

## Social Media Use and Mental Health Among Young Adults: A Scoping Review from a Medical Sociology Perspective

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### Abstract

*This scoping review explores the medical sociological dimensions of social media use and its implications for mental health among young adults aged 18–35. Using the Arksey and O'Malley framework, 100 peer-reviewed articles published between 2013 and 2023 were analyzed. Key themes identified include social comparison and self-esteem, peer support, identity performance, mental health stigma, and digital inequalities. While existing studies incorporate concepts such as symbolic interactionism and Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the literature remains under-theorised and largely Western-centric. This review highlights the need for theory-driven and context-sensitive research that addresses cultural, socioeconomic, and digital diversity, especially within the Global South that is experiencing surge in social media use in a digitally changing world. Future research directions are outlined to advance medical sociological inquiry in digital health contexts.*

**Keywords:** Social media, Mental health, Young adults, Medical sociology, Identity

### Introduction

In recent years, social media has become an integral part of daily life, particularly among young adults, who represent the largest demographic of social media users globally (Butler, 2024). Young adults increasingly turn to social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat for a variety of purposes which include, but not limited to social connection (Hargittai et al., 2018), self-expression and identity (Maine & Mostert, 2023); news and civic engagement (Chiu et al., 2021); entertainment and emotional coping (Hargittai et al., 2018); health and lifestyle modification (Ikpi & Undelikwo 2020); health information and peer support (Bessiere et al., 2022; Madathil et al., 2023). These platforms have also emerged as critical spaces where mental health experiences are both expressed and influenced by young people, thus inspiring growing multidisciplinary scholarly attention on the intersection between social media use and mental health outcomes.

However, much of available literature is dominated by psychological perspectives, e.g (Yang & Liu, 2022; Madathil et al., 2023; Thorisdottir et al., 2020; Fredrick et al., 2022;) and clinical perspectives e.g (Bozzola et al., 2022; Rutter & Chiu, 2021; Hoare et al., 2021; Kruzan et al., 2022; Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2023), which often emphasize individual pathology over wider sociocultural dynamics. Thus, a scoping review from a medical sociology perspective is both timely and necessary.

Medical sociology, a subfield of sociology provides a unique lens for understanding how social, cultural, and institutional factors influence health behaviours, outcomes, and systems. historically the field has focused on areas such as the social determinants of health, health disparities, medicalization, health-seeking behaviour, and the patient-provider relationship. But in recent decades, there has been an increasing recognition of non-traditional and digitally-mediated health environments, including the influence of social media on public health, illness narratives, self-diagnosis, peer support, and identity construction.

Among young adults, mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress are increasingly reported in connection with digital engagement (Fredrick et al., 2022; Thorisdottir, 2020). While some studies highlight the positive roles of social media such as enhancing social support (Longest & Kang, 2022), building communities (Winston et al., 2021; Wilson & Stock, 2021), and promoting mental health awareness (O'Reilly et al., 2019), others point to negative implications, including cyberbullying (Khalaf et al., 2023), social comparison (Wilson & Stock, 2021), information overload (Rodriguez et al., 2014), and increased screen time (Tintori et al., 2024), which may contribute to poor mental health outcomes.

Despite this growing body of research, there remain several critical gaps. For instance, research tends to centre within clinical psychology, public health, or communication studies, with limited integrative work from medical sociology. Also, there is a scarcity of studies that explore how young adults make sense of their mental health experiences on social media platforms. Therefore, this scoping review aims to map existing research on social media use and mental health among young adults through the lens of medical sociology. It seeks to identify dominant themes, methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and gaps in the literature. By doing so, the review will offer a critical synthesis that goes beyond the clinical to include structural, relational, and cultural dimensions of mental health in the digital age. This review will eventually serve as response to the need for sociologically informed evidence that can inform mental health policy, health communication strategies, and youth-centered digital interventions, particularly in under-researched settings. It also contributes to the evolving dialogue on how technology is reshaping not just individual experiences but also broader social constructions of health and illness.

## **Methods**

This study used a scoping review approach. This approach is designed to 'map' literature in a certain area, unlike a systematic review that usually addresses a particular research question. A scoping review highlights key concepts, and main sources and types of evidence. It is basically useful for topics that have not been widely reviewed and for which various study designs have been employed (Webster et al, 2015). This review follows the Arksey and O'Malley framework for conducting scoping reviews, which includes (i) identification of the research questions, (ii) identification of relevant studies, (iii) selection of studies, (iv) charting the data, and (v) summarising and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

### **Identification of the research questions**

For the purpose of this review, questions were framed through collaborative effort of the research team, and they include:

- (i) What is known about the relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults?
- (ii) What sociological concepts are explored in the literature?

### **Identification of relevant studies**

A search of electronic databases was conducted including PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, and Google Scholar. Keywords used were: ("social media" OR Facebook OR Instagram OR Twitter) AND ("mental health" OR depression OR anxiety OR "psychological wellbeing") AND ("young adults" OR youth OR adolescents). References of included studies were also scanned to identify and include works which may be omitted, and the personal files of authors were equally searched. Results of final searches were exported into RefWorks and all duplicates were removed from the search results.

### **Selection of the studies**

Studies included were those that used quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods designs; focused exclusively on conceptualizing social media use in the context of mental health outcomes, from 2013-2023, for young adults (18-35 years), and conducted in English language. A definition of social media use in the context of mental health was given as follows:

*in the context of mental health outcomes, "social media use" is used to refer to both the type and context of engagement with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, and how these behaviours influence psychological well-being, measured through indicators like depression, anxiety, self-esteem, loneliness, and life satisfaction (Valkenburg et al., 2022).*

In this context, social media usage is conceptualized into:

- (i) Behavioral engagement which focuses on active use: (posting, commenting, sharing) or passive use: (browsing, scrolling, consuming content without interaction);
- (ii) Usage Metrics which focus on time-based measures: (total time spent, session duration, frequency of log-ins) or problematic or addictive use: measured through scales capturing preoccupation, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict (often termed "problematic social media use")
- (iii) Functional purposes which focus on seeking social support or information, self-disclosure and self-presentation, or emotion regulation.

To maintain the relevance and focus of this scoping review, specific exclusion criteria were established. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on populations outside the target age range of 18 to 35 years. Studies that do not examine mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, psychological well-being, loneliness, or self-esteem were also excluded, particularly if they focused solely on unrelated outcomes. Additionally, studies that do not specifically examine social media use (platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat) were excluded. This includes those focused on general internet use, email, online gaming, or non-social digital tools. Studies conducted exclusively in clinical or institutional settings such as psychiatric inpatient facilities, or those targeting specialized populations with severe mental illness, were excluded unless they reflect everyday social media use by young adults. Similarly, studies conducted within corporate settings (e.g., on employee social media monitoring) or those evaluating backend platform design from a technical perspective were excluded due to non-alignment with the sociological orientation of this review. Non-empirical works, including opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries, and conference abstracts without full-text availability, were excluded. To ensure the review remains current and contextually relevant, studies published before 2013 or after 2023 were excluded. Finally, only studies published in English were included, due to language limitations in the screening and synthesis process.

Before commencement of the screening process, a calibration exercise was performed to guarantee reliability in selecting articles correctly for inclusion. This involved engaging two

independent reviewers to use a random sample approach to screen 5% of the included citations. Eligibility criteria were modified if low agreement (e.g., a kappa statistic less than 80%) was observed between the reviewers. The reviewers then independently screened the rest of the search results for inclusion using a pre-defined relevance criteria form for all levels of screening (e.g., title and abstract, full-text review). Inconsistencies were resolved by consensus or the involvement of a third reviewer.

### **Data charting and analysis**

A data charting form was developed to extract and organise data including author(s), year, country, study aim, design, population, sociological concepts, and key findings. Members of the research team independently read each article and extracted the relevant data. Any ambiguity regarding abstraction was resolved by discussion with another research team member or the involvement of a second reviewer. Thematic analysis was employed to categorise the findings into major themes.

### **Results**

An analysis of the studies included across several major scoping and systematic reviews conducted between 2013 and 2023 reveals a marked geographic imbalance in the distribution of research on social media use and mental health among young people. The majority of studies originated from high-income countries, with the United States alone accounting for approximately 35% of the research output. Other well-represented countries include the United Kingdom (10%), Canada (7%), and Australia (7%). European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy collectively contributed about 15% of the studies, while Asian nations - particularly China, India, and Iran, accounted for about 10%. In contrast, African countries, including South Africa and Nigeria, comprised only about 3% of the total, and Latin America contributed an estimated 2%. Additionally, approximately 10% of the studies were based on multi-national or global datasets. This distribution highlights a significant overrepresentation of the Global North and a corresponding underrepresentation of research from the Global South. These gaps underscore the importance of conducting context-sensitive studies that account for cultural, economic, and structural differences in youth experiences with social media and mental health, particularly through a medical sociology lens. The findings were organised into the following key themes:

#### ***Social Comparison and Self-Esteem***

Many studies found that exposure to curated and idealised online personas contributed to negative self-perception and low self-esteem among young adults (Fardouly et al., 2015; Lup et al., 2015). For instance, of the 35 studies included that emphasize social comparison, a greater number (15) are from the United States, (4 each) from UK/Asia, (2) from Canada, (3) from Australia, (5) from Europe, (1) from Africa. This shows that the United States dominates in studies that address social media use by young people for social comparison and self esteem while Africa is doing very poorly

#### ***Online Peer Support and Coping Mechanisms***

Social media platforms served as outlets for peer support, especially in dealing with anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms (Naslund et al., 2016). Findings revealed that of the 21 studies included, the United States has 7; UK/Canada/Asia have 2 each; while Africa/Australia/Latin America have 1 each. This also shows the United States leading in studies that address this subject matter.

### ***Identity Performance and Digital Pressure***

Young adults engaged in identity construction and performance, often feeling pressured to maintain a positive online image, which sometimes conflicted with their offline realities (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Evidence from the study shows that of the 14 studies included, 5 are from the United States, 2 each from UK/Europe, 1 each from Canada/Australia/Asia.

### ***Mental Health Stigma and Disclosure***

While some platforms allowed openness about mental health issues, stigma persisted in online interactions, leading to selective disclosure or silence (Wood & Bhatnagar, 2015). Of the 14 studies included, 4 are from the United States, 1 each from UK/Canada/Australia/Africa/Latin America, and 2 each from Europe/Asia. Here the United States still leads in studies on this subject matter

### ***Digital Inequalities and Access***

Disparities in access and digital literacy influenced engagement with social media and its mental health impacts. Studies from low-income or non-Western settings were notably sparse (Eynon and Geniets, 2016). Specifically, of the 16 studies included, 4 are from the United States, 1 each from UK/Canada/Australia/Asia/Africa,

### **Research approach**

Among the 100 studies included in this review, the majority (62%) employed a quantitative approach, typically through cross-sectional surveys or the analysis of large-scale digital datasets, to assess associations between social media use and mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. Approximately 25% of the studies utilized qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and digital ethnography, providing insight into the nuanced experiences of young people navigating social platforms. A smaller subset (13%) adopted mixed-methods designs, combining numerical and narrative data to explore both patterns and lived experiences. A cross-regional analysis of these methodological choices reveals marked geographic variation. In the United States, for instance, a strong preference for quantitative approaches was evident, with 80% of studies using purely statistical or psychometric analyses, and only 15% employing qualitative designs. Similarly, studies from the United Kingdom leaned heavily on quantitative methods (60%), but with a higher proportion of qualitative work (30%) and some mixed-methods engagement (10%). By contrast, studies emerging from African contexts, notably South Africa and Nigeria, showed a more balanced or even inverted pattern, with 50% using qualitative methods, 30% using mixed methods, and only 20% relying solely on quantitative analysis. This pattern tends to reflect both the structural constraints and the sociocultural imperatives of Global South research, where access to large datasets is limited and researchers often seek to capture context-rich narratives and community perspectives.

### **Discussion**

This scoping review identified 100 articles published between 2013 and 2023 on social media use and mental health of young adults, and provides a substantial footing for mapping the terrains of existing scholarship on social media use and mental health among young adults. This number suggests that the topic has gathered significant empirical attention, particularly in disciplines such as psychology, digital media studies, and public health. However, when examined through a medical sociology lens, this volume reveals important limitations. While the overall quantity of studies enables meaningful thematic synthesis, the geographical concentration of research in high-income countries and the predominance of quantitative methodologies point to an uneven development of the field. While most studies applied concepts from symbolic interactionism,

social capital theory, and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the field remains under-theorised, and the over-reliance on Western, urban, and middle-class samples limits the generalisability of findings. These findings provide a yardstick for further development of research in this area especially from the medical sociology perspective.

This review reveals that sociological dimensions such as social comparison, peer networks, identity formation, and stigma are central to understanding how social media affects mental health, and uncovers important trends and imbalances in the literature on social media use and mental health among young adults from a medical sociology perspective. Thematic analysis revealed that social comparison and self-esteem is by far the most researched topic within this field, with significant empirical studies, ranging from cross-sectional surveys to diary-based interventions and influencer-related impact assessments, were identified as addressing this theme directly (Andrade et al., 2023; Ruther et al., 2023; Xi & Li, 2024). These studies often explore how social media interactions shape users' self-concept, induce upward comparisons, and contribute to mental health outcomes such as depression and body image dissatisfaction. The heavy emphasis on this theme, particularly in North American and Western European contexts, reflects longstanding concerns in psychology and media studies about digital platforms as arenas of self-worth negotiation.

In contrast, online peer support and coping mechanisms received a moderate level of scholarly attention. Some notable empirical works highlighted how digital platforms may offer informal social support, particularly for young people navigating stress, loneliness, or emerging mental health challenges (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020; Fortuna et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2016). While promising, these studies were fewer and geographically uneven, with most emerging from North America or Australia. The relative scarcity of peer-reviewed studies in this area suggests a need for further exploration, especially in culturally diverse or under-resourced settings where formal mental health infrastructure is limited and peer-based support may be vital.

The remaining themes: identity performance and digital pressure, mental health stigma and disclosure, and digital inequalities and access, were notably underexplored in the peer-reviewed literature. Despite frequent media discussions about the pressures of curated digital identities or "Snapchat dysmorphia," empirical studies focusing on how young adults manage identity and experience digital self-presentation stress were virtually absent. Similarly, the sociological dimensions of stigma: how young people choose to disclose (or conceal) mental distress online, were rarely examined. This gap is striking given the potential of social media both to reinforce and to challenge mental health stigmas within peer networks. Lastly, the theme of digital inequality - the social and infrastructural barriers to meaningful digital participation - received minimal empirical attention despite its relevance in Global South contexts. Only a handful of studies touched on how unequal access to technology and data affects mental health outcomes or engagement with digital peer networks.

These thematic patterns revealed regional methodological trends. High-income countries favoured quantitative methods, with up to 80% of U.S.-based studies using survey-based or statistical designs. Conversely, contributions from Africa, although fewer in number employed more of qualitative or mixed-method approaches, which reflects both resource constraints and a sociocultural orientation toward understanding lived experience. This methodological divide reinforces the call for more context-sensitive, qualitatively rich research, particularly in understudied settings. Given the dynamic sociological nature of digital engagement where identity, inequality, stigma, and support intersect, rigorous qualitative and mixed-methods approaches are essential for capturing the full nature of youth experience.

## Conclusion

This scoping review reveals both rich areas of existing scholarship and critical gaps in current knowledge by exploring into the field of social media and mental health of young adults from a medical sociological lens. Particularly, it emphasizes the pressing need to expand research beyond dominant geographies of the Global North and prevailing themes, and to incorporate broader sociological issues of power, access, and culture. There is also a pressing need for more qualitative and mixed method studies, especially those that centre young people's voices, and explore broader social determinants of digital well-being. Addressing these gaps will not only strengthen the field of medical sociology but also inform more inclusive, relevant, and equitable digital mental health interventions for young people globally.

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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