

# **The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Young People in the UK: A Scoping Review**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose:**

This study explores the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in the United Kingdom, examining both the positive and negative effects of social media use on psychological wellbeing.

### **Methodology:**

A secondary research design was adopted using a scoping review approach. Three peer-reviewed UK-based studies published from 2016 onwards were selected and analysed. Data were collected from academic databases including Google Scholar, ProQuest and the UWTSD Library. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns across the selected studies.

### **Findings:**

The analysis identified two main themes. Firstly, social media use was associated with negative mental health outcomes, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and poor sleep, often linked to social comparison and cyberbullying. Secondly, social media also demonstrated positive effects, such as providing social support, reducing feelings of isolation and improving access to mental health information.

### **Conclusion:**

Overall, the findings suggest that social media has a complex and dual impact on the mental health of young people in the UK. While excessive use can be harmful, balanced and responsible use may offer important benefits. The study highlights the need for increased awareness, education and support to promote safe social media use among young people.

## Introduction

This research aims to explore the impact of social media use on the mental health of young people in the United Kingdom. Social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create, share and interact with content, including applications such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Mental health encompasses an individual's emotional, psychological and social wellbeing, influencing how people think, feel and behave. Young people, typically defined as individuals in adolescence and early adulthood, are among the most active users of social media and engage with these platforms on a daily basis.

In recent years, social media use among young people in the UK has increased significantly, becoming embedded in communication, identity formation and social interaction. Evidence suggests that young adults spend several hours per day online, reflecting the growing role of digital technologies in shaping social experiences (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2024). This widespread use has raised important questions about the potential implications for mental health. Research from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) highlights that social media plays a central role in young people's lives, but its influence on wellbeing remains a growing public health concern (NIHR, 2023). Similarly, national reports from the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) emphasise that social media has transformed how young people interact, learn and access information, while also introducing new risks to mental health (RSPH, 2017).

A substantial body of research suggests that high levels of social media use may be associated with negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and poor sleep (Keles et al., 2020). UK-based evidence highlights concerns such as cyberbullying, social comparison and exposure to harmful content as key contributing factors to declining mental wellbeing (UK Parliament, 2019). In addition, literature reviews have identified links between social media use and psychological distress, although these relationships are often complex and influenced by multiple factors rather than direct causation (Keles et al., 2020). The NHS literature review further highlights concerns about associations between social media use and self-harm, suicidality and exposure to harmful online communities, particularly among vulnerable groups (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2024).

However, social media is not solely harmful. Research consistently describes it as a "double-edged sword", offering both risks and benefits (Sala et al., 2024). Positive aspects include opportunities for social connection, emotional support, identity development and access to mental health information. Many young people use social media to maintain

relationships, seek advice and access supportive communities, which can reduce feelings of isolation and improve wellbeing (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2024). Reports such as *#StatusofMind* also highlights that social media can promote a sense of belonging and provide valuable support networks (RSPH, 2017). Furthermore, broader evidence suggests that the impact of social media depends on how it is used, the type of content engaged with, and individual characteristics, rather than simply the amount of time spent online (Sala et al., 2024).

Overall, current research presents a complex and mixed picture. While there are clear concerns about the negative effects of social media on mental health, there is also evidence of positive outcomes. Many studies highlight that associations between social media use and mental health are often weak or inconsistent, and that factors such as individual vulnerability, type of use and online experiences play a significant role in shaping outcomes (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2024). This highlights the need for a balanced and critical understanding of the topic, particularly within a UK context.

Understanding both the positive and negative effects of social media is essential for health and social care professionals, as it can inform effective interventions, policies and support strategies aimed at improving young people's wellbeing.

### **Review Question**

What does current research reveal about social media's effects on the mental health of young people in the UK?

### **Objectives**

- To explore existing research on social media use among young people in the UK
- To identify the impact of social media on mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and wellbeing
- To examine both the positive and negative effects of social media use
- To provide recommendations for health and social care practice based on the findings

## Background

The use of social media among young people in the United Kingdom has increased significantly over the past decade, becoming a central aspect of everyday life. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat are widely used for communication, entertainment and social interaction. Concerns about young people's mental health have also risen, with increasing numbers of adolescents experiencing conditions such as anxiety and depression. This has led to growing interest in understanding the role that digital environments, particularly social media, may play in influencing mental wellbeing (Keles et al., 2020).

Research suggests that social media use can have both negative and positive effects on mental health. On one hand, excessive use has been associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, poor sleep quality and low self-esteem (Keles et al., 2020). A systematic review by Keles et al. (2020) found that various aspects of social media use, including time spent online, level of engagement and addictive behaviours, are correlated with psychological distress in adolescents. However, the review also highlights methodological limitations in existing studies, particularly the reliance on cross-sectional designs, meaning causal relationships cannot be firmly established. Factors such as cyberbullying, social comparison and exposure to unrealistic content are commonly identified as risks, with adolescents comparing themselves to idealised online images, negatively impacting body image and self-worth.

Additionally, prolonged screen time may disrupt sleep patterns, further affecting mental health outcomes. Broader evidence suggests that higher levels of social media use are associated with increased psychological distress and depressive symptoms, although the strength of this relationship is often small and influenced by other variables (Sala et al., 2024). The umbrella review by Sala et al. (2024) highlights that the relationship between social media use and mental health is shaped by multiple interacting factors, including individual characteristics, patterns of use and platform design. This suggests that the impact of social media is not uniform but varies depending on context and user behaviour.

On the other hand, social media can also provide important benefits. It can facilitate social connection, particularly for individuals who may feel isolated, and offer access to mental health information and support networks. Research indicates that social media can help adolescents express themselves and receive social support, which may contribute positively to wellbeing (Keles et al., 2020). Similarly, wider evidence suggests that digital platforms can strengthen relationships and reduce loneliness when used appropriately (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Online communities can promote a sense of belonging and provide

opportunities for self-expression, highlighting the positive potential of social media engagement.

In the UK context, understanding the relationship between social media use and mental health is important for health and social care practice. Professionals working with young people must be aware of both the risks and benefits in order to provide appropriate support and guidance. This includes promoting safe and responsible use of social media, as well as recognising when online behaviours may be contributing to mental health difficulties.

Therefore, examining current research evidence is essential to inform policy, practice and future interventions.

## **Methods**

This study adopts a secondary research design using a scoping review methodology to examine existing literature on the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in the UK. A scoping review was selected as it allows for the identification, analysis and synthesis of key research findings across a broad and complex topic, particularly where research evidence is diverse and not yet fully established.

### **Data sources and search strategy**

Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles were identified through electronic databases, including the UWTSD Library, Google Scholar and ProQuest. These databases were selected due to their access to a wide range of academic literature within health and social care. The search initially identified a number of articles, which were screened by title and abstract to remove irrelevant studies. Full texts were then reviewed to ensure they met the inclusion criteria.

### **Keywords**

The search strategy included the following keywords:

“social media”, “mental health”, “young people”, “adolescents”, “UK”, “anxiety”, and “depression”.

These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to refine search results.

### **Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Published from 2016 onwards
- UK-based studies
- Focus on social media use
- Focus on young people or adolescents
- Written in English

#### **Exclusion criteria:**

- Books, reports and websites
- Studies published before 2016
- Non-UK based research
- Studies not related to social media or mental health
- Studies focusing on adults or children outside the defined age group
- Articles not written in English

A total of three studies were selected for inclusion in this review based on these criteria.

#### **Data analysis**

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the selected studies. This involved carefully reading each article, identifying recurring patterns and grouping them into key themes. Themes were developed by comparing similarities and differences across the studies, allowing for the synthesis of findings.

#### **Ethical considerations**

As this study is based on secondary data, there are minimal ethical risks. No primary data was collected; therefore, ethical approval was not required. However, ethical standards were maintained by accurately representing findings, avoiding data manipulation, and properly citing all sources using Harvard referencing. This ensures academic integrity and transparency in the research process.

#### **Results**

A total of three peer-reviewed studies were selected for this scoping review, focusing on the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in the UK. The main characteristics of the selected studies are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of selected studies**

| <b>Author(s)<br/>&amp; Year</b> | <b>Aim</b>                                                                          | <b>Methods</b>                                   | <b>Key Findings</b>                                                                   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Plackett et al. (2023)          | To examine the longitudinal relationship between social media use and mental health | Longitudinal study (UK adolescents aged 10–15)   | Weak association between social media use and mental health; self-esteem plays a role |
| Kelly et al. (2018)             | To assess the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms         | Longitudinal cohort study (UK Millennium Cohort) | Higher social media use linked to increased depressive symptoms, especially in girls  |
| O'Reilly (2020)                 | To explore adolescent and practitioner perspectives                                 | Qualitative focus groups                         | Social media has both positive and negative effects (“good, bad and ugly”)            |

## **Themes**

From the analysis of the selected studies, three main themes were identified.

### **Theme 1: Negative impact of social media on mental health**

The findings from the reviewed studies suggest that social media use is associated with negative mental health outcomes among young people. High levels of use were linked to increased symptoms of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. For example, Kelly et al. (2018) found that adolescents who spent more time on social media reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, with stronger effects observed among female participants.

Several mechanisms were identified to explain this relationship. Increased social media use was associated with poor sleep, exposure to online harassment and lower self-esteem, all of

which contributed to poorer mental health outcomes. Similarly, O'Reilly (2020) reported that adolescents and practitioners recognised risks such as social comparison, pressure to gain approval (e.g. likes), and disrupted sleep patterns.

However, not all findings were consistent. Plackett et al. (2023) found only a weak and non-significant relationship between social media use and later mental health problems, suggesting that the association may be influenced by other factors rather than direct causation.

## **Theme 2: Positive aspects of social media use**

Despite the negative effects, the studies also identified positive aspects of social media use. Social media platforms were found to provide opportunities for social connection, emotional support and communication. O'Reilly (2020) highlighted that adolescents use social media to maintain friendships, reduce stress and feel less isolated.

In addition, social media can support wellbeing by enabling young people to express themselves and access peer support networks. Some participants reported that social media helped them cope with stress and provided a sense of belonging.

Plackett et al. (2023) also suggested that social media may enhance social connectedness, although this does not always translate into improved mental health outcomes.

## **Theme 3: Factors influencing the impact of social media**

In addition to the positive and negative effects identified, the findings suggest that the impact of social media on mental health is influenced by a range of individual and contextual factors. One key factor is gender. Kelly et al. (2018) found that the association between social media use and depressive symptoms was stronger among female adolescents, indicating that girls may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use.

Self-esteem also emerged as an important factor. Plackett et al. (2023) suggested that self-esteem may influence how young people interpret and respond to social media interactions, with lower self-esteem potentially increasing susceptibility to negative outcomes. This highlights that the psychological impact of social media is not solely dependent on usage levels but also on individual characteristics.

Furthermore, the type and pattern of social media use appear to play a significant role. O'Reilly (2020) found that active and supportive use, such as communication with friends,

can have positive effects, whereas passive use, including social comparison and monitoring others, is more likely to contribute to negative mental health outcomes. This suggests that how social media is used may be more important than how much it is used.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in the UK. Overall, the findings from the selected studies suggest that social media has a complex and dual impact, with both negative and positive effects on mental wellbeing.

A key strength of this study is the comparison between different types of research evidence, which highlights inconsistencies in the existing literature. For example, while Kelly et al. (2018) identified a strong association between higher social media use and increased depressive symptoms, particularly among girls, Plackett et al. (2023) reported only a weak and non-significant relationship. This difference may be explained by variations in study design, sample characteristics and analytical approaches. Kelly et al. (2018) utilised a large cohort dataset and identified indirect pathways such as poor sleep, cyberbullying and low self-esteem, whereas Plackett et al. (2023) controlled for baseline mental health and socio-demographic factors, reducing the strength of the association. This suggests that social media may not be a direct cause of poor mental health, but rather interacts with other underlying factors.

This distinction highlights an important issue within the literature, namely the difference between correlation and causation. Much of the existing research, including large-scale studies, identifies associations between social media use and mental health outcomes but does not establish a direct causal relationship. UK policy evidence also supports this, emphasising that current findings are largely correlational and should be interpreted with caution (UK Parliament, 2019). Similarly, Keles et al. (2020) found that while social media use is linked to anxiety and depression, the overall strength of the relationship is relatively small and influenced by methodological limitations. This reinforces the need for more longitudinal and experimental research to better understand causal mechanisms.

Another important finding relates to individual differences in how social media affects mental health. Kelly et al. (2018) identified stronger negative effects among female adolescents, suggesting that gender plays a significant role. This may be linked to higher levels of social comparison and body image concerns among girls. In addition, Fassi et al. (2025) demonstrated that adolescents with existing mental health conditions experience social

media differently, reporting greater emotional sensitivity to online feedback and increased engagement in social comparison. This suggests that vulnerable individuals may be more negatively affected by social media, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions.

Furthermore, the findings support the view that the impact of social media depends not only on the amount of use but also on how it is used. Sala et al. (2024) emphasise that factors such as type of engagement, content exposure and individual characteristics play a crucial role in shaping mental health outcomes. This aligns with the findings of O'Reilly (2020), which demonstrated that social media can simultaneously provide support and contribute to harm. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on reducing screen time, it may be more effective to promote healthy and mindful patterns of use.

The results indicate that high levels of social media use are associated with increased risks of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem among young people. For example, Kelly et al. (2018) found that increased social media use was linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms, particularly among female adolescents. Similarly, O'Reilly (2020) identified factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying and pressure for online validation as key contributors to poor mental health outcomes. These findings support wider UK evidence suggesting that social media can negatively affect sleep, body image and emotional wellbeing.

However, the findings are not entirely consistent. Plackett et al. (2023) reported only a weak association between social media use and mental health outcomes, suggesting that the relationship may not be directly causal. This is supported by wider research indicating that many studies in this field are correlational and do not establish cause-and-effect relationships. Furthermore, Fassi et al. (2025) found that while adolescents with mental health conditions tend to spend more time on social media, the relationship is influenced by individual differences such as type of condition, social comparison behaviours and emotional responses to online feedback. This suggests that social media alone is not the sole cause of poor mental health but interacts with other psychological and social factors.

Despite these risks, the findings also demonstrate that social media can have beneficial effects. O'Reilly (2020) highlighted that social media can support social connection, reduce feelings of isolation and provide emotional support. For some young people, online communities offer a sense of belonging and opportunities for self-expression. This indicates that the impact of social media is not entirely negative but depends on how it is used.

## **Importance for health and social care**

The findings of this study have important implications for health and social care practice. Professionals working with young people should be aware of the potential risks associated with excessive social media use, including its impact on mental health and wellbeing. Early identification of problematic use, such as excessive screen time or exposure to online harm, is essential in preventing more serious mental health issues.

At the same time, practitioners should recognise the potential benefits of social media and incorporate it into supportive interventions where appropriate. Digital platforms can be used to provide mental health education, promote awareness and connect individuals with support services. Promoting balanced and responsible social media use is therefore essential.

## **Limitations of the research**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the use of a secondary research design means that the findings are dependent on the quality and scope of the selected studies. Secondly, only a small number of articles were included in the scoping review, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, differences in study design, sample size and methodology across the selected studies may affect the consistency of the results. Furthermore, much of the existing research in this field is correlational, making it difficult to establish causation between social media use and mental health outcomes. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study used a scoping review approach to explore the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in the UK. The findings indicate that social media has a complex and multifaceted relationship with mental wellbeing. Evidence from the selected studies suggests that higher levels of social media use are associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, particularly among certain groups such as female adolescents. However, the findings also demonstrate that this relationship is not straightforward, as some studies identified only weak or non-significant associations, highlighting the influence of other factors such as individual vulnerability and patterns of use.

In addition, social media was found to have positive effects, including promoting social connection, providing emotional support and offering access to mental health information.

This suggests that social media itself is not inherently harmful, but its impact depends on how it is used and the context in which it is experienced. Overall, the findings emphasise the need for a balanced understanding of social media use rather than viewing it as purely negative or positive. Furthermore, future research should focus on longitudinal and experimental designs to better understand causal relationships between social media use and mental health outcomes. In addition, policymakers should consider developing evidence-based guidelines and regulations to promote safer online environments for young people.

## **Recommendations**

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Promote digital literacy and awareness among young people to encourage safe and responsible use of social media
- Encourage balanced screen time and healthy online behaviours to reduce excessive use
- Provide education on the risks of social comparison, cyberbullying and online harm
- Integrate social media awareness into mental health services and school-based programmes
- Support the development of online mental health resources and safe digital support networks
- Encourage further UK-based research to better understand long-term and causal relationships between social media use and mental health

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