ensure the ethical use of personal data. Key areas of policy interventions include content moderation, privacy protections, digital literacy education, and transparency and accountability. Social media platform regulations focus on setting guidelines and standards for content moderation, user behavior, and platform design to mitigate the negative effects of social media on mental health. Examples of regulations include community guidelines, algorithmic transparency, age restrictions, and mental health resources [5]. Ethical considerations in social media design to promote mental well-being include user empowerment, inclusive design, content sensitivity, and transparency and accountability. Platforms should empower users to control their online experiences, manage their privacy settings, and make informed choices about their digital interactions. Inclusive design ensures platforms are accessible and inclusive for users of all abilities, backgrounds, and identities. Content sensitivity prioritizes the well-being of vulnerable users, and transparency and accountability build trust and accountability.

Future Directions

Emerging Trends in Social Media and Their Potential Impact on Anxiety

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): The integration of VR and AR technologies into social media platforms presents exciting opportunities for immersive experiences and interactive content. While these technologies offer novel ways to connect and engage with others, they also raise concerns about increased escapism, social isolation, and dissociation, which may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and detachment from reality.

Social Commerce and Influencer Culture: The rise of social commerce platforms and influencer marketing strategies has transformed social media into a marketplace where users can discover, purchase, and promote products seamlessly. However, the emphasis on materialism, comparison, and curated lifestyles promoted by influencers can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and social pressure, leading to heightened anxiety and dissatisfaction among users.

Live Streaming and Real-Time Interaction: The popularity of live streaming features on social media platforms enables real-time interaction and engagement with audiences. While live streaming offers opportunities for authenticity and spontaneity, it also poses risks of cyberbullying, negative feedback, and performance anxiety for content creators. Additionally, the pressure to maintain a constant online presence and respond immediately to notifications can increase stress and anxiety levels among users.

Privacy and Data Security Concerns: Growing concerns about privacy breaches, data misuse, and online surveillance have prompted calls for greater transparency and accountability from social media companies. Future trends may include stricter regulations, decentralized platforms, and privacy-enhancing technologies aimed at restoring user trust and protecting personal data. However, uncertainty and mistrust surrounding data practices could contribute to heightened anxiety and digital fatigue among users.

Technological Advancements and Their Implications for Mental Health

1. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning: Advancements in AI and machine learning algorithms hold promise for personalized mental health interventions, such as chatbots, virtual therapists, and predictive analytics tools. These technologies can analyze user data, detect patterns, and deliver tailored interventions or support resources based on individual needs and preferences. However, concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the depersonalization of care remain critical considerations in the development and deployment of AI-driven mental health solutions.

2. Wearable Technology and Biofeedback Devices: Wearable devices equipped with biometric sensors, such as smartwatches and fitness trackers, offer real-time monitoring of physiological indicators like heart rate, sleep patterns, and stress levels. Integrating biofeedback data with social media platforms could enable users to track and manage their mental well-being more effectively. However, the constant monitoring of health metrics and the gamification of self-improvement goals may contribute to obsessive behaviors and heightened anxiety about performance and self-image.

3. Digital Therapeutics and Teletherapy Services: The proliferation of digital therapeutics platforms and teletherapy services provides accessible and convenient options for mental health support and treatment. These platforms offer a range of interventions, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based practices, and peer support groups, delivered through online sessions or mobile applications. While digital therapeutics offer scalability and cost-effectiveness, concerns about treatment efficacy, therapist qualifications, and data privacy require careful consideration in the development and regulation of these services.

4. Virtual Communities and Peer Support Networks: The emergence of virtual communities and peer support networks on social media platforms offers opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges. These online communities provide a sense of belonging, validation, and solidarity, which can be especially beneficial for individuals facing mental health issues like anxiety. However, the quality and safety of peer support spaces, including moderation, peer-to-peer dynamics, and information accuracy, warrant ongoing attention to ensure they remain supportive and inclusive environments for all participants.

Research Gaps and Future Studies Needed to Understand the Relationship Better

1. Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in social media usage patterns, mental health outcomes, and anxiety symptoms over time. Long-term research can provide insights into the cumulative effects of social media exposure, identify risk factors for anxiety development, and inform early intervention strategies.

2. Cross-Cultural Research: Exploring cultural variations in social media usage, coping mechanisms, and anxiety prevalence to understand how cultural norms, values, and social contexts influence individuals' experiences and responses to online interactions. Cross-cultural research can inform culturally sensitive interventions and support strategies tailored to diverse populations.

3. Qualitative Research: Conducting qualitative research to explore users' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies related to social media use and anxiety. Qualitative studies can uncover nuanced insights into the subjective meaning of social media interactions, the role of online communities in mental health support, and users' preferences for intervention approaches.

4. Intervention Studies: Designing and evaluating innovative interventions and coping strategies aimed at mitigating social media-induced anxiety and promoting digital well-being. Intervention studies can test the effectiveness of mindfulness-based practices, digital detox programs, peer support interventions, and educational initiatives in reducing anxiety symptoms and improving mental health outcomes among social media users.

5. Ethical Considerations: Addressing ethical considerations related to research design, data collection, and participant consent in studies examining the relationship between social media and anxiety. Researchers should prioritize participant privacy, informed consent, and data confidentiality to uphold ethical standards and protect participants' rights and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between social media and anxiety is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and sleep disturbances. While social media offers opportunities for connection, it also presents challenges that can contribute to anxiety levels, particularly among vulnerable populations. Understanding demographic differences, such as age, gender, and cultural background, is essential for tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs of diverse groups. Despite the negative associations, social media also offers positive aspects, including social support and access to mental health resources, which can mitigate anxiety symptoms. However, addressing social media addiction and implementing effective interventions and coping strategies are critical for managing anxiety in the digital age. Policy and regulation play a vital role in promoting responsible platform behavior and protecting individuals from harmful content and practices. Future research directions, including longitudinal studies, cross-cultural research, and intervention studies, are needed to further understand the relationship between social media and anxiety and develop evidence-based strategies to promote digital well-being. By addressing these challenges and opportunities, we can harness the potential of social media to foster positive mental health outcomes and support individuals in navigating the digital landscape effectively.

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