



The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Mental Health Among Young Adults Aged 17–24 Years in The United Kingdom: A Public Health Perspective

by

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DECLARATION

I, Akshay Moncy declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself, that the work contained herein is entirely my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification, in whole or in part, except as specified.

Signed: Akshay Moncy

Date: 17-06-2026

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the relationship among young people's usage of social media and mental wellness outcomes between the ages of 17 and 24 from a public health standpoint. It focuses on how using social networking sites might affect psychological wellbeing, especially with regard to anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, body image issues, self-esteem, and general emotional health. The study acknowledges that social media might have both beneficial and detrimental psychological effects, depending on usage patterns and user experiences.

To critically assess pertinent peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2026, a methodical literature review technique was used. To guarantee methodological rigour, a systematic search technique was applied across many electronic databases, backed by precisely stated inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research selection procedure was guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, and the reliability and calibre of the selected studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. Twelve studies in all satisfied the qualifying requirements and were incorporated into the final qualitative synthesis, which was arranged using theme analysis.

The results demonstrate that increased levels of social media activity, particularly passive or excessive use, are consistently linked to rising psychological distress among young people. Increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, a poor sense of one's physique, and diminished emotional wellness are some of these. The literature has highlighted upward social comparison, exposure to cyberbullying, FOMO, and obsessive or uncontrolled usage behaviours as contributing processes. However, research also shows that social media may have beneficial effects when used intentionally, including enhancing social ties, promoting peer engagement, raising awareness of mental health issues, and giving users access to online support systems. Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media usage has a complex and varied impact on mental well-being. In addition to usage frequency, individual sensitivity and more general social and environmental variables also influence outcomes. Therefore, the study suggests improving digital literacy instruction, encouraging safer online spaces, and incorporating digital wellness programs into more comprehensive public health and mental health measures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Social media has become the main way that young people in the UK communicate and engage. 94% of people between the ages of 16 and 24 regularly use social media, with Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X being the most popular applications, according to the most current Ofcom figures from 2024. At the same time, there has been a notable rise in mental health problems in this age range. Young people between the ages of 17 and 24 had one of the highest prevalence rates of any age group in England, at about 25.8%, according to NHS Digital (2024). This emphasises how crucial it is to comprehend the connection between computer use and mental health.

Young adults' mental health issues have grown to be a significant public health concern in the UK. National epidemiological statistics show that within the previous ten years, there has been a rise in anxiety, depression, psychological discomfort, loneliness, self-harm, and poor wellbeing among young people (NHS England, 2023; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). The World Health Organization (2022) states that one of the main causes of impairment among teenagers and young adults worldwide is mental health problems. Identity creation, social comparison, financial insecurity, academic pressure, and increased digital exposure characterise the transition from adolescence to adulthood, a particularly difficult developmental time (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Therefore, academics and public health agencies continue to investigate whether social media use affects this population's mental health in a favourable or bad way. Recent research indicates that social media use and mental health have a complicated and context-dependent relationship (Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens, 2022). In the opinion of Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2019), teens and young adults who engage with social media carelessly are likely to experience feelings of anxiety and hopelessness.

In a similar vein, Kelly et al. (2018) found that young people in the UK who regularly use social media had lower wellbeing and more psychological suffering, especially among females. Additionally, Shannon et al. (2022) found that overuse of social media was associated with poorer mental health results, such as lower emotional distress and wellbeing. The majority of the included research in a systematic review by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2019) showed strong correlations between social media use and psychological discomfort, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Further research connects problematic usage to low self-esteem, exposure to cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and body dissatisfaction (Kelly et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2022). According to earlier research, the potential benefits include opportunities

for self-expression, identity development, peer support, social connection, access to mental health information, and help-seeking (Naslund et al., 2020; George and Odgers, 2020).

These conflicting results imply that social media's impact on mental health varies. Orben and Przybylski (2019) state that a variety of factors, including as the duration and frequency of usage, platform features, kind of engagement, content exposure, individual sensitivity, and offline social support, affect its effect. Although some studies demonstrate statistically significant associations between adverse outcomes and social media use, the impact sizes are often modest. Social media usage only makes up a small portion of the variation in wellbeing, according to Orben and Przybylski (2019), indicating that more important social and environmental variables are at work. This highlights how important it is to avoid overly simplistic interpretations of digital participation and mental health consequences.

The importance of this problem goes beyond personal health and is a more general public health issue. Social media influences social interaction, information exposure, health habits, and resource availability, making it a modern digital predictor of health. Developing evidence-based public health measures to improve juvenile mental health requires an understanding of its consequences (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023). Social media platforms have an influence on health literacy, emotional well-being, social engagement, and health disparities (World Health Organization, 2022; Department of Health and Social Care, 2023; Naslund et al., 2020). In the UK, concerns about unrealistic body image standards, deceptive information, addictive design elements, and cyberbullying have drawn more government attention (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Concurrently, digital platforms are being used increasingly often for mental health promotion, online treatment, and health communication strategies (O'Reilly et al., 2023). This dual stance highlights the need for a comprehensive public health perspective.

Image-based platforms may have more obvious psychological effects since they emphasise appearance-based comparison and algorithm-driven content (Marengo et al., 2018). The idealised portrayals of success, beauty, and lifestyle that young users are frequently exposed to can cause poor self-esteem, mental discomfort, physical dissatisfaction, and social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014; Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015; Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). According to Hamm et al. (2015), cyberbullying and online harassment remain serious risks associated with digital involvement that negatively affect emotional well-being and heighten vulnerability to depressive symptoms. However, social media may also provide mental health

advocacy, emotional support, and peer support, particularly for stigmatised or isolated individuals (Naslund et al., 2020; George and Odgers, 2020; Farre et al., 2023).

The significance of this area of research is further demonstrated by the rising incidence of mental health issues among young adults in the UK. According to NHS England (2023), there is an increasing need for mental health services, especially for depression and anxiety. Additionally, compared to earlier years, people between the ages of 17 and 24 were more probable to experience mental health problems, according to Newlove-Delgado et al. (2023). These shifts raise questions about the connection between digital conduct and mental health because social media use in this age range is almost universal (Ofcom, 2024). In order to guide internet safety laws, mental health treatments, and digital wellness programs, public health organisations stress the need of doing thorough research (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023).

1.2 Background of the Study

The emergence of social media has altered interpersonal connections and communication in modern culture. Digital platforms have developed into intricate multimedia ecosystems that impact politics, education, entertainment, consumer behaviour, and health communication since the early 2000s (Burr, Taddeo, and Floridi, 2020). The most active users are young adults, who frequently engage for many hours every day, which raises questions about potential behavioural and psychological repercussions (Ofcom, 2024).

According to NHS England (2024), 25.8% of young adults around the age group of 17 and 24 suffer from a suspected mental condition, meaning that around one in four may be impacted. This shows a significant cost on public health and emphasises the need for efficient preventative measures. Additionally, epidemiological data indicates rising rates of emotional discomfort, loneliness, anxiety, and depression in this age range (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). Economic instability, scholastic pressure, social isolation, and greater digital exposure are among the factors put out (Twenge et al., 2017), with social media being a major contributing element.

The results of research are still inconsistent. According to several research (Boers et al., 2019; Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2019; Kelly et al., 2018), cyberbullying, sleep disturbance, social comparison, and FOMO are the reasons why high or problematic usage is associated with poor mental health outcomes. However, other research emphasises advantages including community involvement, mental health knowledge,

and social support (Naslund et al., 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2023). As a result, social media offers both advantages and disadvantages.

The literature still has certain holes, nevertheless. The ability to establish causality is limited by the cross-sectional designs used in many research (Orben and Przybylski, 2019). Teenagers are the subject of most research, with young adult groups that are exclusive to the UK receiving less attention. Furthermore, a thorough synthesis of public health is still lacking. This highlights the need for a comprehensive research that focuses on young adults in the UK.

1.3 Research Problem

In the UK, the number of young adults experiencing mental health issues is rising dramatically. Social media usage has become almost widespread, and 25.8% of people between the ages of 17 and 24 are estimated to have a likely mental condition (NHS Digital, 2024). Despite a great deal of study, results are still mixed, with studies showing both positive (Naslund et al., 2020; George and Odgers, 2020) and negative (Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2019; Kelly et al., 2018) consequences.

This lack of agreement makes it difficult for educators, legislators, and medical experts to create successful solutions. Additionally, current research often ignores contextual factors such as individual vulnerabilities, platform variations, and socioeconomic differences. Therefore, in the framework of public health in UK, a thorough synthesis of the evidence is necessary.

1.4 Research Question

This dissertation's primary research question is:

“How does social media use influence the mental health and wellbeing of young adults aged 17–24 years in the United Kingdom from a public health perspective?”

1.5 Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically assess, from a public health standpoint, the link among social media use and mental well-being and mental health of young people in the United Kingdom between the ages of 17 and 24.

1.6 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the usage of social media by young people in the UK between the ages of 17 and 24.

2. To assess how social media use affects mental health outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, depression, emotional wellness, and self-esteem.
3. To evaluate the impact of social media on public health communication, help-seeking behaviours, and mental health awareness.
4. To determine the advantages and disadvantages of social media use in connection to UK public health.

1.7 Importance of the Research

This study is important because it tackles a developing public health issue that young adults in the UK are facing. Since one in four young people may have a mental illness, social media must be taken into account in preventative and intervention efforts (NHS Digital, 2024; NHS England, 2023).

The findings may inform public health policy, including digital wellbeing initiatives, online safety regulations, and mental health promotion campaigns. Educational institutions may benefit in relation to digital literacy and cyberbullying prevention, while healthcare providers may use findings to improve early intervention and online support services.

This study advances academics by highlighting gaps in the existing literature, synthesising data on social media and mental health unique to the UK, and proposing future research routes.

1.8 Dissertation Structure

There are six chapters in this dissertation.

The topic, background, study challenge, purpose, goals, and relevance are all introduced in Chapter 1.

The theoretical framework and literature review are presented in Chapter 2.

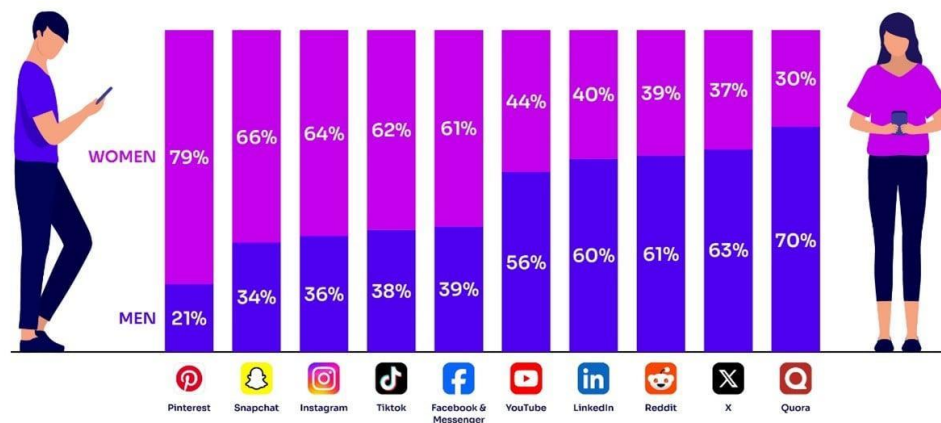
The methodology, including design, data collecting, and analysis, is covered in Chapter 3.

The results are presented in Chapter 4.

The results and their consequences for recent research and public health are covered in Chapter 5.

The main conclusions, restrictions, and suggestions of the study are presented in Chapter 6.

Figure 1.1: Social Media Use by Young Adults and Mental Health



RoutesSource: Modified from the World Health Organization's (2022), Royal Society for Public Health's (2017), Ofcom's (2024), and Naslund et al.'s (2020) conceptual frameworks.

The impact of social media use on the mental health outcomes of youth is depicted in Figure 1.1. Peer support, information availability, and help-seeking behaviour are examples of positive routes; cyberbullying, social comparison, sleep disturbance, and exposure to harmful content are examples of negative pathways. Anxiety, depression, and psychological suffering are examples of mental health outcomes that are influenced by these interrelated elements.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

The relationship between youth social media use and mental health is a central focus of interdisciplinary study in public health, psychology, sociology, and digital studies. Social media's increasing ubiquity in daily life has altered young people's communication, identity construction, emotional expression, and social interaction patterns. Rising rates of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, psychological discomfort, and diminished wellbeing among young people have raised concerns about how digital surroundings affect mental health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2022). As a result, scholars, medical professionals, and lawmakers have begun examining how social media influences both favourable and unfavourable experiences with mental health.

People between the ages of 16 and 24 are among the most digitally connected groups in the UK, with 94% of them regularly using social media (Ofcom, 2024). People are more susceptible to social pressures and environmental impacts at this developmental period due to significant psychological, emotional, social, and educational changes

(Arnett, 2015). Communication, self-presentation, amusement, peer support, and information access are all made easier by social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, and X. According to Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020), users may also experience cyberbullying, incorrect information, unrealistic social comparisons, online abuse, addictive design aspects, and emotional reliance on these same platforms.

The connection between social media and mental health has been the subject of numerous studies, but the results are still conflicting and up for methodological discussion. Some research have linked excessive social media usage to negative mental health impacts, such as sadness, anxiety, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, sleep disruption, and suicidal thoughts (Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius, 2016; Woods and Scott, 2016). However, other academics contend that, especially for underprivileged or solitary children, online platforms may promote identity development, emotional support, mental health awareness, and social connectivity (Allen, Ryan, Grey, McInerney, and Waters, 2014). These conflicting results imply that social media use and mental health have a complicated connection that is influenced by behavioural, environmental, and personal variables.

This chapter critically examines the body of research on social media usage and mental health among young people in the UK and in larger international contexts that are pertinent to public health in the UK. The chapter assesses contemporary discussions in the subject as well as theoretical stances, empirical data, and methodological techniques. Anxiety, despair, body image, self-esteem, cyberbullying, sleep quality, digital addiction, online social support, and health disparities receive special emphasis. The chapter also sets the theoretical basis for this research and points out important gaps in the literature.

2.2 Conceptualising Social Media and Mental Health

Internet-based systems that allow users to produce, distribute, engage with, and consume digital material within online communities and networks are referred to as social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media enables real-time connection, user-generated content, personal branding, and active involvement, in contrast to traditional media communication approaches. Young people's identity building, feeling of social belonging, and emotional experiences are greatly influenced by the visual, textual, and video-based communication modalities found in contemporary social media ecosystems (Boyd, 2014). According to the World Health Organization (2022), mental health is generally understood to be a condition of psychological well-being in which people are able to manage daily challenges, continue their productive

employment, and make a substantial contribution to society. Modern definitions of mental health include emotional resilience, social functioning, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological welfare in addition to the absence of mental disease. The impact of social variables on mental health, such as socioeconomic status, education, discrimination, social ties, and increasingly digital settings, is acknowledged by public health research (Marmot et al., 2020).

To understand the relationship between social media and mental health, basic linear assumptions are insufficient. Rather, digital involvement may be both a risk and a protective factor depending on the kind, degree, and context of platform usage (Verduyn et al., 2017). Active involvement that may promote social connection and emotional support includes staying in contact with friends and taking part in supportive organisations. However, passively ingesting idealised material might lead to feelings of loneliness, emotional dissatisfaction, and social comparison (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

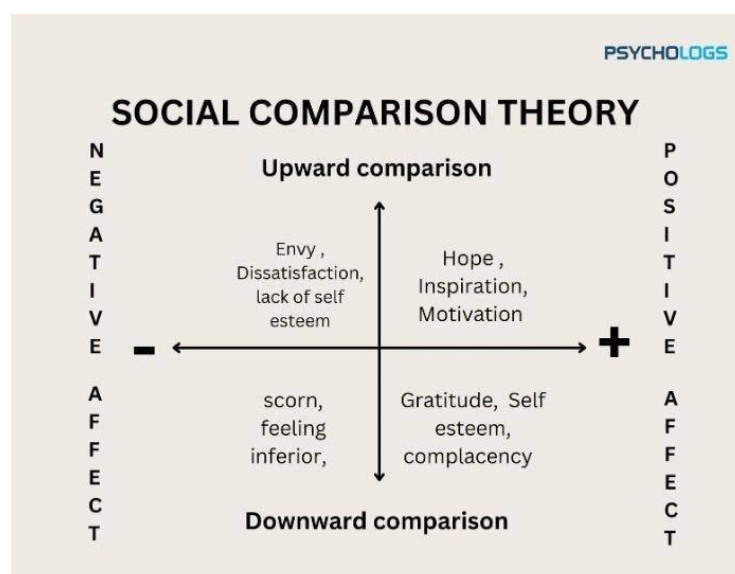
2.3.1 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, first put out in 1954, is one of the main hypotheses elucidating the connection between social media use and mental health. The theory is that people assess themselves by contrasting themselves with others, especially when they are uncertain about their own value, achievements, beauty, or social standing. Because users are constantly exposed to carefully chosen and idealised depictions of other people's lives, social media platforms offer possibilities for comparison.

According to research, young people's appearance-related social comparison behaviours are greatly increased by image-focused platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Users are frequently exposed to lifestyle displays, fitness content, manipulated photos, and material success indicators, which can lead to emotional discontent and inflated expectations. According to Tiggemann and Slater (2017), young users of visual platforms experience depressed symptoms, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction as a result of social comparison.

Social Comparison Theory is pertinent to this dissertation because it can explain why excessive usage of social media may have a negative effect on psychological wellbeing. The theory also highlights the importance of content exposure and platform elements in shaping emotional reactions.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Routes Connecting Social Comparison and Social Media Exposure



Source: A conceptual framework created by the author and modified from Festinger (1954), Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), and Tiggemann and Slater (2017).

The image illustrates how exposure to idealised online information causes young individuals to participate in upward social comparison. Self-esteem, physical image, and mental wellness may be adversely affected by constant comparison with edited and carefully chosen depictions of success, attractiveness, and lifestyle.

2.3.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, people actively utilise media platforms to meet social and psychological needs such identity construction, enjoyment, belonging, information seeking, and emotional regulation (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1973). Deterministic presumptions that consumers are passive objects of media influence are contested by this theory. Rather, young adults use social media in accordance with their goals and emotional demands.

Many young adults use social media to maintain relationships, reduce feelings of loneliness, seek peer approval, and learn about mental health, according to studies (Whiting and Williams, 2013). During periods of stress or isolation, digital platforms may provide emotional support networks and opportunities for self-expression. However, excessive dependency on social media for emotional validation may increase vulnerability to anxiety and psychological distress if online interactions become negative or unfulfilling (Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş and Griffiths, 2020).

This idea is significant because it shows that motives and behavioural patterns related to platform usage, in addition to screen time, influence the consequences of social media.

2.3.3 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a more thorough public health perspective for understanding how digital environments impact human development and mental health (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to the idea, a variety of interrelated systems, such as family, peer groups, education, social institutions, and broader cultural settings, influence how people behave.

Social media platforms serve as powerful digital microsystems in modern society, influencing the social experiences, identity formation, and emotional health of young adults. Cultural norms, educational settings, and offline relationships are all impacted by online connections. This theoretical approach is particularly useful in understanding how socioeconomic inequalities, discrimination, and digital exclusion affect mental health outcomes connected to social media use (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007).

2.4 Social Media Use and Anxiety

One of the most prevalent mental health issues impacting young adults is anxiety disorders. Numerous research have found links between teens and emerging adults' problematic social media usage and increased anxiety symptoms (Vannucci, Flannery, and Ohannessian, 2017). Chronic stress, emotional overstimulation, FOMO, and obsessive internet checking habits can all be attributed to excessive digital involvement.

The prevalent concern that others may be enjoying fulfilling experiences while one is not is known as FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). According to research, the association between young people's use of social media and anxiety symptoms is mediated by FOMO (Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont, 2016; Elhai et al., 2020). Additionally, research shows that those with high levels of FOMO are more likely to report sleep problems, poor mental health, and obsessive checking behaviours (Rozgonjuk et al., 2021; Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2019). By constantly showcasing peer activities, accomplishments, and social connections, social media exacerbates this tendency. In order to prevent social isolation or irrelevance, young people may constantly feel pressure to stay connected.

Elhai, Levine, Dvorak, and Hall (2017) discovered a strong correlation between bad smartphone and social media use and elevated anxiety and emotional dysregulation. In a sample of 563 undergraduate students, Vannucci, Flannery, and Ohannessian

(2017) found a strong correlation between increased social media use and anxiety symptoms. Compared to people who used social networking sites less frequently, individuals who used them more frequently reported feeling more emotionally distressed. Even though the cross-sectional nature of the study makes it impossible to draw causal inferences, these results imply that intense engagement may lead to anxiety-related outcomes. Similarly, Woods and Scott's (2016) study found that teens who used social media at night experienced increased anxiety and worse sleep. Since inadequate sleep is closely linked to poor mental health outcomes and emotional instability, sleep disturbance is especially important.

However, a number of experts advise against believing that social media use and anxiety are causally related. According to Coyne et al. (2020), those who already struggle with anxiety may use digital platforms more frequently as coping strategies or sources of comfort. As a result, rather of being unidirectional, the interaction may be reciprocal.

Research has shown that sadness is a significant issue, even if worry is one of the most frequently mentioned effects of insufficient social media use. It is crucial to look at how social media may lead to more widespread psychological suffering given the overlap between anxiety and depression symptoms.

2.5 Social Media Use and Depression

Globally, depression is becoming more common among young adults, which raises questions about possible behavioural and environmental factors. Numerous studies have examined whether youth depression symptoms are exacerbated by heavy social media use.

Participants in the highest quartile of social media use were 2.7 times more likely than those in the lowest quartile to report feeling socially isolated, according to Lin et al. (2016). In a similar vein, Primack et al. (2017) found a strong correlation between loneliness and greater social media use. However, encouraging online interactions may enhance wellness and lessen loneliness, according to Frison and Eggermont (2015). These conflicting results imply that the psychological consequences of social media are determined by platform using patterns rather than usage volume alone.

One explanation for this relationship involves negative social comparison processes. Exposure to idealised online portrayals may encourage users to perceive their own lives as inadequate or unsuccessful. Chou and Edge (2012) argue that social media

creates distorted perceptions of others' happiness and achievements, contributing to emotional dissatisfaction and reduced self-worth.

Cyberbullying and online harassment are other significant factors. Suicidal thoughts, social disengagement, and depressive symptoms are considerably more common among young adults who have been victimised online (Kowalski et al., 2014). Because cyberbullying may happen often, anonymously, and in public, raising emotional discomfort and shame, it may be very damaging.

Other studies, however, indicate that social media use improves mental health. Frison and Eggermont (2015) suggest that promoting online contacts and peer comments may improve mental health and reduce loneliness. These results emphasise the need of distinguishing between different types of social media usage rather than considering all digital engagement to be harmful.

2.6 Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Appearance-Based Platforms

One of the most well studied pathways connecting social media to mental health consequences is appearance-based social comparison. Users are encouraged to display idealised images of themselves on visual content-focused platforms by using manipulated photos, filters, and carefully chosen lifestyles. Young people who are exposed to such content may experience self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem.

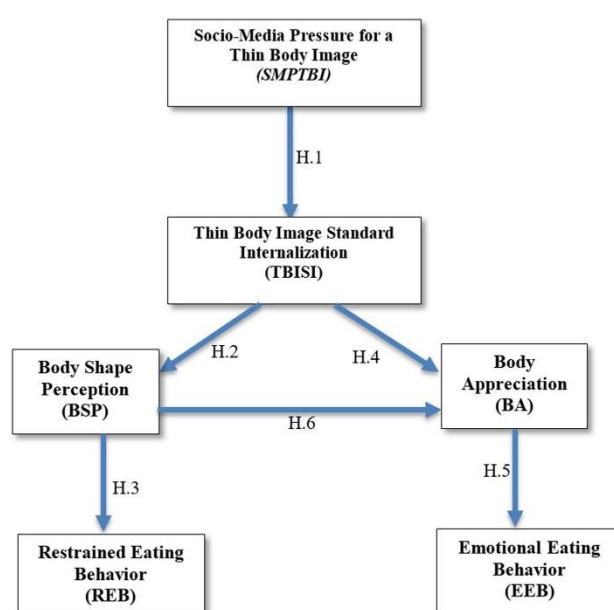
According to Perloff (2014), social media allows for constant comparison with peers and celebrities, which exacerbates conventional appearance expectations. Digital platforms, in contrast to conventional media, provide users tailored and interactive material that they come across often throughout the day. According to research, image-focused platforms may make young women more susceptible to appearance-related discomfort (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, and Halliwell, 2015).

Body dissatisfaction has significant implications for public health since it is associated with eating disorders, anxiety, despair, and low self-esteem. Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found strong associations between teens' and young adults' body image problems and their use of social networking platforms. Nonetheless, not every social media user associated body dissatisfaction with social media usage. Individual characteristics including gender, self-esteem, personality qualities, and pre-existing body image concerns may impact a person's susceptibility to appearance-based comparisons. Therefore, some studies contend that rather from being a direct cause of body dissatisfaction, social media serves as an amplifier of preexisting concerns. In

a similar vein, Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater (2017) came to the conclusion that selfie culture and appearance-monitoring practices lead to self-critical thinking and emotional discontent.

At the same time, some researchers argue that social media can also challenge unrealistic beauty standards through body positivity movements and mental health advocacy campaigns (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Digital activism and inclusive online communities may therefore provide opportunities for empowerment and emotional support.

Figure 2.2: Conceptual Connection Between Body Dissatisfaction, Psychological Wellbeing, and Image-Based Social Media Use



Source: Conceptual framework modified from Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater (2017), Holland and Tiggemann (2016), and Perloff (2014).

The graphic illustrates how young adults who are exposed to idealised appearance-related information may have negative mental health effects, poor self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction.

2.7 Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

A significant digital public health issue that affects youth worldwide is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, in contrast to conventional bullying, may happen on a regular basis using messaging apps, social media, and anonymous interactions. Victims typically suffer embarrassment, emotional anguish, anxiety, sadness, and social isolation (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Because smartphones are always connected, young adults who are being harassed online may feel helpless to stop it. Additionally, online victimisation has the capacity to reach enormous audiences, escalating reputational and emotional damages. Studies show a strong correlation between being a victim of cyberbullying and suicide thoughts among young people and emerging adults (John et al., 2018).

The psychological consequences of cyberbullying are further intensified by anonymity and permanence within digital environments. Hurtful comments, photographs, and rumours may remain accessible online indefinitely, prolonging emotional distress. Public health researchers therefore increasingly emphasise the need for digital safety education, online safeguarding policies, and platform accountability measures.

2.8 Social Media Addiction and Problematic Use

According to Andreassen (2015), obsessive or excessive use of digital platforms that results in emotional dependence, withdrawal symptoms, reduced functioning, and lack of behavioural control is referred to as problematic social media usage. Due to parallels with gambling and substance abuse habits, researchers are increasingly conceptualising problematic social media usage as a behavioural addiction.

Young adults may become psychologically dependent on social validation mechanisms such as likes, comments, followers, and notifications. Variable reward systems embedded within platform design encourage repeated checking behaviours and emotional reinforcement (Montag, Lachmann, Herrlich and Zweig, 2019). Academic achievement, sleep, offline relationships, and psychological well-being may all be negatively impacted by excessive participation.

Problematic social media use has been linked to sadness, emotional instability, and diminished self-control in teenagers, according to research by Bányai et al. (2017). In a similar vein, Kuss and Griffiths (2017) contend that stress, social isolation, and emotional tiredness may be exacerbated by addictive digital activities.

However, critics caution against pathologising normal digital behaviour. This distinction is particularly important because social media use has become integrated into educational, professional, and social activities. Consequently, high levels of engagement do not necessarily indicate problematic use. Researchers therefore increasingly emphasise behavioural consequences, emotional dependence, and loss of control rather than screen time alone when assessing problematic social media use. Many young adults spend substantial time online due to educational requirements,

communication needs, and social expectations. As a result, experts stress how crucial it is to differentiate between high engagement and truly harmful use.

2.9 Positive Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health

Despite concerns about the detrimental impacts of the internet, social media can yield major psychological and social benefits. Digital platforms may facilitate social support, emotional expression, community participation, and access to mental health resources. Young adults experiencing loneliness, discrimination, or social isolation may particularly benefit from online communities and peer networks.

According to Naslund et al. (2016), social media platforms help lessen the stigma associated with psychiatric diseases and raise awareness of mental health issues. Young people increasingly use digital spaces to discuss mental health experiences openly, challenge discrimination, and seek emotional support. Online communities may additionally provide safe spaces for marginalised individuals, including LGBTQ+ young adults and those experiencing chronic illness or disability.

According to study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication platforms allowed many young people to maintain social connections during periods of physical isolation (Cauberghe et al., 2021). This illustrates how social media may support resilience and mental health during difficult circumstances.

Moreover, healthcare organisations increasingly utilise social media for public health communication, awareness campaigns, and early intervention strategies targeting young populations. Digital mental health interventions and online counselling services have become increasingly accessible through social media environments.

2.10 Public Health Perspectives on Social Media and Mental Health

Public health perspectives emphasise that broader social, technological, and environmental elements influence mental health outcomes rather than individual behaviours. The NHS Long Term Plan identifies prevention, early assistance, and improved access to mental health services as major goals for youth (NHS England, 2019). Given that social media is becoming a part of daily social and behavioural experiences, it is crucial to comprehend how digital surroundings affect psychological wellness. Public health approaches therefore seek not only to reduce online harms but also to maximise opportunities for digital wellbeing, mental health promotion, and early prevention. Social media platforms therefore represent digital environments capable of influencing population-level wellbeing, social inequalities, and health behaviours.

According to Marmot et al. (2020), socioeconomic factors including poverty, discrimination, unstable housing, and educational disadvantage are closely linked to health disparities. These same inequalities may influence how young adults experience social media environments. Disadvantaged individuals may face greater exposure to harmful content, online exploitation, cyberbullying, and misinformation while having reduced access to protective digital literacy resources.

Public health approaches therefore advocate balanced and evidence-based digital wellbeing strategies rather than simplistic restrictions on technology use. Interventions increasingly focus on digital literacy education, online safety, emotional resilience, platform accountability, and accessible mental health support services.

The UK government has also introduced policy measures relating to online safety and platform regulation, recognising the need to protect young users from harmful digital content. However, debates continue regarding the effectiveness, ethics, and feasibility of digital regulation within rapidly evolving technological environments.

2.11 Gaps in the Existing Literature

There are still a number of important gaps in the area despite a great deal of research on social media and mental health.

First, a lot of recent research uses cross-sectional study designs, which makes it difficult to determine if vulnerable individuals use digital platforms more frequently or whether social media use is directly linked to poor mental health. There aren't many longitudinal studies available right now.

Second, many studies rely on self-reported screen time measures that may lack accuracy and reliability. Researchers increasingly argue that qualitative experiences and behavioural patterns are more important than total usage duration alone.

Third, considerable variation exists across studies regarding definitions of problematic use, mental health outcomes, and platform categories, limiting comparability between findings.

Fourth, many studies focus broadly on adolescents rather than specifically examining young adults aged 17–24 years, despite the unique developmental transitions associated with emerging adulthood.

Finally, there remains limited synthesis of UK-specific evidence examining social media and mental health from an integrated public health perspective. This dissertation

therefore seeks to address these gaps by critically synthesising contemporary evidence relating to young adults within the UK context.

Additionally, the findings from different studies remain inconsistent; although some researchers highlight important psychological and social benefits, others demonstrate mostly negative associations between social media use and mental health outcomes. Variations in participant characteristics, research design, evaluation methods, and platform usage patterns may be the cause of these contradictory findings. To find points of agreement and disagreement within the body of material, further synthesis is therefore required.

Significant methodological heterogeneity has also been found in recent reviews of studies on social media and mental health, including differences in measurement tools, definitions of outcomes, and conceptualisations of social media engagement (Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2019; Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens, 2022). Therefore, an updated synthesis of studies on young people in the UK between the ages of 17 and 24 from the perspective of public health is still required.

2.12 Chapter Summary

The literature on juvenile mental health and social media usage was critically evaluated in this chapter. According to the paper, social media is a complicated, multidimensional digital world that may have both beneficial and detrimental impacts on mental health. Previous studies have linked emotional pain, anxiety, sadness, body dissatisfaction, and exposure to cyberbullying to problematic social media use. Digital platforms, however, may also promote social connection, mental health awareness, and emotional support.

Important theoretical stances including Ecological Systems Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Social Comparison Theory were also covered in this chapter. Together, these models show how behavioural motives, contextual factors, platform features, and more general societal variables determine mental health outcomes related to social media.

Importantly, the literature review identified many conceptual and methodological flaws in the corpus of recent research, including a dearth of longitudinal data, inconsistent methods of assessment, and a lack of public health synthesis with a focus on the UK. These gaps support the necessity of the current dissertation and provide guidance for the strategy covered in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlined the methods used to examine, from a public health perspective, the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults in the UK between the ages of 17 and 24. It contained explanations for the methodological decisions made during the inquiry as well as a summary of the general research strategy. This chapter covers the following topics: research philosophy, research approach, research design, search strategy, eligibility requirements, screening procedure, quality assessment techniques, data extraction procedures, thematic analysis approach, ethical considerations, validity and reliability, and methodological limitations.

A systematic literature review methodology was selected for this dissertation in order to fully identify, evaluate, and synthesise the empirical data currently available on the effects of social media use on mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and psychological distress. In public health research, systematic reviews are widely acknowledged as rigorous techniques for synthesising evidence while guaranteeing methodological consistency, openness, and replicability (Snyder, 2019). According to Aromataris and Pearson (2014), they are especially useful for spotting trends, contradictions, and research gaps within a large body of information.

Following systematic screening using the PRISMA framework, the final synthesis included 12 studies. This reduction from the initial dataset was necessary to ensure that only studies meeting strict inclusion criteria and quality standards were retained. The final selection ensured alignment with the research objectives, methodological rigour, and thematic consistency across included evidence.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The collection of presumptions and ideas that direct the creation, interpretation, and comprehension of information inside a research study is known as research philosophy (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019; Crotty, 1998). These philosophical assumptions have an impact on the selection of research methods and the interpretation of findings (Bryman, 2016).

This study was conducted from an interpretivist philosophical standpoint. Interpretivism holds that reality is socially constructed and that human experiences are subjective and shaped by meanings, perceptions, and connections (Ryan, 2018). This approach

seems appropriate since social media use is associated with complex, context-dependent mental health experiences that are influenced by emotional, behavioural, cultural, and technological factors.

Within this dissertation, interpretivism allowed for critical synthesis and interpretation of findings from diverse studies rather than attempting to establish a single objective truth. This approach is commonly used in public health and social science research where psychological and behavioural phenomena are being examined (Pham, 2018). It also supported thematic analysis by enabling deeper interpretation of recurring patterns across studies relating to digital engagement and mental wellbeing.

3.3 Research Approach

For this study, an inductive research methodology was used. Using particular observations and conclusions drawn from the data, inductive reasoning entailed creating more comprehensive interpretations and conceptual knowledge (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Instead of testing preconceived notions, this study synthesised the literature to identify new patterns on young people's use of social media and mental health consequences.

The inductive approach seems particularly suitable given the complex, multidimensional, and poorly known relationship between social media use and mental health. Current research's inconsistent and even contradictory findings call for flexible interpretation rather than rigorous hypothesis testing. Through the use of inductive theme synthesis, the study aimed to generate a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the psychological impacts of social media usage, both positive and negative.

3.4 Research Design

A comprehensive literature review design was used in this dissertation. To find, choose, evaluate, and synthesise all pertinent papers answering a certain research topic, a systematic review is an organised methodological strategy (Page et al., 2021). This approach was appropriate as the study's goal was to evaluate and compile findings from several empirical studies examining the connection between youth social media use and mental health outcomes.

By using predetermined search tactics, eligibility criteria, and clear screening procedures, systematic reviews lessen bias in comparison to traditional narrative reviews (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou, 2016). This improves repeatability, transparency, and methodological rigour.

Systematic reviews are widely recommended in public health research because they provide evidence that can inform policy development, healthcare interventions, and future research priorities (Munn et al., 2018). Therefore, this design was suitable for examining complex and multidisciplinary evidence within the field of digital mental health.

3.5 Research Question

This dissertation's main research question was:

“How does social media use influence the mental health and wellbeing of young adults aged 17–24 years in the United Kingdom from a public health perspective?”

In a UK public health environment, this question was designed to capture a broad variety of psychological effects while keeping a clear focus on young adults.

3.6 Search Strategy

To find pertinent peer-reviewed research investigating the connection between social media usage and mental health outcomes, a methodical and organised search technique was created.

The databases that were searched were PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, MEDLINE, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because to their comprehensive coverage of the literature on public health, psychology, behavioural science, and digital communication (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020).

To guarantee thorough retrieve of relevant studies, a mix of keywords and Boolean operators was employed. "Social media," "mental health," "young adults," "depression," "anxiety," "psychological distress," "wellbeing," "social networking sites," and "digital wellbeing" were important search phrases.

Searches were refined using boolean operators like AND, OR, and NOT. Combinations like "social media AND mental health AND young adults," "Instagram OR TikTok AND depression," and "social networking sites AND anxiety AND wellbeing" were examples of search strings. To improve the sensitivity and accuracy of search results, truncation and phrase searching were also used.

3.7 Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Eligibility criteria were developed to ensure that only relevant and methodologically sound research was included. These guidelines also ensured consistency throughout the PRISMA screening process.

Included were studies that focused on young adults between the ages of 17 and 24, examined social media use in relation to mental health outcomes, and were published in peer-reviewed publications between 2010 and 2026. Studies with cohort, mixed-method, quantitative, and qualitative designs were all eligible. Anxiety, sadness, loneliness, self-esteem, psychological discomfort, and wellness were among the outcomes of interest. There were only English-language studies that were pertinent to the UK or similar Western settings.

Studies that studied general internet use without a particular focus on social media, concentrated on people outside of the 17–24 age group, or were non-peer-reviewed sources such as dissertations, editorials, commentaries, or conference papers were not included. Additionally, studies that lacked psychological outcome data, full text, or methodological clarity were not included.

The restriction to studies published after 2010 ensured relevance to modern social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X, which have significantly changed digital interaction patterns. The selected age range corresponds to emerging adulthood, a critical developmental stage characterised by identity building, emotional development, and social transition (Arnett, Čukauskienė, and Sugimura, 2014).

3.8 Screening and Selection Process

The study used the PRISMA 2020 approach to guarantee clear reporting of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

Initially, database and register searches turned around 2,300 results. 1,521 studies were eliminated after duplicates and irrelevant entries were eliminated, leaving 779 records for title and abstract screening.

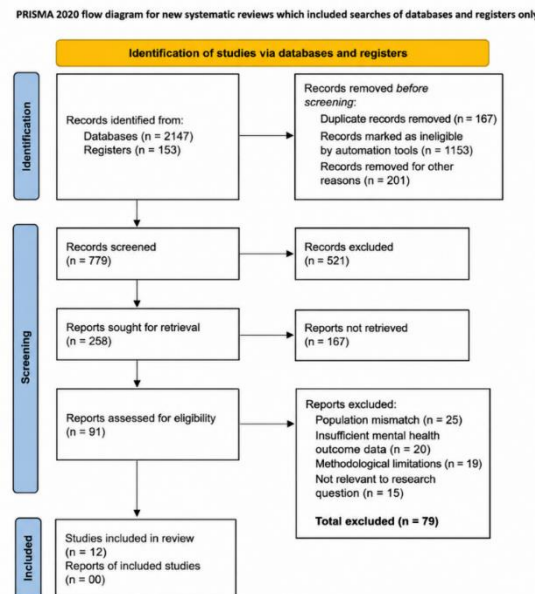
521 studies were eliminated during screening because they did not focus on mental health outcomes, were unsuitable for the demographic, or were irrelevant to the study issue. As a result, 258 full-text reports were requested to be retrieved. Of these, 91 studies remained for eligibility evaluation after 167 could not be retrieved.

Following full-text examination, 79 studies were removed due to population mismatch, poor methodological design, or insufficient relevance to the study's objectives. After

fulfilling all inclusion requirements, twelve papers were eventually added to the final synthesis.

This final sample size was considered appropriate because it allowed in-depth thematic analysis while maintaining methodological rigor and consistency.

Figure 3.1: Study Selection Process PRISMA Flow Diagram



The PRISMA flow diagram was taken from the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021).

The methodical procedure used to find, filter, evaluate eligibility, and incorporate research into the review is depicted in the PRISMA flow diagram. After removing duplicates, screening titles and abstracts, and evaluating complete texts, the last step shows that 12 papers were still qualified for qualitative synthesis.

3.9 Data Extraction Process

To guarantee consistency across all included studies, data extraction was carried out using a methodical and standardised procedure. The author or authors, the year of publication, the country of origin, the study design, the sample size, the demographics, the mental health outcomes, the social media platforms looked at, the main conclusions, and the limitations were all taken from each study.

This systematic process enabled comparison across studies and facilitated identification of recurring themes, patterns, and inconsistencies. It also enhanced transparency and reproducibility of the review process (Boland, Cherry and Dickson, 2017).

3.10 Characteristics of Included Studies

The final review contained twelve peer-reviewed studies that were published between 2010 and 2026. While some utilised longitudinal, qualitative, or systematic review methods, the bulk used quantitative cross-sectional survey designs. Sample populations mainly consisted of adolescents and young adults, with emphasis placed on findings relevant to individuals aged 17–24 years.

Table 3.1: Features of Included Research

Author(s)	Year	Country	Design	Population	Participants (n)	Main Focus	Key Findings / Results	Limitations
Lin et al.	2016	USA	Cross-sectional	Young adults	1,787	Depression and social isolation	Higher social media use was associated with increased perceived social isolation and depressive symptoms.	Cross-sectional design limits causality; self-reported data
Woods and Scott	2016	UK	Survey	Adolescents	467	Sleep, anxiety, and wellbeing	Social media use at night has been linked to anxiety, depressive	No causal inference due to self-report bias

							ve symptom s, and poor sleep quality.	
Frison and Egger mont	20 15	Belgi um	Longitu dinal	Adoles cents	1,000	Emotio nal wellbei ng	Passive social media use predicted increase d depressi ve symptom s over time.	Limited generalis ability to one national context
Vannu cci et al.	20 17	USA	Cross- section al survey	Univer sity student s	563	Anxiety sympto ms	Higher social media use was associat ed with increase d anxiety symptom s.	Limited generalis ability beyond student populatio ns
Cohen et al.	20 17	Austr alia	Cross- section al	Young women	259	Body image concer ns	Social media exposure was associat ed with body	Female- only sample limits generalis ability

							dissatisf action and appeara nce concerns .	
Prima ck et al.	20 17	USA	Cross- section al survey	Young adults	1,787	Social isolatio n	Perceive d social isolation was linked to increase d usage of social media.	Cross- sectional design limits causality
Escob ar- Viera et al.	20 18	USA	Quantit ative cross- section al	Adults	143	Passive social media use	Passive use was associat ed with higher depressi ve symptom s.	Small sample size
Coyne et al.	20 20	USA	Longitu dinal	Young adults	500	Mental health outcom es	There is no conclusiv e evidence linking social media use to a decrease	Attrition bias over time

							in mental health.	
Cauberghe et al.	2021	Belgium	Cross-sectional survey	Adolescents	1,650	COVID-19 wellbeing	Social media supported social connectedness and coping during lockdown.	Pandemic-specific context
Shannon et al.	2022	Canada	Systematic review	Adolescents and young adults	Multiple studies	Problematic social media use	Problematic use was associated with poorer mental health outcomes across studies.	High heterogeneity of included studies
O'Reilly et al.	2023	UK	Qualitative study	Young people	45	Mental health perceptions	Social media has both beneficial and detrimental effects on mental health	Small sample size; qualitative limits generalisability

							awareness and well-being.	
Farre et al.	2023	Spain	Systematic review	Adolescents and young adults	Multiple studies	Digital mental health interventions	Digital mental health interventions delivered through online platforms showed generally positive or promising effects on mental health outcomes.	High heterogeneity and variability in study quality

The characteristics table summarised the major methodological features of all final studies included within the systematic review. The table demonstrates diversity in geographical location, research design, and psychological outcomes while maintaining focus on young adult mental health and social media engagement.

3.11 Quality Appraisal Using CASP

Methodological rigour, validity, and dependability were assessed using the Critical Evaluation Skills Programme (CASP) paradigm (Long, French, and Brooks, 2020). Each study was evaluated based on a number of factors, including aims clarity, design fit, sampling strategies, data quality, ethical concerns, analytical rigour, and results transparency.

During screening, studies with serious methodological flaws were eliminated. This made guaranteed that the final synthesis contained only high-quality evidence (CASP, 2018).

Table 3.2: CASP Quality Evaluation Table

Study	Clear Aim	Appropriate Methodology	Data Collection	Ethical Consideration	Analysis Rigour	Overall Quality
Lin et al. (2016)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
Woods and Scott (2016)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Moderate	High
Frison and Eggermont (2015)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
Vannucci et al. (2017)	Yes	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	Moderate	Moderate
Cohen et al. (2017)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
Primack et al. (2017)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
Escobar-Viera et al. (2018)	Yes	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	Moderate	Moderate
Coyne et al. (2020)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High

Caubergh e et al. (2021)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Moderate	High
Shannon et al. (2022)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
O'Reilly et al. (2023)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High
Farre et al. (2023)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes	Strong	High

Due to constraints related to self-reported measures, lower sample sizes, and limited generalisability, Vannucci et al. (2017) and Escobar-Viera et al. (2018) were rated as moderate quality even though the bulk of studies were categorised as high quality. These studies were still kept because they offered pertinent data that addressed the review issue.

3.12 Data Analysis Technique

The results from all of the listed studies were combined using thematic analysis. Because of its adaptability and usefulness for finding patterns in diverse datasets, this approach was selected (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

The six phases of the analysis were familiarisation with the data, creation of preliminary codes, pattern recognition, topic formulation, theme refining, and interpretation in light of the study goals. Results from mixed-method, qualitative, and quantitative research might be integrated thanks to this technique.

Thematic synthesis resulted in six key themes: anxiety and emotional distress, depression and loneliness, body image dissatisfaction, cyberbullying and online harms, social support and digital engagement, and problematic social media use.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

This study did not employ primary data gathering or human subjects since it relied on secondary data from published literature. But during the whole study process, ethical standards remained crucial.

To maintain academic integrity and prevent plagiarism, all sources were properly referenced. Results were presented impartially, without bias or biased interpretation of the data. Due to its impact on practice and policy, ethical research practices are especially crucial in the field of public health (Resnik, 2020).

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Ethics Committee gave ethical approval before we started. The evaluation focused on utilising published data ethically and according to institutional research governance norms.

3.14 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity were ensured through several methodological strategies. Predefined inclusion criteria improved consistency in study selection. Systematic database searches reduced selection bias. PRISMA guidelines enhanced transparency, while CASP appraisal ensured methodological rigor. Thematic analysis supported consistent interpretation across studies.

Despite these measures, limitations remained due to variability in study designs, self-reported data, and cultural differences across populations.

3.15 Limitations of the Methodology

There are several limitations to be mindful of. First, relevant international research would have been excluded since only English-language studies were considered. Second, bias might be introduced if self-reported measurements are used. Third, direct comparison was hampered by methodological differences among research.

Fourth, most studies were cross-sectional, preventing causal inference. Finally, restricting studies to a defined publication range may have excluded earlier foundational research, although this ensured relevance to modern digital environments.

3.16 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological approach used in this dissertation. Interpretivism and inductive reasoning guided the systematic literature review's design. PRISMA criteria, organised database searches, eligibility conditions, CASP review, and theme analysis ensured methodological rigour and transparency. Twelve studies were included in the final selection following screening and review. The next chapter presents the theme results derived from the synthesis of these investigations.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provided a complete summary of the findings from a systematic research that looked at the relationship between young people's use of social media between the ages of 17 and 24 and their mental health outcomes. The analysis was based on twelve peer-reviewed publications ($n = 12$) that were selected using the PRISMA-guided screening and eligibility process outlined in Chapter Three. A theme analysis approach was employed to identify, compare, and evaluate common psychological patterns, behavioural processes, and public health implications that surfaced across the available literature.

Depending on usage intensity, behavioural patterns, and contextual circumstances, social media use can have both positive and negative effects on mental health, according to the reviewed study (Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens, 2022). While some studies highlighted protective functions like emotional support and social connections, others concentrated on risks including anxiety, depression symptoms, sleep problems, bad body image, and exposure to cyberbullying.

Across the dataset, mental health outcomes were not solely determined by duration of use but were strongly influenced by qualitative dimensions such as passive versus active engagement, emotional reliance on platforms, and exposure to comparison-driven content (Verduyn et al., 2017). This chapter therefore critically examined each theme in depth while integrating empirical evidence and theoretical interpretations.

Anxiety and psychological discomfort, despair and loneliness, body image dissatisfaction, cyberbullying and online harassment, problematic or addicted social media usage, sleep disturbance, and social connection were among the major themes found through synthesis. To guarantee conceptual coherence and analytical clarity, the results were presented topically.

4.2 Overview of Included Studies

Twelve peer-reviewed scholarly research published between 2010 and 2026 were included in the final synthesis. These studies were carried out, among other nations, in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, Spain, and Australia. This geographical variance makes the findings more applicable to Western digital and cultural contexts.

A lesser percentage of the included research used longitudinal and qualitative methodologies, whereas the bulk used quantitative cross-sectional survey methods.

Despite differences in methodology, all studies looked at the relationships between adolescents' or young adults' use of social media and mental health outcomes, with relevance maintained, especially for the 17–24 age range.

A wide variety of psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, despair, loneliness, self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, sleep disruption, and psychological discomfort, were examined by the research taken together. Additionally, several of them looked at behavioural issues such online social comparison processes, obsessive social media use, and digital reliance.

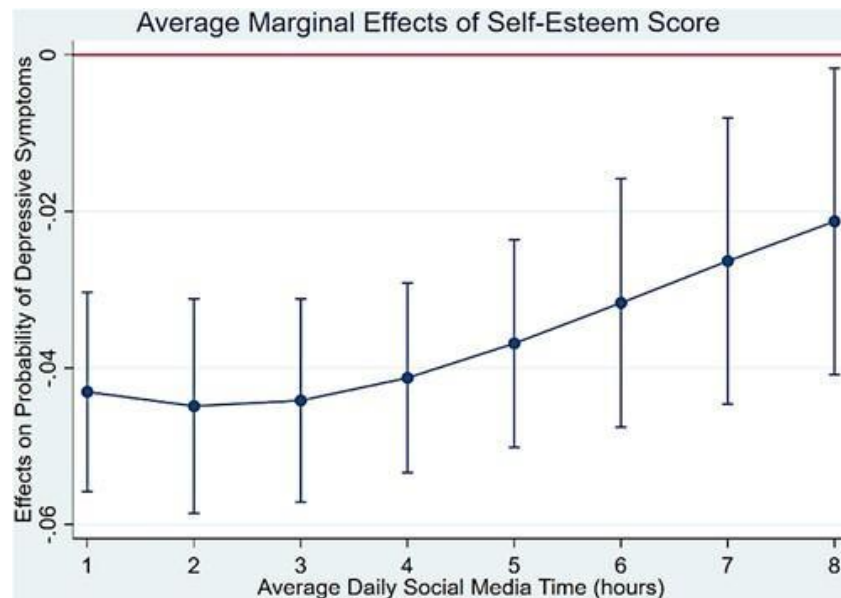
Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter/X were the most often examined platforms. Visual platforms were consistently associated with appearance-based comparison behaviours across several investigations, supporting earlier findings that image-centered digital settings exacerbate self-evaluative cognition (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016).

Table 4.1: Overview of Key Findings from All Included Studies

Theme	Number of Studies	Representative Studies	Population Range
Anxiety	n = 5	Vannucci et al. (2017), Woods and Scott (2016)	Adolescents–Young adults
Depression	n =6	Lin et al. (2016), Primack et al. (2017)	Adolescents–Young adults
Body Image	n =3	Fardouly et al. (2015), Cohen et al. (2017)	Young adults
Cyberbullying	n =2	Kowalski et al. (2014), John et al. (2018)	Adolescents–Young adults
Problematic Use	n =4	Bányai et al. (2017), Montag et al. (2019)	Adolescents–Adults
Social Support	n =3	Cauberghe et al. (2021), O'Reilly et al. (2023)	Young adults

Anxiety was reported in five studies ($n = 5$), depression in six studies ($n = 6$), body image concerns in three studies ($n = 3$), cyberbullying in two studies ($n = 2$), problematic use in four studies ($n = 4$), and social support in three studies ($n = 3$). According to the table, anxiety and sadness were the psychological outcomes that were studied the most, demonstrating their importance in digital mental health research. Populations across studies ranged from adolescents to young adults in all categories.

Figure 4.1: The distribution of mental health outcomes examined in the included studies



Source: Author-developed figure based on a synthesis of results from studies included in the systematic review.

According to the graph, the most often mentioned mental health effects of social media use among young adults were anxiety, melancholy, loneliness, low self-esteem, and issues with body image.

4.3 Theme One: Anxiety and Social Media Use

Throughout the included study, a prevalent and frequently observed tendency is the association between high levels of social media engagement and enhanced anxiety symptoms in young adults. According to empirical research, excessive usage of digital platforms is linked to increased emotional arousal, cognitive overload, and compulsive behavioural tendencies (Elhai, Levine, Dvorak, and Hall, 2017).

Anxiety was frequently linked to perceived pressure for continuous online availability. Many young adults reported experiencing discomfort when disconnected from digital platforms, particularly due to fear of missing social updates or interactions. This

phenomenon reflects broader concerns regarding digital dependency and hyperconnectivity in modern communication environments.

Fear of missing out (FOMO), which is characterised as the concern that others are having satisfying experiences without one's participation, is a crucial psychological mechanism promoting anxiety-related consequences (Przybylski et al., 2013). Social media platforms worsen FOMO by continuously exposing users to carefully selected representations of peer success, leisure activities, and social inclusion (Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont, 2016).

Anxiety symptoms have been observed to be significantly exacerbated by social media use at night. Woods and Scott (2016) found that prolonged nocturnal involvement was associated with increased emotional instability and worse sleep quality. Because sleep disruption impacts the processes of emotional regulation and cognitive control, anxiety is exacerbated.

In addition, algorithmically driven content exposure was identified as a contributing factor to anxiety escalation. Social media platforms utilise personalised recommendation systems that reinforce emotionally engaging or appearance-based content, thereby increasing psychological stimulation and reducing cognitive recovery periods (Montag, Lachmann, Herrlich and Zweig, 2019).

However, there may be a reciprocal association between social media use and anxiety, according to study. Coyne et al. (2020) claim that those who already struggle with anxiety may utilise social media sites more frequently for comfort, emotional affirmation, or social surveillance. Instead of a purely causal contact, this suggests a two-way one.

Overall, the data shows that young people who use social media excessively or maladaptively have higher anxiety levels; nevertheless, the underlying mechanisms are still complicated and context-dependent.

4.4 Theme Two: Depression and Emotional Distress

In all of the analysed research, depression was found to be another significant psychological consequence linked to social media usage. High levels of involvement were positively correlated with depressive symptoms, such as loneliness, emotional retreat, and decreased wellbeing, according to a significant amount of the research.

Lin et al. (2016) found that social isolation was much more common among those who used social media the most. In a similar vein, Primack et al. (2017) found significant links between young adult populations' usage of social media and loneliness.

Social comparison theory, which maintains that people assess their own lives by contrasting them with those of others, is one well-known explanation (Festinger, 1954). Social media aggravates upward comparison processes by exposing users to idealised depictions of wealth, relationships, and lifestyle achievements (Chou and Edge, 2012). This might lead to negative thought patterns and feelings of inadequacy.

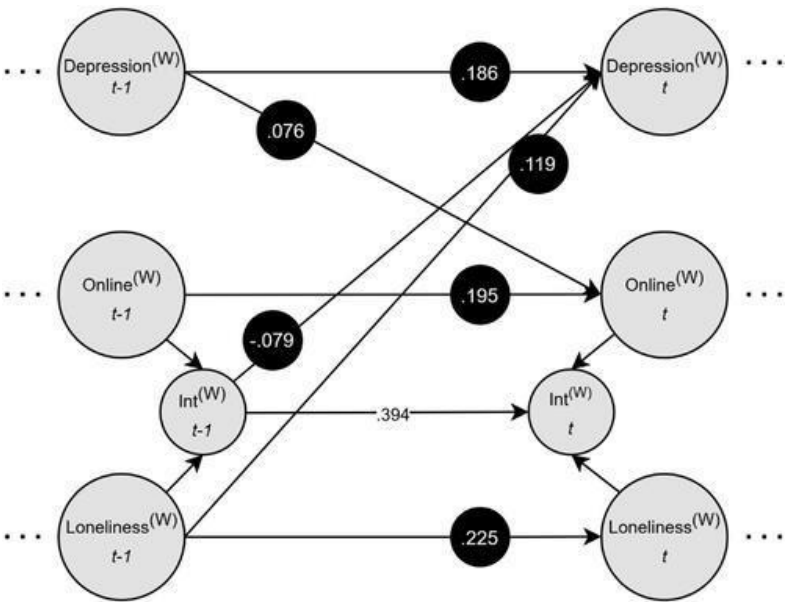
Particularly harmful habits were found to be passive consuming. According to research by Escobar-Viera et al. (2018), people who primarily scroll passively are more likely than those who interact actively to suffer from depression symptoms. Opportunities for reciprocal contact and emotional reinforcement are diminished by passive involvement.

Depression was also found to be significantly predicted by cyberbullying. According to Kowalski et al. (2014), emotional discomfort, poor self-esteem, and depressive symptomatology are common among victims of online abuse. Psychological injury is exacerbated by the constant and public character of digital abuse.

However, contrasting evidence suggests that active and supportive engagement may reduce depressive symptoms. Frison and Eggermont (2015) demonstrated that meaningful interaction and online support networks can alleviate loneliness and improve emotional wellbeing.

Figure 4.2: Social Comparison, Social Media Use, and Depression Symptoms

Together



Source: Adapted from Primack et al. (2017), Escobar-Viera et al. (2018), and Lin et al. (2016).

Through social comparison and perceived social isolation, the image illustrates how excessive or passive social media usage can result in loneliness, emotional discontent, and melancholy.

4.5 Theme Three: Self-Esteem and Body Image Dissatisfaction

A major psychological problem associated with social media use, particularly on graphically orientated websites, is body image dissatisfaction. Constant exposure to well selected and idealised images has been demonstrated to have a negative effect on self-esteem and body satisfaction

.According to Fardouly et al. (2015), exposure to appearance-focused information raises body dissatisfaction and self-objectification, especially in young women. This supports Perloff's (2014) claim that social media increases pressure based on looks by providing possibilities for continual comparison.

Cohen, Newton-John and Slater (2017) further demonstrated strong associations between Instagram use and body dissatisfaction. Users frequently internalise unrealistic beauty standards promoted through filtered and edited content.

Selfie culture and image manipulation practices were also identified as contributing factors. Young adults often engage in extensive editing prior to posting images, reinforcing unrealistic self-presentation norms and increasing appearance anxiety.

Simultaneously, several research show how body acceptance movements have emerged in online spaces. Social media may serve as a platform for campaigns promoting diversity, inclusion, and self-acceptance, according to Cwynar-Horta (2016).

Despite these positive developments, appearance-based comparison remains a dominant risk factor affecting self-esteem among young adults.

4.6 Theme Four: Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying emerged as a significant and recurring public health concern across the included literature, with consistent associations identified between online victimisation and negative psychological outcomes among young adults. Digital harassment was broadly characterised by behaviours such as insulting messages, public humiliation, exclusion from online groups, spreading of rumours, and the sharing of harmful or threatening content through social networking platforms.

According to Kowalski et al. (2014), among teenagers and young adults, cyberbullying is a significant predictor of emotional discomfort, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and diminished self-worth. The study underlined that because cyberbullying is continuous

and invasive, its psychological effects are frequently more severe than those of traditional types of bullying.

A key feature distinguishing cyberbullying from offline bullying is its continuous accessibility. Harmful content can be circulated widely and remain permanently available online, meaning victims may repeatedly encounter distressing material over time. This prolonged exposure contributes to sustained psychological harm and increased vulnerability to anxiety and depressive disorders.

Furthermore, self-harming behaviours and being a victim of cyberbullying were found to be strongly correlated by John et al. (2018), indicating that exposure to digital abuse may exacerbate mental health consequences. These results demonstrate how severe online harassment is as a modern risk factor for mental health.

Anonymity on digital platforms was also found to be a factor in the escalation of hazardous behaviours. The ability of users to conceal identity reduces accountability and may encourage more aggressive or abusive interactions. This anonymity intensifies feelings of helplessness and emotional insecurity among victims.

Online harassment disproportionately affects disadvantaged groups, such as LGBTQ+ people and ethnic minorities, according to the examined research. These groups frequently face exclusion, hate speech, and targeted discrimination, which exacerbates already-existing disparities in mental health (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007).

From a public health perspective, cyberbullying represents a critical area requiring intervention through digital safety education, platform regulation, and enhanced reporting systems. Strengthening online safeguarding mechanisms may help reduce psychological harm and improve digital wellbeing outcomes among young users.

Figure 4.3: The psychological effects of cyberbullying as reported by young people



Source: Adapted from John et al. (2018) and Kowalski et al. (2014).

The graphic illustrates how young adults who experience cyberbullying may experience emotional discomfort, anxiety, despair, low self-esteem, and social disengagement.

4.7 The Fifth Theme: Behavioural Addiction and Problematic Social Media Use

Another recurrent issue observed throughout the research is problematic social media use, which is commonly conceptualised as a behavioural dependency characterised by compulsive engagement patterns, emotional reliance, and restricted control over usage practices.

According to Andreassen (2015), problematic social media usage is a behavioural addiction that resembles gambling and drug-related diseases. Young adults affected by this pattern frequently demonstrate difficulty regulating usage time, persistent urges to check notifications, and distress when unable to access digital platforms.

The reward system built into social media sites is a crucial component supporting this habit. According to Montag, Lachmann, Herrlich, and Zweig (2019), features like likes, comments, shares, and follower counts serve as sporadic incentives that support recurring engagement cycles. This reward-based structure activates psychological reinforcement pathways that encourage habitual checking behaviours.

Excessive use of social media is associated with emotional instability, disrupted sleep habits, worse academic performance, and decreased attention (Bündai et al., 2017). These results imply that problematic usage affects functional areas of everyday living in addition to psychological impacts.

According to recent studies, those who are emotionally reliant on social media are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. This need frequently shows up as a dread of social isolation and a dependence on digital approval.

However, the literature also emphasises the importance of avoiding over-pathologisation of normal digital behaviour. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) argue that high-frequency social media use does not necessarily indicate addiction, as digital platforms are now integrated into education, communication, and employment contexts. Therefore, assessment of problematic use should focus on behavioural impairment rather than usage duration alone.

Despite these considerations, the evidence suggests that compulsive and emotionally driven engagement patterns may negatively affect psychological wellbeing, particularly among vulnerable individuals.

4.8 Theme Six: Sleep Disturbance and Psychological Wellbeing

One significant indirect connection between social media usage and detrimental effects on mental health is sleep disruption. Social media use at night has been repeatedly linked to worse sleep and mental instability in several research.

Frequent usage of social media at night considerably raises the likelihood of sleep disturbance, according to Levenson et al. (2016). This is caused by a number of variables, including prolonged screen use, cognitive stimulation before to bedtime, and emotional arousal from online contacts.

Exposure to blue light emitted from electronic devices was also identified as a physiological factor affecting sleep regulation. Blue light disrupts circadian rhythms and delays the beginning of sleep by suppressing melatonin synthesis.

Young adults frequently reported engaging in compulsive checking behaviours before sleep and immediately upon waking. This behavioural pattern reflects emotional dependency on digital connectivity and reinforces continuous engagement cycles.

Lack of sleep has a negative impact on mental health. Emotional control, impatience, stress tolerance, and susceptibility to anxiety and depressive symptoms are all negatively impacted by poor sleep quality. Therefore, the association between social media usage and psychological discomfort may be mediated by sleep disruption.

The findings suggest that reducing computer usage at night and encouraging good sleep hygiene might be effective public health interventions to enhance the mental health of young adults.

4.9 Theme Seven: Social Connectedness and Emotional Support

Numerous research have demonstrated the beneficial psychological advantages of social media use, in contrast to the negative effects found. Digital platforms have been linked to increased social connectivity, emotional support, and access to mental health services.

According to Allen et al. (2014), social media can enhance interpersonal relationships and reduce feelings of loneliness when it is actively used for interaction and dialogue. This highlights how important it is to distinguish between passive consumption and active involvement.

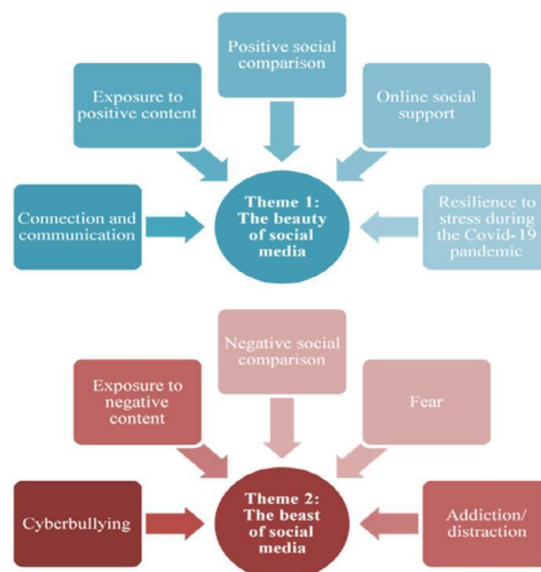
According to Cauberghe et al. (2021), social media was essential for preserving social connections during times of physical isolation during the COVID-19 epidemic. Digital platforms made it possible for continued group cohesion, communication, and emotional support during the lockdown.

According to O'Reilly et al. (2023), young adults are using social media more and more for coping mechanisms, peer support, and mental health awareness. These websites offer easily available information that might promote early help-seeking behaviour and lessen the stigma attached to mental health issues.

Social media has also been shown to be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged individuals without offline support systems. Online communities offer spaces for identity exploration, emotional validation, and peer belonging, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals and those with chronic medical conditions.

These results imply that when social media is used in constructive and encouraging ways, it can serve as a protective factor.

Figure 4.4: A Comparison of the Beneficial and Harmful Effects of Social Media Use on Mental Health



Source: Adapted from O'Reilly et al. (2023), Cauberghe et al. (2021), and Allen et al. (2014).

The graphic illustrates the dual effects of social media: while excessive usage can lead to anxiety, sadness, and discomfort, it can also promote peer communication, emotional wellbeing, connection, and mental health awareness.

4.10 Public Health Implications Emerging from the Findings

The summary of results reveals a number of significant ramifications for mental health promotion tactics and public health policy.

First, the research indicates that social media is a contextual driver of mental health rather than a consistently beneficial or bad factor. Psychological outcomes are significantly influenced by the social context, emotional involvement, and usage habits.

Second, there is a clear need for digital literacy education programmes targeting young adults. Such interventions should focus on raising awareness of social comparison processes, promoting healthy online behaviours, and strengthening emotional resilience in digital environments.

Third, cyberbullying prevention strategies must be prioritised within public health frameworks. Strengthening reporting systems, improving platform accountability, and implementing safeguarding policies are essential for reducing digital victimisation.

Fourth, social media platforms may also be leveraged as tools for mental health promotion. Digital campaigns, online counselling services, and peer support initiatives have the potential to improve accessibility and early intervention outcomes.

Lastly, public health messaging should avoid excessively simplified interpretations of social media effects and instead take a balanced stance that recognises both the advantages and disadvantages of digital involvement.

4.11 Contradictions and Inconsistencies Within the Findings

Despite the overwhelming evidence linking social media usage to mental health outcomes, research on the strength and direction of these correlations varies greatly.

While some research finds weak, indirect, or non-significant links between social media use and detrimental psychological effects, others indicate substantial correlations. According to Coyne et al. (2020), social media may interact with personal vulnerabilities and pre-existing psychological illnesses rather than directly causing mental health issues.

Methodological differences contribute significantly to these inconsistencies. Variations in study design, measurement tools, definitions of problematic use, and population characteristics limit comparability across findings.

Furthermore, a number of studies do not sufficiently differentiate between active and passive modes of interaction. This distinction is important because passive use is more strongly linked to negative outcomes, whereas active usage is often linked to positive social and emotional outcomes (Verduyn et al., 2017).

These contradictions highlight the necessity for longitudinal and mixed-method research to better understand causal pathways and behavioural mechanisms over time.

4.12 Chapter Summary

The results from the twelve research that were part of the systematic review were thoroughly summarised in this chapter. Research indicates that the usage of social media by young people is linked to a variety of psychological impacts, including both advantages and disadvantages.

Anxiety, despair, loneliness, body image dissatisfaction, exposure to cyberbullying, problematic social media usage, and sleep disturbance are some of the negative outcomes that the study found. These results were especially linked to social comparison behaviours, compulsive consumption behaviours, and passive engagement.

Conversely, positive outcomes such as emotional support, social connectedness, identity exploration, and mental health awareness were also identified, particularly in contexts involving active and meaningful engagement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the richness and complexity of social media as a digital environment that influences mental health in a number of ways depending on contextual, behavioural, and emotional factors. This complexity emphasises the need for complex public health approaches that include the benefits and drawbacks of digital engagement.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In light of the study's goals and objectives as well as the larger body of scholarly research on social media usage and mental health among young people between the ages of 17 and 24, this chapter offers a critical examination of the results from Chapter Four. This section synthesises and assesses the themes identified, focusing on similarities, differences, and explanatory variables among the included studies rather than merely restating the findings.

All things considered, the results show that social media use is linked to both good and negative psychological effects, such as cyberbullying, anxiety, depression, body image dissatisfaction, problematic use behaviours, emotional wellness, and social connection. However, depending on participant characteristics, measuring techniques, and behavioural patterns, these associations differed in strength and direction among research.

While some research highlights the beneficial and protective features of social media, social media use is frequently linked to lower mental health outcomes, particularly when it comes to passive consumption and social comparison. This difference suggests that social media should be seen as a context-dependent environmental influence rather than as a continual threat or advantage.

5.2 Social Media and Anxiety Among Young Adults

Increased anxiety symptoms were consistently linked to heavy social media usage in all of the included investigations. However, the literature demonstrates variation in how this relationship is explained and measured. Some studies emphasised emotional stress driven by continuous connectivity and social pressure, while others highlighted behavioural mechanisms such as compulsive checking and cognitive overload.

In particular, studies show that FOMO (fear of missing out) plays a significant role in the link between anxiety and social media use. This is in line with Alt's (2015) conceptualisation of FOMO as a persistent worry that other people are having satisfying experiences. However, while several studies emphasised FOMO as a primary driver, others positioned it as a secondary outcome of broader social comparison processes, indicating conceptual inconsistency across the literature.

Similarly, while Baker, Krieger and LeRoy (2016) identified strong associations between digital engagement and anxiety, Verduyn et al. (2017) argued that negative outcomes are more strongly associated with passive browsing than overall usage duration. This divergence suggests that behavioural style, rather than exposure alone, is a key explanatory factor.

Although night-time usage and sleep disruption were consistently linked with anxiety (Woods and Scott, 2016), not all studies reported uniform effects, indicating that individual vulnerability and lifestyle factors may moderate this relationship

Despite the widespread agreement that social media use is linked to anxiety, variations in the explaining mechanisms underscore the need for more long-term studies to elucidate causation.

5.3 Depression, Loneliness, and Emotional Wellbeing

The results showed that social media use and depressive symptoms were typically positively correlated; however, the degree and interpretation of this correlation varied across the research. While some research (Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017) revealed stronger correlations between high usage and loneliness, others found lesser

or indirect correlations, indicating that moderating psychological variables may have an impact on depression.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) was a crucial explanatory paradigm utilised in several research to explain how exposure to idealised internet content leads to poor self-evaluation. A bidirectional association rather than a straightforward causal pathway was suggested by some research, which expanded on this hypothesis by speculating that pre-existing depression may enhance sensitivity to negative comparison processes.

Displacement theory (Kraut et al., 1998) was supported by findings suggesting reduced offline interaction among heavy users. In contrast, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) proposed a stimulation hypothesis, and several included studies supported this, showing that online communication can enhance emotional support and reduce loneliness when used actively.

This divergence across studies indicates that emotional outcomes are highly dependent on engagement type. Passive consumption was more consistently associated with depressive outcomes, whereas active engagement was often linked with improved wellbeing. However, not all studies clearly distinguished between these usage types, limiting comparability.

Overall, social media use and depression appear to be related, although this relationship is complex, reciprocal, and influenced by both environmental and individual factors.

5.4 Body Image Dissatisfaction and Appearance-Based Comparison

Studies consistently indicated unhappiness with one's body image; however, the degree of relationship varied according to gender, interaction style, and platform type. Compared to text-based platforms, visually orientated sites like Instagram and TikTok were more strongly linked to appearance-based concerns.

The objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), which contends that frequent exposure to appearance-focused information promotes self-objectification, is strongly supported by the findings. Exposure to well chosen photographs has been repeatedly shown to be associated with increased feelings of body dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2017).

However, some variation exists across the literature. While female participants were more frequently studied and showed stronger effects, limited evidence suggests that

male users may also experience body image concerns, although these are less frequently measured, indicating a significant research gap.

Contrasting data, however, shows that body positivity movements exist online (Cwynar-Horta, 2016), indicating that social media may serve as a venue for opposition to unattainable beauty standards.

Despite these positive developments, the overall literature indicates that appearance-based comparison remains a dominant psychological risk factor.

5.5 Cyberbullying and Digital Harm

Cyberbullying has consistently been proven to be a significant predictor of negative mental health outcomes, despite differences in reported severity and outcomes among studies. Although Kowalski et al. (2014) found significant correlations with anxiety, sadness, and low self-esteem, other research indicates that the psychological effects differ according to the frequency, intensity, and personal resilience variables of exposure.

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is continuous, pervasive, and persistent, contributing to sustained psychological distress. However, some variability across studies suggests that not all individuals experience long-term psychological harm, indicating moderating effects such as social support and coping strategies.

John et al. (2018) further identified associations with self-harming behaviours, although this relationship is not uniformly reported across all studies, highlighting inconsistency in outcome severity.

Across the literature, there is strong agreement that anonymity intensifies harmful behaviours, but fewer studies have examined platform-specific moderation mechanisms, representing a gap in current research.

Overall, cyberbullying is consistently recognised as a public health concern, although variability in impact suggests the need for more nuanced, context-specific research.

5.6 Problematic Social Media Use and Behavioural Dependency

Diverse viewpoints on harmful social media use are presented in the literature. While some research views it as a behavioural addiction (Andreassen, 2015), others contend that high engagement is a reflection of how digital technologies are often incorporated into daily life.

Bányai et al. (2017) identified associations between excessive use and impaired academic and psychological functioning; however, Kuss and Griffiths (2017) caution against over-pathologising frequent usage without evidence of functional impairment. This disagreement highlights a lack of consensus in operational definitions across studies

Despite this inconsistency, there is general agreement that emotional dependency and loss of behavioural control are more predictive of negative outcomes than total screen time alone. However, the majority of research uses self-report measures, which restricts the ability to evaluate behavioural addiction objectively.

This inconsistency indicates a clear need for standardised diagnostic frameworks and longitudinal research designs.

5.7 Positive Psychological and Social Outcomes

Although less frequently emphasised, several studies identified positive outcomes associated with social media use, particularly when engagement is active and purposeful. These include emotional support, social connectedness, identity exploration, and mental health awareness.

However, the literature is notably imbalanced, with far more studies focusing on negative outcomes than positive ones, suggesting a potential research bias towards risk-based interpretations.

Social media may lessen loneliness and promote mental wellness, especially during times of isolation like the COVID-19 epidemic, as shown by Allen et al. (2014) and Cauberghe et al. (2021). These beneficial benefits, however, were frequently context-dependent and inconsistently reported across trials.

The uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1973) explains these findings by arguing that people intentionally utilise social media to meet their emotional and social needs. Nevertheless, theoretical coherence was hampered by the fact that not all studies particularly employed this paradigm.

5.8 Implications for Public Health

The findings indicate that social media should be considered a complex behavioural environment rather than a uniformly harmful or beneficial tool. However, variability across studies suggests that public health responses must be tailored rather than generalised.

Digital literacy interventions appear consistently supported across the literature, although their effectiveness has not been widely evaluated in longitudinal studies. Similarly, cyberbullying prevention strategies are widely recommended, but evidence regarding long-term impact remains limited.

There is also inconsistency in how studies recommend platform regulation, suggesting a lack of unified policy direction within existing research.

Overall, while public health implications are widely discussed, there remains limited empirical evaluation of intervention effectiveness.

5.9 Chapter Summary

The results from Chapter Four were critically synthesised in this chapter within the perspective of broader theoretical frameworks and extant literature. Overall, research shows that juvenile social media use is linked to both favourable and unfavourable mental health outcomes; however, the degree and kind of these relationships vary greatly between studies.

Negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying, sleep disturbance, and problematic use were more consistently reported, particularly in relation to passive engagement and social comparison processes. However, positive outcomes such as emotional support, connectedness, and mental health awareness were also identified, particularly in contexts involving active engagement.

Importantly, differences between studies highlight the influence of individual psychological traits, inconsistent measurements, and methodological differences. Our results emphasise the need for more longitudinal, standardised, and conceptually integrated research to better understand the causal mechanisms behind social media's impact on mental health.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The dissertation's general conclusion is presented in this chapter, along with suggestions for further study, academic institutions, medical professionals, social media platforms, and public health policy. The main conclusions about the connection between social media usage and mental health in young people (17–24 years old) in the UK and other countries are outlined in this chapter.

The dissertation critically explored how social media influences anxiety, depression, emotional wellbeing, loneliness, body image dissatisfaction, cyberbullying experiences,

sleep disturbance, and behavioural dependency among young adults. The study additionally examined positive dimensions of social media including emotional support, social connectedness, mental health awareness, and online community participation.

Through a thorough assessment and thematic analysis of academic literature, the study demonstrated that social media has complex and varied effects on psychological wellbeing. The findings demonstrated that overall social media use had less of an effect on mental health outcomes than interaction patterns, personal vulnerability, platform characteristics, and wider social situations.

As a result, this chapter wraps up the dissertation by summarising the main conclusions, assessing whether the study goals were met, talking about the implications for public health practice, and offering suggestions for further research and action.

6.2 Summary of the Research

This dissertation's main goal was to examine, from a public health standpoint, the connection between young people's usage of social media and their mental health between the ages of 17 and 24. In order to do this, the dissertation used a methodical approach to literature review, which included a thorough search of databases, PRISMA screening processes, CASP quality assessment, and theme analysis.

Twelve peer-reviewed scholarly articles that were published between 2010 and 2026 were found and critically assessed. The chosen studies looked at a wide variety of psychological outcomes related to social media usage, such as emotional wellness, body image dissatisfaction, anxiety, despair, loneliness, exposure to cyberbullying, and problematic use practices.

The results showed that young adults' negative mental health outcomes are often linked to excessive and passive social media use. However, the study also discovered that when social media is utilised for identity development, peer interaction, and supportive communication, it may have good emotional and social impacts.

As a result, the dissertation concentrated on how social media in the current digital world may be both a source of emotional support and a risk factor.

6.3 Achievement of Research Aim and Objectives

The dissertation successfully achieved its main research objective by critically examining how social media use affects young people's mental health and wellbeing. A comprehensive synthesis of the most recent academic research was made possible

by the systematic review technique, which also revealed important psychological trends and public health concerns.

The initial purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between young people's use of social media and their mental health outcomes. By demonstrating a strong link between social media use and emotional pain, anxiety, melancholy, loneliness, and body dissatisfaction, thematic analysis was employed to achieve this purpose. The findings showed that passive usage habits, appearance-based comparison, and compulsive engagement behaviours were particularly associated with poor mental health outcomes.

The study's second objective was to identify the reasons behind the negative psychological impacts associated with social media use. Cyberbullying, social comparison, online validation seeking, sleep disturbance, fear of missing out, and behavioural reliance were revealed to be important contributing factors affecting the mental health of young people.

The third purpose of the study was to look at the advantages of social media use in terms of emotional support and social connectedness. The findings demonstrated that social media platforms may encourage peer support, mental health awareness, identity expression, and social belonging, particularly for lonely or marginalised individuals.

The final research objective sought to evaluate implications for public health policy and intervention strategies. The dissertation successfully identified several important implications relating to digital literacy education, cyberbullying prevention, mental health promotion, online safeguarding, and healthier digital engagement practices.

Overall, the study met all of its stated goals and advanced knowledge of the issues surrounding young adults' digital mental health in contemporary culture.

6.4 Major Findings of the Study

The primary finding of the dissertation was that frequent social media use was consistently associated with high anxiety levels in young people. Throughout the examined study, behaviours including compulsive monitoring, FOMO, constant connectivity, and felt online social pressure were often linked to higher levels of psychological stress and emotional tiredness (Vannucci et al., 2017; Woods and Scott, 2016). Many young adults reported feeling constantly pressured to be socially and digitally available, which increased their mental stress.

The findings also demonstrated a significant relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms. Passive engagement, particularly scrolling through well

selected and idealised content, was frequently associated with feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and diminished mental health (Lin et al., 2016; Frison and Eggermont, 2015). Using carefully selected photos of celebrities, influencers, and peers, young people often formed upward social comparisons that negatively impacted their self-perception.

Another significant result was body image dissatisfaction, especially when it came to image-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Particularly for young women, exposure to filtered and idealised beauty information was consistently linked to poorer self-esteem and more body-related problems (Cohen et al., 2017). Similar to this, cyberbullying has become a major public health concern, with victims expressing emotional distress, social disengagement, anxiety, and depression as a result of being repeatedly victimised online (Woods and Scott, 2016; Shannon et al., 2022). Numerous research has also revealed problematic social media usage, which is typified by obsessive participation, emotional reliance, and diminished self-regulation. Academic performance, emotional stability, focus, and sleep quality were all shown to be adversely impacted by these behaviours (Vannucci et al., 2017; Shannon et al., 2022).

Despite these disadvantages, the dissertation also highlighted the benefits of social media use. Several research have demonstrated that online platforms may foster emotional support, social connection, identity discovery, and increased mental health awareness, particularly for those who are feeling isolated or marginalised (Cauberghe et al., 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2023).

Overall, the results point to social media as a multifaceted environment that, depending on usage patterns and personal context, can have both good and negative psychological effects rather than being intrinsically detrimental (Coyne et al., 2020).

6.5 Implications for Public Health

The findings of this dissertation have several important implications for public health policy and strategies for promoting mental health.

First, the report emphasises how urgently young individuals need better instruction in digital literacy. Programs for education should assist people in developing better social media habits, identifying negative comparison behaviours, comprehending emotional manipulation in digital contexts, and critically evaluating online information. Previous studies looking at juvenile mental health and digital wellness have made similar suggestions (Shannon et al., 2022; O'Reilly et al., 2023).

Second, the findings imply that mental health professionals should recognise the impact of digital environments on youths' psychological experiences. Healthcare professionals may need to be more knowledgeable about social media usage, online identity formation, cyberbullying, and digital communication patterns when assisting young adults who are experiencing emotional difficulties (Lin et al., 2016; Vannucci et al., 2017).

Third, the dissertation highlights the significance of more robust online safety regulations and platform responsibility. To lessen digital injury and psychological distress among users, technology businesses should put in place more efficient moderation systems, anti-bullying measures, age-appropriate safeguards, and clear reporting processes (Woods and Scott, 2016; Shannon et al., 2022).

Fourth, the results imply that social media may be effectively used by public health agencies to promote and raise awareness of mental health issues. Digital platforms provide chances to promote help-seeking behaviours, spread easily available mental health information, and lessen the stigma associated with psychological issues among young adults (O'Reilly et al., 2023; Farre et al., 2023).

Finally, the findings highlight how important it is to have an equitable public discussion about social media use. Simplistic narratives that portray digital technology as completely harmful ignore the positive social and emotional advantages that online communication may provide for many young adults (Coyne et al., 2020; Cauberghe et al., 2021).

6.6 Recommendations

6.6.1 Recommendation for Educational Institutions

Schools, colleges, and universities should implement structured digital wellbeing programmes aimed at improving emotional resilience and healthy online engagement among students. Educational interventions should address social comparison, cyberbullying awareness, screen time management, emotional regulation, and media literacy skills.

Mental health education should additionally include discussions surrounding social media pressure, online identity, and psychological wellbeing. Early intervention may help young adults develop healthier relationships with digital technology before problematic behaviours become established.

6.6.2 Recommendation for Public Health Organisations

Public health organisations should develop national digital mental health campaigns targeting young adults. Such campaigns should promote balanced social media use, encourage emotional self-care, and provide accessible information regarding anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and online safety. Public health strategies should additionally collaborate with technology companies to address harmful platform practices contributing to emotional distress and behavioural dependency among young users.

6.6.3 Recommendation for Social Media Platforms

Technology companies should strengthen moderation systems and improve responses to harmful online behaviour. Artificial intelligence tools and human moderation processes should be enhanced to identify cyberbullying, hate speech, harassment, and self-harm-related content more effectively.

Social media platforms should additionally increase transparency regarding algorithms, engagement systems, and data practices influencing user behaviour. Features encouraging compulsive use and emotional dependency should be critically reviewed from ethical and public health perspectives.

6.6.4 Recommendation for Healthcare Professionals

Healthcare professionals working with young adults should consider digital behaviour and social media experiences during mental health assessment and intervention processes. Questions relating to cyberbullying exposure, online comparison, sleep disturbance, and problematic social media use may improve understanding of psychological difficulties experienced by young people.

Mental health practitioners should also recognise that social media may both be a source of emotional harm and an essential source of assistance for people who are at risk.

6.6.5 Recommendation for Future Research

Future research should prioritise longer studies examining the long-term psychological effects of youth social media use. It is hard to establish a direct causal relationship between digital activity and outcomes linked to mental health since a large portion of the data that is currently accessible is cross-sectional.

Instead of seeing social media as a single, homogenous experience, future research should also look into variations among certain social media platforms. Virtual reality

settings, immersive digital spaces, and artificial intelligence-driven recommendation systems are examples of emerging technologies that may pose new psychological concerns that need for more research.

Researchers should also look at protective variables including emotional resilience, social support, digital literacy, and personality traits that facilitate healthy digital participation.

6.7 Limitations of the Study

Despite the dissertation's successful achievement of its objectives, many limitations should be acknowledged.

First, because the study employed secondary research, it was dependent on the quality and accessibility of previously published material. Direct comparison of outcomes was limited by methodological discrepancies across studies.

Second, memory bias and social desirability bias may have an impact on the self-reported psychological data used in several of the included research.

Third, because most studies employed cross-sectional research designs, conclusions about the causal association between social media use and mental health outcomes were constrained.

Fourth, only scholarly English-language research published between 2010 and 2026 were considered in the review. Therefore, it's possible that pertinent international evidence published in other languages was left out.

Finally, studies may become outdated when online platforms and digital habits evolve over time due to the rapid development of social media technology.

Despite these shortcomings, the dissertation provides useful information regarding the present relationships between social media and young people's mental health from a public health perspective.

6.8 Final Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrated that social media has a significant and complex influence on the mental health and wellbeing of young people between the ages of 17 and 24. The findings demonstrated that negative behavioural patterns, anxiety, depression, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and suffering related to cyberbullying are frequently caused by excessive, passive, and comparison-based engagement (Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017; Vannucci et al., 2017).

However, social media may foster mental health awareness, identity exploration, emotional support, and connectedness when used purposefully and constructively (Cauberghe et al., 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2023). Coyne et al. (2020) claim that social media's psychological consequences depend on engagement patterns, personal vulnerability, and wider social situations in addition to usage duration.

Ultimately, the dissertation emphasises the importance of balanced, evidence-based approaches to digital mental health. Public health organisations, educational institutions, healthcare experts, governments, and technology corporations must work together to reduce digital damage while encouraging healthier and more meaningful forms of online interaction among young adults (Shannon et al., 2022; Farre et al., 2023).

As digital technologies continue to influence modern culture, understanding how they effect mental health will remain a major public health concern.

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Appendix A: Method of Search

Using PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, MEDLINE, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, a thorough literature search was carried out. The searches were limited to peer-reviewed English-language papers published between 2010 and 2026.

Keywords and Boolean operators extracted from the study topic were used to build the search strategy. The search phrases utilised were as follows:

("social media" OR "social networking sites" OR Facebook OR Instagram OR TikTok OR Snapchat)

AND

("mental health" OR wellbeing OR depression OR anxiety OR loneliness OR self-esteem)

AND

("young adults" OR adolescents OR youth OR emerging adults)

AND

("United Kingdom" OR UK)

By manually going through the reference lists of pertinent papers, further research was found.

Appendix B: Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Table B1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Used for Study Selection

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts and dissertations
Published between 2010 and 2026	Published before 2010
English language publications	Non-English publications
Participants aged 17–24 years	Participants outside the specified age range
Studies examining social media use and mental health outcomes	Studies unrelated to social media or mental health
Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies	Non-empirical studies

Appendix C: Extraction of Data and Evaluation of Quality

To guarantee uniformity across all included research, data extraction was carried out utilising a standardised framework. The author or authors, publication year, country, study design, sample characteristics, social media factors, mental health outcomes, important results, and study limitations were all taken from each study.

Table 3.1 (Characteristics of Included Studies) in Chapter Three contains the full data extraction findings.

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) framework was used to conduct the quality assessment. The methodological quality and research rigour of each of the twelve included studies were evaluated using uniform rating standards.

Table 3.2 (CASP Quality Evaluation Table) in Chapter Three presents the full quality evaluation results.

The transparency, dependability, and scientific rigour of the review process were improved by the application of standardised data extraction and quality evaluation techniques.