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EVALUATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOUR AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UK AND PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Social media has become an integral component of young adults' everyday lives, influencing communication, interpersonal relationships, identity development, information consumption and emotional experiences. Although digital platforms provide opportunities for social support, self-expression and social participation, their use may also be associated with problematic engagement, social comparison, fear of missing out, anxiety, depression and sleep disturbances. This article evaluates the relationship between digital behaviour and psychological wellbeing by critically examining empirical studies, systematic reviews and meta-analytical evidence. Particular attention is given to differences between general social media use and problematic engagement. Previous research involving 9,269 participants across 18 studies identified significant associations between problematic social media use and depression (r=.273), anxiety (r=.348) and stress (r=.313). A further systematic review by Ahmed et al. (2024), involving 1,169,396 individuals across 182 studies, demonstrated that the relationship between social media use, mental health and sleep varies according to the nature of engagement. This article develops a proposed mixed-methods framework to examine digital behaviour, psychological mechanisms and wellbeing outcomes among young adults. Published statistical findings are presented as secondary evidence rather than original research results. The analysis argues that the psychological implications of social media cannot be adequately explained through screen time alone. Instead, the quality, purpose and consequences of digital engagement should be considered when evaluating psychological wellbeing. The article provides an integrated framework for understanding everyday digital practices and developing evidence-informed approaches to healthier social media participation.

Introduction

The expansion of digital communication technologies has substantially transformed how individuals establish relationships, exchange information and participate in everyday social activities. Social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and X, have become important environments for interpersonal communication, entertainment, education and personal expression. For young adults, these platforms are not simply occasional communication tools; they are increasingly integrated into ordinary routines, including studying, working, maintaining friendships and

managing leisure activities. Their growing influence has consequently raised important questions about the relationship between digital engagement and psychological wellbeing.

Young adulthood represents an important developmental period characterised by identity formation, increasing independence, educational and occupational transitions and changing social relationships. During this stage, individuals may become particularly attentive to social acceptance, appearance, personal achievements and interpersonal belonging. Social media provides opportunities to explore these dimensions through communication, self-presentation and interaction with different online communities. However, continuous exposure to other people's achievements, relationships and carefully selected representations of everyday life may also influence self-evaluation and emotional experiences (Nesi, 2020).

The increasing adoption of social media among younger populations demonstrates the importance of understanding these experiences. According to Pew Research Center (2026), 95% of US adults aged 18–29 reported using YouTube, 79% reported using Instagram and 65% reported using TikTok. These figures demonstrate the substantial reach of digital platforms among younger adults, although they should not be interpreted as representative of all countries or cultural populations.

The psychological consequences of social media engagement remain contested. Some research identifies associations with depression, anxiety, loneliness and reduced wellbeing, whereas other studies emphasise communication, social support and positive participation. Orben and Przybylski (2019), using three large datasets involving 355,358 adolescents, found that digital technology use explained at most 0.4% of the variation in wellbeing. Their findings challenged assumptions that digital engagement necessarily produces substantial psychological harm. Similarly, Appel et al. (2020) argued that the relationship between social media and psychological wellbeing requires consideration of different activities, individual characteristics and the quality of online experiences.

Nevertheless, problematic social media use has emerged as an important area of investigation. Unlike ordinary platform participation, problematic engagement involves impaired control, persistent preoccupation and continued use despite negative consequences. Shannon et al. (2022) identified statistically significant associations between problematic social media use and depression, anxiety and stress. Ahmed et al. (2024) further demonstrated that general social media use and problematic engagement have different relationships with mental health and sleep.

The central research problem is therefore not simply whether young adults use social media excessively, but how different digital behaviours influence their everyday psychological experiences. Existing studies frequently investigate individual outcomes without adequately integrating engagement patterns, psychological motivations, social comparison, emotional regulation and social connectedness.

This article evaluates the relationship between digital behaviour and psychological wellbeing among young adults by synthesising previous empirical findings, presenting published statistical evidence and developing a proposed research framework. It aims to examine how active and passive engagement, problematic use and online social experiences may be associated with psychological wellbeing. Its central argument is that digital behaviour should be evaluated through the quality, purpose and consequences of engagement rather than screen time alone.

Literature Review

Social media represents a complex digital environment in which individuals communicate, share personal information, observe others and develop social identities. Its psychological implications depend on the activities individuals undertake, their motivations for using platforms and the relationships they maintain online. Consequently, researchers increasingly distinguish between general engagement, active participation, passive browsing and problematic social media use.

Active engagement includes posting, commenting, messaging and participating in online communities. These activities may strengthen interpersonal relationships and

provide opportunities for social support. Passive engagement, in contrast, involves observing other people's content without substantial interaction. This distinction is important because browsing idealised representations of other people's lives may encourage unfavourable social comparisons. Nevertheless, neither form of engagement produces identical outcomes for every individual. Bayer et al. (2020) explained that social media operates through different technological features, communication environments and social processes, which can influence users in different ways.

Social comparison theory provides an important explanation for these experiences. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities through comparisons with other people. Within digital environments, these comparisons may involve physical appearance, educational achievements, relationships, employment and lifestyle. Upward comparisons may reduce self-satisfaction when individuals perceive others as more successful or attractive. Conversely, exposure to other people's achievements may provide inspiration and motivation. Appel et al. (2020) demonstrated the importance of considering social comparison and other psychological processes when interpreting the relationship between social networking sites and wellbeing.

Fear of missing out represents another relevant psychological mechanism. It involves concern that others are participating in rewarding experiences from which an individual is absent. Continuous access to information about social activities may encourage repeated checking and difficulty disengaging from digital platforms. Przybylski et al. (2013) developed and evaluated a measure of fear of missing out and identified relationships between this psychological experience, lower mood, reduced life satisfaction and increased social media engagement. Such findings suggest that the motivation to remain continuously connected may be relevant to problematic digital behaviour.

Problematic social media use is different from frequent platform participation. It refers to patterns characterised by impaired control, persistent preoccupation and continued engagement despite negative consequences. Shannon et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis involving 18 studies and 9,269 participants. Their findings demonstrated moderate positive associations between problematic social media use and depression, anxiety and stress. These results indicate that the behavioural characteristics of engagement deserve separate consideration from general platform exposure.

The relationship between social media and sleep is also important. Late-night browsing, repeated notifications and prolonged engagement may interfere with normal sleep routines. However, evidence suggests that general social media use does not consistently demonstrate the same relationship with sleep problems as problematic use. Ahmed et al. (2024) found that problematic social media use was positively associated with sleep problems, whereas general use did not demonstrate a statistically significant pooled association with sleep problems. This distinction suggests that behavioural regulation and disruption of everyday routines may be more relevant than simply accessing social media.

Social media can also provide positive psychological experiences. Online communities may offer companionship, emotional support, opportunities for self-expression and access to information. For young adults experiencing geographical separation or limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction, these activities may contribute to perceived belonging. Nesi (2020) emphasised that digital environments create both challenges and opportunities for youth mental health. Similarly, Verduyn et al. (2017) highlighted that social networking sites can influence subjective wellbeing through different psychological and interpersonal processes. Therefore, social media should not be presented as an inherently harmful influence.

The everyday nature of digital engagement provides another important perspective. Bengtsson and Johansson (2022) conducted individual and small-group interviews with 67 young adults aged 18–26 in Sweden. Their analysis identified three important meanings of social media in everyday life: filling empty periods, transforming everyday routines and managing mood. These findings demonstrate that digital engagement is embedded in ordinary activities and emotional experiences rather than being limited to deliberate communication.

Longitudinal research also provides important evidence. Coyne et al. (2020) examined social media use and mental health over eight years, demonstrating the importance of investigating digital behaviour across time rather than relying exclusively on single measurements. Similarly, Kelly et al. (2019), using data from 10,904 adolescents in the UK Millennium Cohort Study, identified relationships between social media engagement and depressive symptoms through potential pathways involving sleep, online harassment, self-esteem and body image. Although these studies involve younger populations, their findings provide relevant evidence concerning the psychological mechanisms that may also require investigation during young adulthood.

The broader research literature does not establish a single universal relationship between social media and psychological wellbeing. Keles et al. (2020) identified associations between social media use and depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents, while Meier and Reinecke (2021) demonstrated that the relationship between computer-mediated communication and mental health varies according to conceptual definitions and measurement approaches. Valkenburg et al. (2022) similarly highlighted individual differences in the relationship between social media and mental health.

The specific research gap addressed in this article concerns the limited integration of everyday digital practices, psychological motivations, positive and negative online experiences and multidimensional wellbeing within a single research framework. Understanding these dimensions together may provide a more realistic explanation of how social media engagement relates to young adults' psychological experiences.

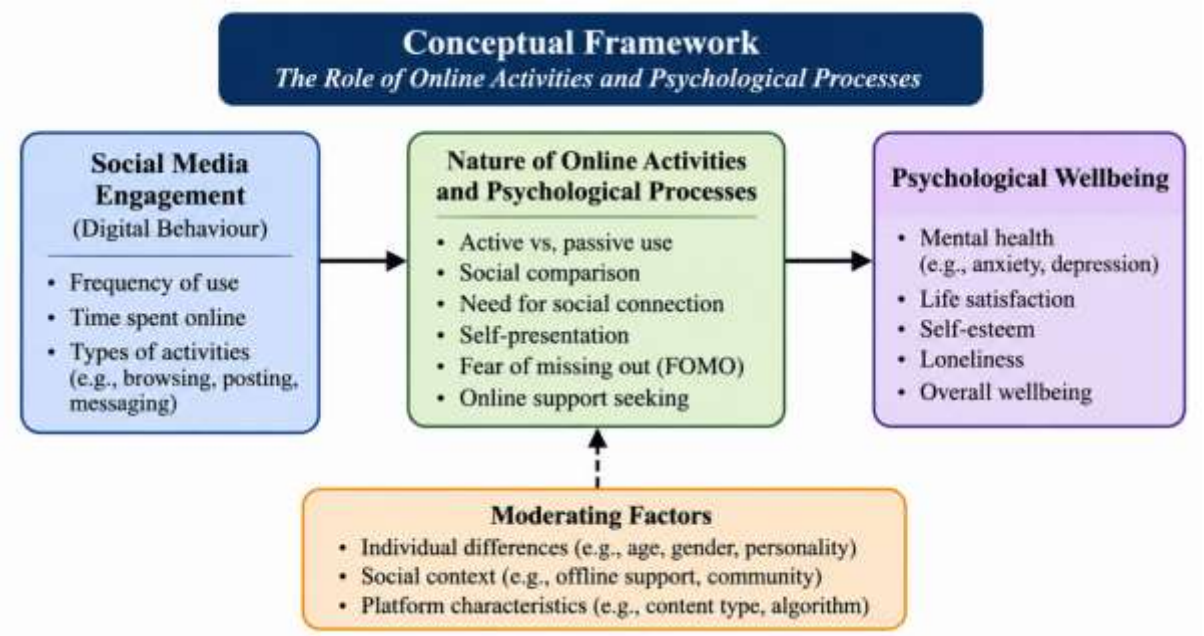
Theoretical Framework

The proposed research is based primarily on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), complemented by a multidimensional understanding of digital engagement. Social comparison theory explains how individuals evaluate themselves through exposure to other people's achievements, appearance and social experiences. Digital platforms increase opportunities for these comparisons because users encounter continuous streams of personal and social information.

The conceptual framework identifies digital behaviour as the principal explanatory dimension. It includes active engagement, passive browsing, frequency of use, duration of engagement and problematic social media use. These behaviours may be associated with psychological mechanisms such as social comparison, fear of missing out, emotional regulation and perceived social support.

Psychological wellbeing is considered a multidimensional outcome incorporating emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, loneliness, social connectedness and psychological distress. Individual characteristics and social circumstances are treated as contextual factors that may influence these relationships.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking digital behaviour and psychological wellbeing



Methodology

A mixed-methods research design is proposed to investigate the relationship between digital behaviour and psychological wellbeing among young adults. The approach combines quantitative assessment of social media engagement and psychological indicators with qualitative exploration of participants' everyday experiences. This is appropriate because statistical measurements can identify patterns of association, while interviews can explain how individuals interpret their digital activities and emotional experiences.

The proposed population consists of young adults aged 18–30 who regularly use at least one social media platform. Participants could be recruited through universities, community organisations and online research advertisements. Purposive recruitment would help achieve variation in age, gender, educational background, employment circumstances and digital engagement patterns. The final sample size should be established through an a priori statistical power calculation rather than an arbitrary assumption.

Quantitative information would be collected through a structured questionnaire covering platform preferences, frequency and duration of use, active and passive engagement, motivations, problematic use and online experiences. Psychological wellbeing would be assessed using established instruments, including the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), developed and validated by Tennant et al. (2007). Self-esteem could be assessed through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), while problematic engagement could be examined using an appropriately validated social media problematic-use instrument. Andreassen et al. (2016) provide relevant foundational research on addictive social media and video-game use.

The qualitative component would involve semi-structured interviews examining participants' daily digital routines, experiences of social comparison, emotional responses, online relationships and perceived benefits or disadvantages of social media. Interview questions would encourage participants to describe their experiences without assuming that digital engagement is necessarily harmful.

Quantitative data would be analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression, where assumptions are satisfied. Frequencies and percentages would describe platform preferences and patterns of engagement. Means and standard deviations would summarise continuous measures. Correlation analysis would investigate associations between social media engagement and psychological outcomes. Multiple regression would examine whether particular digital behaviours remain associated with wellbeing

after adjustment for relevant demographic and contextual variables.

Qualitative data would be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This process would involve familiarisation with transcripts, coding, theme development, review and interpretation. Quantitative and qualitative findings would subsequently be integrated to identify similarities, differences and explanations across the two forms of evidence.

Ethical approval would be obtained before recruitment. Participants would provide informed consent, and confidentiality, voluntary participation and withdrawal rights would be protected. The research would not access private messages or personal social media accounts without explicit consent and an appropriate ethical justification. Data would be securely stored and handled according to applicable data protection requirements.

Results and Statistical Evidence from Previous Research

Because no original participant dataset has been supplied, this section presents statistical findings from previous published research. The numerical results must be interpreted as secondary evidence rather than findings generated by the proposed investigation.

Table 1. Associations between problematic social media use and psychological outcomes

Psychological outcome	Number of studies measuring outcome	Total review sample	Correlation (*r*)	95% confidence interval	Significance
Depression	11	9,269 overall	.273	.215–.332	*p*<.001
Anxiety	9	9,269 overall	.348	.270–.426	*p*<.001
Stress	6	9,269 overall	.313	.203–.423	*p*<.001

The findings demonstrate positive associations between problematic social media engagement and psychological distress. Anxiety demonstrated the strongest pooled correlation (*r*=.348), followed by stress (*r*=.313) and depression (*r*=.273). The confidence intervals do not cross zero, supporting statistically significant associations. However, correlation coefficients do not demonstrate that problematic social media use independently causes these psychological outcomes.

Table 2. Published pooled associations between general and problematic social media use

Digital behaviour and outcome	Studies (*k*)	Participants (*N*)	Pooled correlation (*r*)	95% confidence interval
General use and depression	42	47,975	.102	.074–.130
General use and anxiety	18	24,657	.136	.083–.188
General use and wellbeing	7	4,273	.004	−.175–.184
General use and sleep problems	11	19,889	.079	−.037–.194
Problematic use and depression	33	23,966	.297	.253–.341
Problematic use and anxiety	12	10,020	.278	.221–.336
Problematic use and sleep problems	10	7,967	.189	.054–.323

The comparison demonstrates why general social media use and problematic engagement should not be treated as equivalent exposures. The pooled association with depression was larger for problematic use (*r*=.297) than for general use (*r*=.102). Similarly, problematic use demonstrated a significant association with sleep problems, whereas the pooled association for general use was not statistically significant. The wellbeing estimate for general use was also close to zero, with a confidence interval crossing zero.

Table 3. Study characteristics of the systematic review by Ahmed et al. (2024)

Research characteristic	Published result
Records initially identified	6,108
Studies included in systematic review	182
Total participants in systematic review	1,169,396
Studies included in meta-analyses	98
Participants in meta-analyses	102,683
Cross-sectional studies	139
Longitudinal studies	41
Studies containing both designs	1
Cohort studies	1
Weighted mean age in meta-analysis	17.4 years
Female participants in meta-analysis	55.3%

The review provides a substantial evidence base for examining digital engagement and psychological outcomes. However, the weighted mean age of 17.4 years indicates that the evidence is not exclusively representative of adults aged 18–30. This population difference should be considered when applying its conclusions to young adults.

Table 4. Social media platform adoption among US adults aged 18–29 (2026)

Social media platform	Users aged 18–29 (%)
YouTube	95%
Facebook	69%
Instagram	79%
TikTok	65%
WhatsApp	37%
LinkedIn	41%
Snapchat	56%
Reddit	40%
X (formerly Twitter)	31%
Nextdoor	10%
Truth Social	1%

The figures demonstrate the substantial adoption of different social media platforms among younger US adults. YouTube had the highest reported adoption at 95%, followed by Instagram at 79%, Facebook at 69% and TikTok at 65%. These figures represent platform adoption, not daily usage, and respondents may use multiple platforms. Therefore, the percentages should not be added together or interpreted as mutually exclusive categories. They also describe US adults rather than a representative global sample.

Table 5. Statistical findings from previous longitudinal and population-based research

Author(s)	Population and sample	Statistical finding	Research implication
Orben and Przybylski (2019)	Three datasets; 355,358 adolescents	Digital technology use explained at most 0.4% of wellbeing variation	Average associations may be small
Kelly et al. (2019)	10,904 UK adolescents aged 14	Compared with 1–3 hours of use, 3 to <5 hours was associated with 26% higher depressive symptom scores	Potential pathways include sleep and online harassment

		among girls and 21% among boys	
Kelly et al. (2019)	Same UK cohort	At least 5 hours was associated with 50% higher depressive symptom scores among girls and 35% among boys	Longer engagement may be associated with poorer outcomes in this adolescent population
Shannon et al. (2022)	18 studies; 9,269 participants	Anxiety correlation r=.348	Problematic engagement is associated with anxiety
Ahmed et al. (2024)	182 studies; 1,169,396 participants	Problematic engagement showed associations with depression, anxiety and sleep problems	General and problematic engagement require separate analysis

These studies collectively indicate that digital engagement is a multidimensional behaviour. The findings of Orben and Przybylski (2019) demonstrate that the average relationship between digital technology and wellbeing may be small, whereas Shannon et al. (2022) identified stronger relationships when problematic engagement was examined. Kelly et al. (2019) further identified potential pathways through sleep, online harassment, self-esteem and body image.

Statistical Equations and Analytical Framework

The following equations represent established statistical procedures suitable for the proposed investigation. They are not newly developed equations or calculated findings from this article.

1. Percentage calculation

$$P=\frac{f}{N}\times 100$$

Where P represents the percentage, f represents the frequency of a particular response and N represents the total number of valid responses.

For example, if 80 out of 100 participants report using a particular platform:

$$P=\frac{80}{100}\times 100=80\%$$

This is an illustrative calculation, not a result from the proposed study.

2. Arithmetic mean

$$\bar{x}=\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} x_i}{N}$$

This equation calculates the average score across observations.

3. Standard deviation

$$SD=\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N}(x_i-\bar{x})^2}{N-1}}$$

This measures the dispersion of observations around the sample mean.

4. Pearson correlation coefficient

$$r=\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N}(X_i-\bar{X})(Y_i-\bar{Y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{N}(X_i-\bar{X})^2\sum_{i=1}^{N}(Y_i-\bar{Y})^2}}$$

The Pearson correlation coefficient measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous variables. Shannon et al. (2022) used correlation coefficients to summarise relationships between problematic social media use and psychological outcomes.

5. Multiple linear regression

$$Y_i=\beta_0+\beta_1 X_{1i}+\beta_2 X_{2i}+\beta_3 X_{3i}+\varepsilon_i$$

Where:

Y_i = psychological wellbeing score.
X_{1i} = problematic social media engagement.
X_{2i} = social comparison score.
X_{3i} = perceived social support.
β_0 = regression intercept.
β_1,β_2,β_3 = regression coefficients.
ε_i = error term.

6. Coefficient of determination

$$R^2=1-\frac{SS_{res}}{SS_{tot}}$$

The coefficient of determination estimates the proportion of variation in the dependent variable explained by the regression model.

These equations would support transparent reporting of future research findings. They should not be used to generate statistical findings without actual participant-level observations.

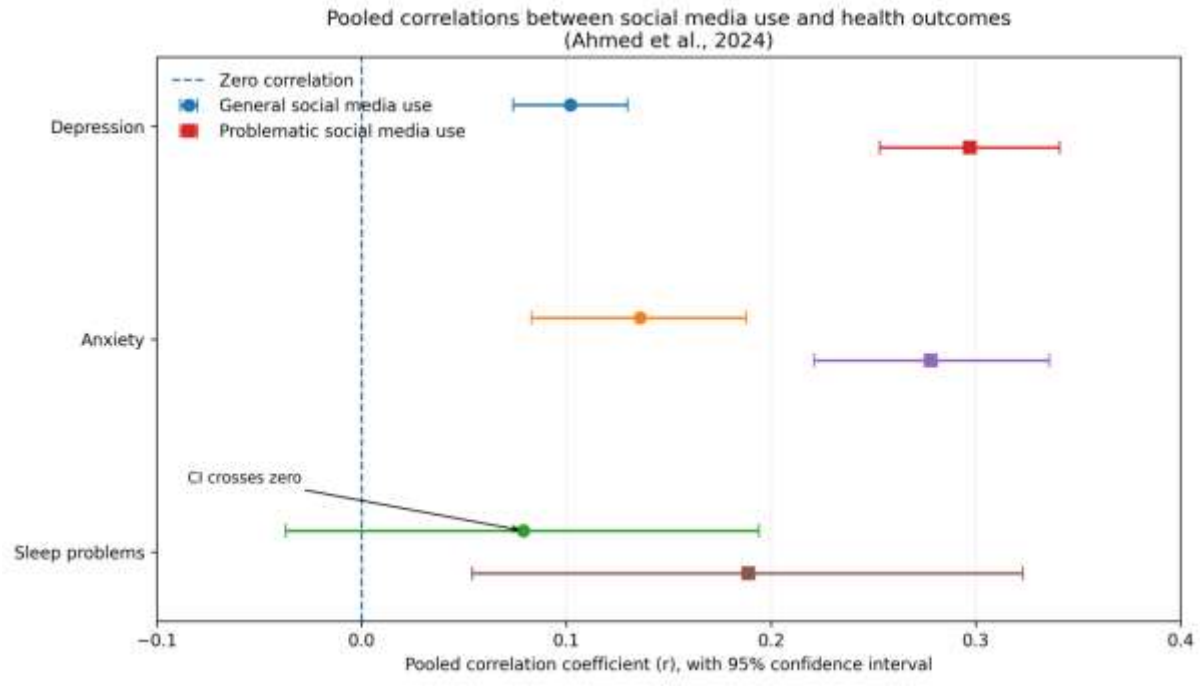


Figure 2. Comparison of published correlations between general and problematic social media engagement

Discussion

The statistical evidence demonstrates that the relationship between social media and psychological wellbeing is more complex than conventional assumptions about screen time suggest. One of the most important findings is the difference between general social media engagement and problematic use. Ahmed et al. (2024) reported a pooled correlation of r=.102 between general social media use and

depression, compared with r=.297 for problematic use. This difference suggests that behavioural characteristics may be more informative than frequency alone.

The findings of Shannon et al. (2022) provide further support for this interpretation. Their meta-analysis identified correlations of r=.273 with depression, r=.348 with anxiety and r=.313 with stress. Anxiety demonstrated the strongest association among the three outcomes. However, these results should be interpreted as associations rather than proof that social media causes psychological distress. Individuals experiencing emotional difficulties may also turn to social media to obtain reassurance, distraction or interpersonal contact.

Another important consideration is the magnitude of the relationship between digital technology and wellbeing. Orben and Przybylski (2019) analysed three large datasets containing 355,358 adolescents and found that digital technology use explained at most 0.4% of the variation in wellbeing. This finding challenges interpretations that attribute substantial psychological harm to digital technology without considering other influences.

The findings of these studies are not necessarily contradictory. They reflect different conceptual definitions of exposure, different populations and different analytical approaches. General technology use captures a broad range of digital activities, whereas problematic social media measures identify patterns involving impaired control and negative consequences. This distinction is central to interpreting the available evidence.

The relationship between social media and sleep also requires careful attention. Ahmed et al. (2024) reported a correlation of r=.079, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from −.037 to .194, for general social media use and sleep problems. This estimate was not statistically significant. In contrast, problematic social media use demonstrated a significant association with sleep problems (r=.189, 95% CI [.054, .323]). These findings suggest that disruption associated with uncontrolled engagement may be more relevant to sleep than general platform participation.

Everyday digital routines also deserve greater attention. Bengtsson and Johansson (2022) demonstrated that young adults incorporate social media into ordinary activities through practices associated with passing time, transforming everyday routines and managing mood. These experiences suggest that social media may become embedded in ordinary routines even when individuals do not consciously intend to spend extended periods online.

Social comparison remains another potentially important explanation. Exposure to carefully selected representations of other people's appearance, achievements and relationships may influence self-esteem and emotional satisfaction. However, social comparison is not necessarily negative in every circumstance. Digital platforms may also expose individuals to positive examples, supportive communities and information that strengthens motivation. The psychological consequences therefore depend on the interpretation of content and the circumstances of the individual.

Overall, the evidence supports a multidimensional interpretation of digital wellbeing. Platform engagement, psychological motivations, individual characteristics and social circumstances should be examined together. The proposed research can contribute by examining these relationships among young adults while distinguishing published evidence from newly collected empirical findings.

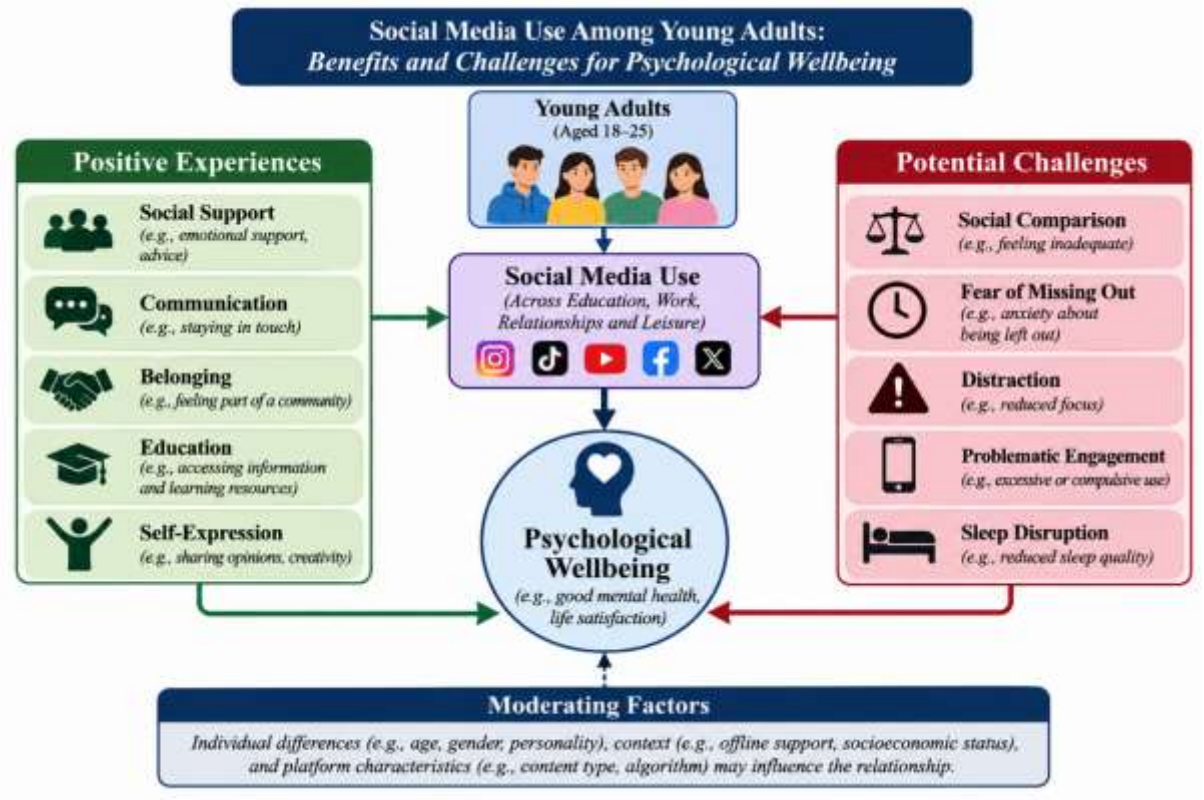


Figure 3. Digital behaviour and young adults' everyday psychological experiences

Implications

The evidence has implications for individual behaviour, educational institutions, mental health professionals, policymakers and social media developers. At an individual level, digital wellbeing initiatives should encourage purposeful engagement, awareness of emotional responses and greater control over habitual platform use. Young adults should be supported in recognising the differences between beneficial communication and digital activities that interfere with everyday responsibilities.

Educational institutions could incorporate digital wellbeing into student support programmes. Particular attention should be given to social comparison, online harassment, fear of missing out, sleep routines and the psychological consequences of problematic engagement. Universities could also promote balanced approaches that preserve the educational and interpersonal benefits of digital communication.

Mental health professionals should consider digital experiences when assessing emotional difficulties among young adults. Rather than automatically identifying social media as the cause of psychological distress, they should examine the specific platforms, activities and experiences associated with an individual's difficulties. This may help distinguish problematic engagement from ordinary digital participation.

Social media companies also have responsibilities concerning platform design. Notification settings, recommendation systems, privacy controls and content moderation may influence patterns of engagement. Providing users with greater control over notifications and content exposure could support healthier digital experiences.

At policy level, digital wellbeing initiatives should balance protection against harmful online experiences with the preservation of social connection, educational opportunities and access to supportive communities. Effective interventions require cooperation between technology companies, educational institutions, researchers and public health organisations.

Limitations and Future Research

This article synthesises existing evidence and develops a proposed research framework; it does not report an independently completed empirical investigation. The published studies

included different populations, instruments and research designs, limiting direct comparison of their statistical findings. Several studies focused on adolescents, while others included young adults, making age-specific interpretation necessary.

Furthermore, many existing studies rely on self-reported engagement and cross-sectional designs. These approaches may introduce recall bias and cannot establish causal direction. Future research should use longitudinal designs, digital activity diaries and validated psychological measures to investigate changes over time. Greater attention should also be given to cultural differences, socioeconomic circumstances, platform-specific activities and individual motivations. Studies conducted specifically among adults aged 18–30 would help establish whether the relationships identified in adolescent research apply to young adulthood.

Conclusion

Social media has become an important dimension of young adults' everyday lives, influencing communication, relationships, self-perception and emotional experiences. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that its relationship with psychological wellbeing cannot be explained through screen time alone. General social media use and problematic engagement demonstrate different statistical relationships with depression, anxiety and sleep problems.

Previous research identifies potentially beneficial experiences, including social support, communication and emotional connection, alongside challenges involving social comparison, problematic engagement and psychological distress. The distinction between these experiences is essential for developing an accurate understanding of digital behaviour.

The proposed research framework offers an approach to examining these relationships through quantitative assessment and qualitative exploration. Ultimately, promoting psychological wellbeing requires a balanced understanding of digital participation that recognises both its opportunities and its potential risks.

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