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Abstract

Social media is a major part of everyday life for young adults in the United Kingdom and plays an important role in how they communicate, build relationships and express themselves. While social media can offer opportunities for connection and support, there are growing concerns about how it may affect mental health. This research report explores the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults aged 18–30 living in the UK.

The study used a secondary research design and followed a scoping review approach to examine existing research on this topic. Three peer-reviewed UK studies were selected based on their relevance and quality: Kelly et al. (2018), O'Neill et al. (2021) and Winstone et al. (2022). These studies were analysed using thematic analysis to find common patterns and key ideas across the findings.

Two main themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme showed that higher and more intense social media use was linked to negative mental health outcomes, particularly symptoms of anxiety and depression. The second theme highlighted that the impact of social media is strongly influenced by user behaviour and online experiences, such as emotional involvement, cyberbullying, sleep disruption and exposure to distressing content. Together, these findings suggest that how young adults use social media can be just as important as how much time they spend online.

Overall, this review suggests that social media is not harmful, but certain patterns of use and negative experiences can increase the risk of poor mental health. The findings highlight the importance of promoting healthier and more balanced social media use, as well as increasing awareness of digital wellbeing among young adults. Future research should focus on identifying protective strategies that support positive online engagement

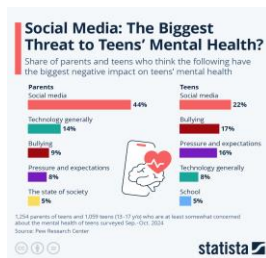
1. Introduction

Social media plays an important role in the lives of young adults in the United Kingdom. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter are used daily to stay connected with friends, share experiences and keep up with the rest of the world. For a lot of these young adults, social media is not only used for entertainment it is a key part of how they communicate, build their relationships and express who they are. However, as people use social media increasingly there are growing worries about how it affects mental health. Some young adults report feeling anxious overwhelmed or pressured online, while others say these platforms help them feel supported and connected. This mix of positive and negative experiences shows how complex the relationship between social media and mental wellbeing can be.

Research made in the United Kingdom has highlighted this complexity. A study by Kelly et al. (2018) found that high levels of social media use were linked to increase depressive symptoms in young people, and that the issue of cyberbullying, poor sleep and negative body image played a role in this. Although the study focused on teenagers, many of the same challenges continue into young adulthood like, O'Neill et al. (2021) found that during COVID –19 lockdown people who spent long periods consuming online media – including social media – reported higher levels of anxiety and depression. These findings suggest that the amount and type of online content young adults are exposed to can have a strong impact on their wellbeing. A more recent study by Winstone et al. (2022) showed that different patterns of social media use were linked to different mental health outcomes, showing that the way individuals use social media can matter just as much how as how often they use it.

Young adults by the ages of (18-30) is a time of big life changes starting by university, entering the workforce, forming serious relations and gaining their own independence during this period many people are still trying to figure out who they are and where they may fit in, which can make them more vulnerable to social media pressures, comparisons and negative interactions online. All this because social media is such a big part of everyday life for this age group, it is important to understand how this may influence their mental health both positively and negatively

Figure 1:



statista (Statista, 2021)

Rationale

Young adults in the United Kingdom use social media as a central part of their daily lives, replying on platforms to communicate, build relationships and express their identities. Because social media plays such an important role in their social and emotional development, concerns have grown about its impact on mental health. Research suggests that young adults may be particularly vulnerable to experiences such as anxiety, loneliness, negative comparison with others and sleep disruption, all of this can be influenced by online activity (Kelly et al., 2018).

Peer-reviewed studies conducted in the UK highlight several ways in which social media use can affect psychological wellbeing. Kelly et al. (2018) found that higher levels of social media use were associated with increased depressive symptoms, partly due to cyberbullying, poor sleep and negative body image. O'Neill et al. (2021) similarly reported that heavy exposure to online media during the COVID-19 lockdown was linked to higher levels of anxiety and depression among adults in the United Kingdom. More recently, Winstone et al. (2022) found diverse types of adolescent's social media users and showed that certain patterns of online behaviour were associated with poorer future mental health outcomes. Although the study focused on adolescents, these behavioural patterns, such as high emotional investment or problematic use are also a common among young adults aged 18-30. Understanding how these findings apply to young adults is important because this age group faces significant life transitions, including entering higher education, beginning careers, and forming new social networks. These pressures may make them more sensitive to online comparison, criticism, and exposure to distressing content. At the same time, social media can provide social support and help reduce feelings of isolation, showing that its effects are not universally negative.

This research aims to bring together evidence from peer-reviewed United Kingdom studies to explore how social media use influences the mental health of young adults aged 18-30. By finding factors that lead to positive or negative outcomes, the findings may contribute to the development of educational programmes and digital wellbeing initiatives that promote safer and more beneficial social media use.

Review Question

The research investigates how social media activities affect the mental health of British young adults between 18 and 30 years old.

Objectives

- To investigate social media usage effects on mental health of UK young adults while studying both beneficial and detrimental psychological outcomes from social media interaction.
- research will show guidelines to help people keep healthy online activities which supports their mental health.

2. Background

Social media is a big part of everyday life for young adults in the United Kingdom. Many people aged 18-30 use platforms like instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and twitter to talk to friends share their lives and stay connected with the world. Because social media is used so often and in so many ways, it has become an important space where young adults build relationships, from their identities and express their feelings. This also means that the things they experience online can have a real impact on how they think and feel.

Over the past few years, concerns about young adults' mental health have grown. Anxiety, depression and loneliness are being reported more often, and some of these issues appear to be linked to the way people use social media for example constantly comparing themselves to others, seeing unrealistic images or lifestyles, receiving negatives comments or messages, and staying up late scrolling can all affect wellbeing. This has led researchers to look more closely at how social media might contribute to these challenges.

Several studies carried out in the United Kingdom help us understand this better. Kelly et al. (2018) found that spending a lot of time on social media was linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms in young people, especially when issues like cyberbullying, poor sleep and body image worries were involved. O'Neill et al. (2021) showed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, people who spent extended periods consuming online media, including social media reported higher levels of anxiety and depression. This suggests that the type of content young adults see online can influence their emotional wellbeing. Winstone et al. (2022) added another important insight they discovered that different patterns of social media use are linked to different patterns of social media use are linked to different mental health outcomes. In other words, *how young people use social media matters as much as how they use it.*

All this highlights that social media can have both positive and negative effects. On one hand, it helps young adults stay connected, build friendships and find support. On the other hand, it can also increase pressure, comparison, and exposure to harmful content. Since young adulthood is a time of major life changes, such as starting university building careers and forming new relationships. Young people might be especially affected by online experiences. Understanding this context is important for exploring how social media influences their mental health and finding ways to support healthier online habits.

3. Methods

This research uses secondary research design and follows the scoping review approach to explore how social media use affects the mental health of young adults aged 18-30 in the United Kingdom. A scoping review is right because it allows to look at a wide range of existing research and find common themes across different studies, instead of limiting the review to one specific outcome. The review focuses on three peer-reviewed UK studies that were chosen because they relate to social media use and mental health in young people: Kelly et al (2018), O'Neill et al. (2021) and Winstone et al. (2022)

Databases to be used

- Google Scholar
- UWTSD Library

I searched using simple combinations of keywords such as:

“Social media and mental health”, “young adults Uk”, “anxiety”, “depression”, “wellbeing”, “social comparison”, “user types”

Operators like AND, OR and NOT were used to help narrow or widen the search when I needed.

During my study I selected three peer reviewed UK studies because they were most relevant to my topic and met all my criteria. The authors were:

- Kelly et al. (2018)
- O'Neill et al. (2021)
- Winstone et al. (2022)

Inclusion Criteria

I included studies that:

- Were peer-reviewed
- Were published between 2015 and 2025
- Focused on UK participants
- Looked at people aged 18-30 or younger groups whose findings still apply to young adults.
- Explored the link between social media use and mental health

All three of my selected articles met these conditions.

Exclusion Criteria

I excluded studies that:

- Were not peer-reviewed
- Were not based in the UK
- Were published before 2015
- Did not discuss mental health outcomes
- Focused on children under 13 or older adults with no relevance to my age group

This helped me make sure that only the most relevant and reliable studies were used.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis – (Braun and Clarke, 2021)

When my three articles were selected, I read each one carefully and took notes on the key points. I used thematic analysis to find patterns across the studies. To be able to this I followed Braun and Clarke's six steps, which included:

- Reading the studies several times
- Highlighting important ideas
- Grouping similar codes together
- Identifying the main themes that appeared across the studies
- Writing a summary of these themes showed

From this process, themes such as social comparison, cyberbullying, problematic use and emotional wellbeing appeared across the three articles.

5) Ethical Considerations

Because this research used already published studies, there were no direct participants involved. I made sure to use credible, peer-reviewed sources, and I referenced everything using the Harvard cite them right format. I also ensured that the authors work was represented accurately.

4. Results

The table below shows the characteristics of the study selected in the scooping review.

Author/s and publication year	Aim	Methodology and methods	Findings
1. Kelly et al. (2018)	To examine the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms among young people in the UK, and to identify factors that may explain this relationship such as cyberbullying, sleep disruption and body image concerns.	Used data from over 10,000 participants from the UK millennium cohort study to examine the link between social media use and depressive symptoms, including the influence of factors such as cyberbullying and sleep.	Higher social media use was linked to increase depressive symptoms, especially among girls, with cyberbullying, poor sleep and body image concerns helping to explain this relationship.
2. O'Neill et al. (2021)	To examine the relationship between media consumption, including social media use and mental health outcomes among adults in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdown.	This quantitative cross-sectional study used an online survey of UK adults during the COVID-19 lockdown to examine the association between media and social media use and	Higher levels of media and social media use were associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression suggesting that frequent exposure to online content

		symptoms of anxiety and depression using validated measures	during stressful periods can negatively affect mental wellbeing.
3. Winstone et al. (2022)	To examine different patterns of social media use among young people in the UK and how these patterns are associated with mental health and wellbeing over time.	This quantitative longitudinal study analysed UK survey data to identify different social media user types and examine how these patterns of use were linked to later mental health and wellbeing outcomes.	Different patterns of social media use were linked to different mental health outcomes, with more emotionally involved users experiencing poorer wellbeing over time.

From the analysis of the findings, two themes have been generated.

Themes	
Theme1	Social media use and negative mental health outcomes
Theme2	The role of user behaviour and online experiences.

Theme 1 social media use and negative mental health outcomes

Across the studies, higher levels of social media use were linked to poorer mental health, particularly increased anxiety and depressive symptoms. Kelly et al. (2018) found that young people who spent three or more hours a day on social media, especially those using it for five hours or more reported higher levels of depressive symptoms. Like O'Neill et al (2021) showed that high levels of media use during the COVID 19 lockdown were associated with increased anxiety and depression.

Theme 2 The role of user behaviour and online experiences.

The findings of the studies suggest that the impact of social media on mental health is strongly influenced by how individuals use these platforms and the experiences they have online Kelly et al. (2018) found that negative experiences such as cyberbullying, poor sleep and concerns about body image played a key role in explaining the link between social media use and depressive symptoms

5. Discussion

This scoping review explored how social media use is linked to the mental health of young adults in the UK by examining findings from three peer-reviewed studies. Two main themes emerged from the analysis: social media use and negative mental health experiences.

Together these themes show that while social media is a normal part of young adults' lives certain ways of using it may negatively affect mental wellbeing. These findings also show that mental health outcomes are influenced by how social media is used. Negative online experiences such as cyberbullying, poor sleep and exposure to distressing content were linked to poorer mental health Kelly et al. (2018,) O'Neill et al. (2021). In addition, Winstone et al (2022) highlighted that emotionally involved users were more vulnerable to negative outcomes. Overall, these results suggest that promoting healthier and more balanced social media use may help reduce the risk of poor mental health among young adults.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The review helps to show that social media a normal and important part of young adults' everyday lives, but its impact on mental health depends on how it's used and experienced. Rather than being purely positive or negative social media can affect individuals in different ways based on their behaviour emotional involvement and personal circumstances. Looking at social media in this way allows for a more balanced understanding of its role in mental health.

Focusing on young adults is particularly important, as this stage of life involves a lot of changes and pressures that can shape how online experiences are felt and interpreted. By bringing the need for greater awareness, reflection and support around social media use. Overall, it encourages a more thoughtful approach to digital engagement and provides a foundation for future research and wellbeing strategies aimed at helping young adults navigate online spaces in healthier way.

These are the recommendations for the future:

- Encourage balanced social media use: Young adults should be supported in developing awareness of their social media habits, particularly how different platforms and types of content affect their mood and mental wellbeing.
- Promote positive online behaviour: Educational initiatives should raise awareness about the impact of cyberbullying, social comparison and negative online interactions, helping young adults develop healthier ways of engaging online.
- Integrate digital wellbeing support: Universities, colleges and mental health services should include digital wellbeing guidance within existing support programmes, focusing on managing screen time, emotional responses and online pressures.
- Support platform-level responsibility: Social media platforms should be encouraged to promote safer online environments by offering tools that limit exposure to harmful content and provide easy access to mental health resources.
- Develop targeted future research: Further research should focus specifically on young adults aged 18–30, exploring protective factors such as positive online communities and mindful social media use, as well as long-term mental health outcomes.

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