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# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media has become an essential part of modern life, influencing how women communicate, establish relationships, express their identities, and perceive themselves. Although digital platforms provide opportunities for social support, education, professional development, and emotional connection, excessive or problematic use may contribute to psychological difficulties. This research paper examines the impact of social media on women's mental health, with particular attention to anxiety, depression, self-esteem, body image, social comparison, cyberbullying, and psychological well-being. It also considers the positive role of online communities in reducing isolation and increasing access to mental health information. The study adopts a qualitative, secondary-research approach based on a thematic review of recent academic literature published between 2023 and 2025. Existing research suggests that the relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and varies according to patterns of engagement, the nature of online content, individual vulnerability, and the availability of social support. In particular, appearance-focused content, unrealistic beauty standards, online harassment, and compulsive checking may contribute to emotional distress among some women. Conversely, supportive communities and meaningful online interactions can promote belonging and psychological resilience. The paper concludes that social media should not be considered universally harmful or beneficial. Instead, responsible digital engagement, media literacy, supportive platform policies, and accessible mental health services are important for promoting women's psychological well-being in an increasingly digital society.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *Social media, women's mental health, psychological well-being, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, body image, social comparison, cyberbullying, digital technology, online social support, problematic social media use, emotional health, digital literacy, and gender.*

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed communication and social interaction across the world. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat allow individuals to share experiences, exchange information, maintain relationships, and participate in online communities. For women, these platforms can provide spaces for self-expression, professional networking, education, entrepreneurship, and public participation. However, the growing presence of social media in everyday life has also raised concerns about its potential psychological consequences. Understanding these effects is important because online environments can influence how women evaluate themselves, interpret social relationships, and respond to social expectations. Oli Ahmed, O., Walsh, E. I., Dawel, A., Alateeq, K., Espinoza Oyarce, D. A., & Cherbuin, N. (2024). found that Women's mental health is influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, interpersonal, economic, and cultural factors. Social media may interact with these factors by exposing users to continuous streams of carefully selected images, personal achievements, lifestyle content, and public feedback. Such exposure can encourage women to compare their appearance, relationships, careers, and lifestyles with those of others. When these comparisons create feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction, they may contribute to reduced self-esteem and emotional distress. Nevertheless, these outcomes are not experienced by every woman, and the strength of the relationship depends on individual circumstances and patterns of social media use.One important concern is the relationship between social media and body image. Images

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promoting idealized body shapes, flawless skin, fashionable clothing, and apparently perfect lifestyles may establish unrealistic expectations regarding physical appearance. Editing tools, filters, and carefully staged photographs can make these expectations particularly difficult to achieve. Women who repeatedly encounter appearance-focused content may become more dissatisfied with their bodies or increasingly concerned about how others perceive them.

Recent research on women's exposure to social media images indicates that the type of visual content matters, with idealized appearance content presenting particular concerns for body satisfaction and self-perception. Another major concern is the possible relationship between social media use, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Notifications, public comments, online disagreements, and pressure to remain constantly available may create stress. Some women may become concerned about missing important information, receiving insufficient attention, or being excluded from social activities. Repeated exposure to negative news, hostile comments, or distressing content can further affect emotional well-being. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis found small associations between general social media use and depression and anxiety, while problematic use showed stronger associations with psychological difficulties. Alwuqaysi, B. (2025). Explained that These findings suggest that the quality and compulsiveness of engagement may be more informative than time spent online alone. Cyberbullying, online harassment, and gender-based abuse also deserve attention. Women may experience unwanted sexual comments, threats, appearance-related criticism, stalking, and the circulation of private information. Such experiences can create fear, shame, anger, and social withdrawal. The public and persistent nature of online communication can intensify the emotional effects because harmful material may be shared repeatedly or remain accessible long after the original incident. Women who experience online harassment may consequently limit their participation in digital spaces, affecting their freedom of expression, professional opportunities, and sense of safety.At the same time, social media can provide important psychological benefits.

Social media can also increase awareness of mental health concerns and help users discover counseling services, educational resources, and peer-support networks. Research examining active and passive social media use indicates that online engagement can be associated with social support and positive well-being in some contexts, although results differ according to the nature of the interaction. Fassi, L., Thomas, K., Parry, D. A., Leyland-Craggs, A., Ford, T. J., & Orben, A. (2024). Explains that Therefore, examining the impact of social media on women's mental health requires a balanced approach. It is important to distinguish between ordinary use and problematic engagement, between supportive communities and harmful online environments, and between temporary emotional reactions and persistent psychological difficulties. This paper reviews recent research to explore how social media may influence women's emotional well-being, the factors that increase or reduce potential harm, and the strategies that can encourage healthier digital participation. By considering both benefits and risks, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's mental health in contemporary digital society.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How does social media use influence women's mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety, depression, self-esteem, body image, and social support?

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## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To critically examine the positive and negative effects of social media use on women's mental health by analyzing recent academic literature published between 2023 and 2025, with particular attention to psychological well-being, body image, social comparison, online harassment, and the role of supportive digital communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media use and psychological well-being have become important topics in contemporary mental health research. Digital platforms influence how individuals communicate, obtain information, develop relationships, and experience social approval. For women, these platforms may create opportunities for participation and support while also introducing pressures associated with constant connectivity and public evaluation. The psychological effects of social media cannot be understood through usage time alone because different activities may produce different outcomes. For example, communicating with supportive friends may strengthen belonging, whereas repeatedly viewing idealized photographs may encourage unfavorable comparisons.Ahmed et al. (2024) examined the relationship between social media use, mental health, and sleep through a systematic review and meta-analysis. Sarda, E., El-Jor, C., Shankland, R., Hallez, Q., Patiram, D., Nguyen, C., ... & Flaudias, V. (2025). revealed that Their review included 182 studies involving approximately 1.17 million participants, with 98 studies contributing to the meta-analyses. The authors reported small associations between general social media use and depression and anxiety, while problematic social media use was associated with depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and poorer well-being. The review also identified considerable variation among studies, demonstrating that the relationship between social media and mental health is not uniform. These findings are relevant to women because they indicate that patterns of engagement and individual circumstances need to be considered when evaluating potential psychological effects. Valkenburg et al. (2024) examined active and passive social media use in a meta-analysis covering 141 studies and approximately 145,000 participants. Their findings showed that many associations between particular patterns of social media use and psychological outcomes were negligible, although some positive and negative associations were observed. Active engagement was associated with greater online social support and certain indicators of well-being, while passive use was associated with less favorable emotional outcomes in some contexts.

Research on social media and mental health also needs to account for the direction of the relationship. Women experiencing anxiety, loneliness, or low mood may turn to online platforms for distraction, reassurance, or support. Consequently, problematic social media use may sometimes be a response to existing psychological distress as well as a possible contributor to it. Cross-sectional studies cannot reliably establish which factor comes first. Longitudinal studies and carefully designed experiments are therefore needed to understand how social media habits and mental health influence one another over time.A further consideration is the difference between frequency of use and problematic use. Frequent use does not automatically indicate psychological harm, particularly when online activities serve educational, occupational, or interpersonal purposes. Problematic use is more concerned with patterns such as difficulty controlling engagement, neglect of responsibilities, persistent checking, or continued use despite negative consequences. Xu, J., Alivi, M. A., Mustafa, S. E.

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B., Dharejo, N., Brony, M., & Haoyue, W. (2025). Elaborated on This distinction is essential for research involving women because social media may be integrated into work, caregiving, friendship networks, and community participation. An appropriate analysis must therefore consider why women use these platforms, what they encounter, and how online activity affects their everyday functioning.Overall, recent evidence supports a cautious interpretation of the relationship between social media and psychological well-being. Social media may be associated with emotional difficulties for some users, but effects vary according to the type of engagement, the online environment, and individual characteristics. Research focused specifically on women should examine these differences rather than treating women as a single, psychologically uniform group.Body image is one of the most widely discussed aspects of social media's potential impact on women's mental health. Image-based platforms expose users to photographs, videos, beauty tutorials, fitness content, fashion trends, and edited representations of physical appearance. These materials may influence how women understand attractiveness and evaluate their own bodies. When idealized appearances are presented repeatedly, users may begin to interpret narrow beauty standards as normal or necessary. This can increase appearance-related concerns and contribute to dissatisfaction with body shape, skin, weight, or other physical characteristics.

The researchers found that exposure to images of women with smaller bodies was associated with less favorable appearance satisfaction, mood, and body appreciation than exposure to images of women with larger bodies. Self-objectification increased across the experimental conditions, illustrating that appearance-focused exposure may influence how women view themselves even when images differ in content. The results also suggest that more diverse representations of women's bodies may offer some benefits, although they do not establish that every form of body-positive content is universally helpful. A 2025 meta-analysis of experimental research on young women also examined differences between video-based and image-based social media content. Its reported findings indicated that idealized body content reduced body satisfaction, while body-positive content improved it. Video-based idealized content appeared to have stronger negative effects than image-based material in the studies reviewed. Cai, W., Zhang, C., Zhang, S., Bai, Y., Chen, B., Chen, J., ... & Gong, P. (2025). Elaborated on These results highlight the need to consider not only the amount of exposure but also the format and message of the content. They also suggest that social media environments may be improved through more diverse and realistic representations of women's bodies. Appearance-related pressure may extend beyond dissatisfaction with weight or body shape. Women may also compare their skin, hair, clothing, age, fitness, or perceived attractiveness with influencers and other users. Beauty filters and editing tools can intensify these comparisons by creating images that are difficult to reproduce in ordinary life. Some users may consequently invest substantial time and emotional energy in editing photographs, monitoring reactions, or seeking reassurance through likes and comments.

Nevertheless, body image outcomes are not identical for all women. Existing attitudes, cultural expectations, age, social support, and personal vulnerability may influence the way appearance-related content is interpreted. Some women may find confidence and representation through communities that challenge restrictive beauty standards. Others may experience positive effects from fitness, fashion, or beauty content when it emphasizes enjoyment, creativity, health, or personal expression rather than perfection. The literature therefore supports a content-sensitive approach that distinguishes idealized appearance pressure from inclusive, supportive, and realistic representations.Anxiety and depression are

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central concerns in research on social media and mental health. Digital platforms can create an environment in which social feedback is frequent, visible, and sometimes unpredictable. Users may become concerned about whether their posts receive sufficient attention, how others interpret their comments, or whether they are being excluded from conversations. For some women, these experiences can contribute to worry, emotional tension, reduced confidence, and persistent concern about social acceptance. Behera, N., Khuntia, S., Pandey, K., & Shankar, S. (2025). revealed that The 2024 systematic review by Ahmed et al. provides evidence that general social media use has a small association with depression and anxiety, while problematic use is associated with more pronounced psychological difficulties. The distinction matters because it suggests that the relationship may depend on the extent to which online activity becomes difficult to regulate or interferes with everyday life. A woman who uses social media to communicate with family and friends may have a different experience from someone who feels compelled to check notifications continually or remains online despite distress. Fassi et al. (2024) examined social media use and internalizing symptoms in clinical and community adolescent samples through a systematic review and meta-analysis published in *JAMA Pediatrics*. Their work is relevant to young women and girls because adolescence and emerging adulthood can involve important changes in identity, peer relationships, and emotional development. However, findings from adolescent samples should not automatically be generalized to all adult women.

One possible pathway from social media to emotional distress involves repetitive social comparison. A woman who repeatedly encounters posts emphasizing professional success, romantic relationships, travel, financial prosperity, or physical appearance may feel that her own life is inadequate. This response may be particularly strong when the posts are interpreted as evidence that others are more successful or socially accepted. Nevertheless, social comparison does not always have a negative effect. Observing others' achievements may also provide inspiration, information, or motivation when the comparison is realistic and constructive.Another pathway involves constant availability and information overload. Social media can make users feel that they must respond quickly, remain informed, and maintain an attractive online presence. These expectations may interfere with relaxation and concentration, particularly when notifications continue during study, work, family responsibilities, or bedtime. Problematic engagement may also be associated with sleep difficulties, which can affect mood and daily functioning. However, the evidence concerning ordinary social media use and sleep is mixed, and the association should not be interpreted as proof that social media directly causes sleep problems in every user. Depression and anxiety also influence how individuals use social media. Women experiencing loneliness or low mood may use digital platforms to seek connection, reassurance, or distraction. Such engagement can be beneficial when it leads to supportive interaction, but it may be unhelpful when it becomes repetitive passive browsing or exposes users to hostile content.

## METHODOLOGY

A third gap concerns measurement. Studies may define social media use according to daily hours, frequency of checking, particular platforms, specific online activities, or symptoms of problematic engagement. These measures are not interchangeable. A woman who spends several hours using social media for work may have a very different experience from a woman who spends a shorter period repeatedly comparing her appearance with others. Future

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research should measure not only duration but also content exposure, emotional responses, interaction quality, motivation, and interference with everyday functioning.Cultural context also requires greater attention. Beauty ideals, family expectations, gender roles, social norms, and access to mental health care vary across societies. Research conducted in one country may not accurately represent women's experiences elsewhere. In communities where discussing mental health is stigmatized, online networks may offer valuable opportunities for anonymous support; in other settings, privacy concerns and social surveillance may make online disclosure risky. Comparative studies can help establish which findings are broadly consistent and which depend on local circumstances.A further priority is the development and evaluation of practical interventions. Media literacy programs can help women recognize edited images, question unrealistic comparisons, and evaluate online information. Digital well-being practices, such as limiting unnecessary notifications and creating periods without social media, may help some users establish healthier boundaries. Platforms can contribute by improving moderation, reducing exposure to abusive content, providing meaningful privacy controls, and supporting access to reliable mental health resources. These approaches should be evaluated rather than assumed to work equally well for every population.Overall, the literature suggests that social media's relationship with women's mental health is shaped by a combination of personal, interpersonal, cultural, and technological factors.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research design to examine the impact of social media on women’s mental health. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand the meanings, experiences, behavioral patterns, and psychological mechanisms associated with social media use rather than to calculate the prevalence of mental health conditions in a new population. The descriptive component summarizes existing knowledge about anxiety, depression, self-esteem, body image, online harassment, social comparison, and social support, while the exploratory component investigates how these factors may interact in different digital environments. The study uses a secondary-research design, meaning that the information is obtained from previously published academic studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and relevant research reports rather than from newly collected questionnaires or interviews. Literature published between 2023 and 2025 is prioritized to reflect recent developments in digital communication and mental health research. The analysis is organized around the central research question of how social media influences women's psychological well-being. Particular attention is given to the distinction between active and passive use, ordinary and problematic engagement, supportive and harmful online interactions, and appearance-focused and non-appearance-focused content. The study also considers the relevance of age, social environment, cultural expectations, and individual vulnerability when interpreting the evidence. Rather than assuming that social media causes mental health problems, the research design emphasizes patterns of association, plausible explanatory mechanisms, differences among studies, and limitations in the available evidence. The design is therefore intended to develop a balanced conceptual understanding of social media’s potential benefits and risks for women. Because it relies on published material, it does not claim to represent every woman’s experience or establish new causal relationships. Its principal contribution is to organize recent research into a coherent framework that can inform future empirical investigations, digital well-being initiatives, and gender-sensitive mental health interventions.

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## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative secondary-research methodology based on the examination and thematic synthesis of academic literature published from January 2023 through December 2025. The review focuses on research addressing social media use and women's mental health, including studies of mixed-gender populations where findings concerning women or gender differences are relevant. Academic search resources such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and relevant scholarly journal websites provide an appropriate framework for identifying literature. Search terms include “social media and women's mental health,” “social media and anxiety,” “social media and depression,” “women and body image,” “social comparison,” “problematic social media use,” “cyberbullying and women,” “online social support,” and “digital well-being.” Priority is given to peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and experimental studies because these sources provide different levels of evidence and help establish the current state of knowledge. Studies are considered relevant when they investigate at least one of the psychological, behavioral, or social dimensions addressed in the research question. Research concerning body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social support, harassment, and patterns of digital engagement is particularly important. General studies of social media and mental health are included when their findings offer useful context, but results from adolescent samples, mixed-gender samples, or non-representative populations are interpreted cautiously rather than automatically generalized to all women. Sources are assessed according to their relevance, publication details, research methods, sample characteristics, reported findings, and acknowledged limitations. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are used to identify broad patterns across studies, while experimental research is considered for evidence concerning the immediate effects of particular types of content. The selected literature is organized into thematic categories, and similarities, differences, and gaps are examined across the resulting groups.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is conducted through thematic synthesis, a qualitative technique used to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and relationships across published research. In this study, the analytical material consists of the findings, interpretations, and methodological observations reported in the selected literature rather than raw numerical responses collected from participants. The first analytical stage involves organizing the literature according to the main mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, emotional distress, and well-being. A second stage groups studies according to the social media activities examined, such as passive browsing, active communication, posting photographs, viewing appearance-focused content, participating in online support groups, and experiencing harassment. The third stage compares the results to identify recurring themes and areas of disagreement. One major theme is the relationship between problematic engagement and psychological distress. The systematic review and meta-analysis by Ahmed et al. (2024) found that general social media use had small associations with depression and anxiety, whereas problematic use was associated with poorer mental health and well-being across the reviewed literature. This distinction suggests that the emotional consequences of social media may depend partly on whether engagement becomes difficult to regulate or interferes with everyday life. A second theme concerns body image and social comparison. Experimental research involving young women indicates that exposure to particular forms of

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appearance-related imagery can influence body satisfaction and self-perception, although the effects depend on the content and the characteristics of the individuals exposed. A third theme concerns the contrast between passive and active engagement. The meta-analysis by Valkenburg and colleagues (2024) found that many associations between social media activities and mental health outcomes were small or negligible, while certain forms of active engagement were associated with greater online support and some positive well-being indicators. A fourth theme concerns the dual role of social media in women's social lives: platforms can expose users to criticism, harassment, and unrealistic standards while also enabling connection, information sharing, and supportive communities. During interpretation, the analysis considers differences in study populations, methods, outcome measures, and research designs, because these differences may explain some of the variation in reported findings.

## FINDINGS

The synthesis of recent literature identifies several interconnected findings concerning the impact of social media on women's mental health. First, the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being appears to be complex rather than uniformly negative. Research published in 2024 indicates that associations between general social media use and depression or anxiety are often small, while problematic use tends to show stronger associations with psychological difficulties. This suggests that the nature, purpose, and consequences of online engagement may be more informative than usage duration alone. Second, body image emerges as an important area of concern, particularly when women are exposed to idealized appearance content, narrow beauty standards, and carefully edited photographs or videos. Experimental findings involving young women indicate that the body-related content viewed online can influence appearance satisfaction, body appreciation, and related psychological responses. However, the effects vary according to the images presented and the characteristics of the users. Third, social comparison may help explain why some women experience lower self-confidence after using image-focused platforms. Repeatedly comparing everyday experiences with highly curated portrayals of beauty, relationships, careers, and lifestyles may encourage feelings of inadequacy, especially when online content is interpreted as a realistic standard against which to judge oneself. Fourth, the literature identifies problematic engagement as a relevant concern because compulsive checking, difficulty disengaging, and continued use despite negative consequences may coincide with emotional distress and sleep-related difficulties. Nevertheless, the evidence does not establish that every frequent user experiences these problems or that social media is their sole cause. Fifth, online harassment and gender-related abuse represent potential threats to women's emotional safety and participation in digital spaces.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of social media on women's mental health is a significant and multidimensional issue in contemporary society. The literature reviewed in this paper indicates that social media can influence psychological well-being through several interconnected pathways, including social comparison, exposure to idealized appearance standards, problematic engagement, online harassment, and opportunities for social support. Appearance-focused content may contribute to body dissatisfaction among some women, while public feedback and continuous social interaction may increase concerns about social acceptance. Problematic

social media use has also been associated with anxiety, depression, and poorer well-being, although the strength and direction of these relationships vary across studies. At the same time, social media provides valuable opportunities for women to maintain relationships, exchange knowledge, develop professional networks, express their identities, and participate in supportive communities. These benefits demonstrate that digital platforms should not be understood solely as a source of psychological harm. Instead, their effects depend on how they are used, the types of content and interactions encountered, and the social and personal circumstances of individual users. An important implication of the research is the need to distinguish ordinary social media use from problematic engagement and to recognize that associations do not automatically establish causation. Future research should include longitudinal studies, well-designed experiments, and culturally diverse samples that examine women's experiences across different ages and social contexts. Practical responses should include media literacy education, greater awareness of image editing and social comparison, healthy digital boundaries, accessible mental health services, and effective measures against online harassment.

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