

Chapter

The Contemporary Addiction: Social Media Use and Its Impact on Well-Being

*Lucía Fernández-López, Elena Martínez Laorden,
Fatima Martín Sánchez, Pilar Almela Rojo
and Javier Navarro-Zaragoza*

Abstract

Social media are digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and view media content, as well as interact with each other through the internet. They facilitate communication, socialization, and the dissemination of information on a global scale. Its use presents many advantages. In addition to the fact that they provide entertainment, social media also facilitate instant communication and help with the dissemination of information in real time. Furthermore, from a business perspective, the visibility of brands is enhanced. Finally, they can also be used for educational and pedagogical purposes. Despite all these benefits, the use of social media also has a negative side. From a health perspective, social media can have negative effects on physical and mental health and can even lead to addiction. Social media addiction has been also found to be associated with numerous issues, including emotional, relational, health, and performance-related problems. Thus, this chapter aims to review the effect of social media use on the health of users.

Keywords: social media, internet, addiction, mental health, young people

1. Introduction

The presence of digital reality has accompanied people's daily lives for at least two decades, significantly impacting them [1, 2]. Nothing has made a greater impact in the way information is delivered to the average citizen in the past 30 years than the Internet. The Internet has transformed the way we research topics, explore new ideas, and communicate with one another. It has the potential to bring us closer—not only to the people we know but also to our colleagues and others we have never met except online [3].

As early as the 1990s, Internet addiction was studied by the American psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg, who coined the term Internet Addiction (1996), using the gambling

disorder model as a reference to describe the addiction of spending excessive time on the computer browsing the web. This phenomenon was also equated with substance addiction [4] and later with impulse control disorder [5]. By the mid-1990s, excessive Internet use was classified as Internet Addiction Disorder [6], which is described as “a particular type of compulsive-impulsive disorder that manifests with symptoms such as an irresistible urge to connect to the web”.

However, this broad term has evolved and now encompasses many types of addiction-related issues associated with generalized Internet addiction and a range of specific addictive Internet uses, including online gambling, online gaming, social networks, and cybersex, among others.

Access to the Internet is now very easy; you can connect anywhere with any type of device, whether it be a PC, a smartphone, or a tablet, 24 hours a day. In addition to that the rapid proliferation of Internet-based social media and the ways of interpersonal communication have drastically changed [7, 8]. Nowadays, young people do everything through digital technology, from chatting and shopping online to sharing photos and videos, with social media platforms at the top of the list for those who spend time online. In fact, as of October 2024, there were 5.52 billion internet users worldwide, representing 67.5% of the global population. Among them, 5.22 billion people (63.8% of the world’s population) actively used social media. This indicates that most internet users also engage with social networking platforms [9].

2. Social media

Social networking is one of the most popular digital activities worldwide. Social media are digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and consume content, as well as interact with each other over the internet. They facilitate communication, socialization, and the dissemination of information on a global scale [10].

Social media enable communication between people through messages, comments, “likes,” etc., in addition to sharing content, such as photos, videos, texts, and links. They facilitate relationships between individuals, businesses, and institutions regardless of geographical location, enabling a globalized connection. They also provide the possibility of creating “communities,” which consist of groups of people with common interests, and they can adapt to users’ interests and preferences, personalizing the experience.

The use of social media presents many advantages. In addition to providing opportunities to build and enhance friendships, receive social support, reduce feelings of isolation, social media facilitate instant communication and help with the dissemination of information in real time. Furthermore, from a business perspective, it enhances the visibility of brands and businesses and can also be used for educational and teaching purposes [11–13].

These platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YikYak, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, WeChat, and others. These different types of social media vary depending on the user’s main objective when connecting. Some are used for socializing and sharing diverse content (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X), others focus on multimedia content, such as images and videos (e.g., TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest). There are also professional/work-related platforms that promote professional connections and job opportunities (e.g., LinkedIn), and messaging platforms that allow direct communication between users (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram).

2.1 Social media in numbers

Social media usage is one of the most popular online activities and it is no surprise that social networking penetration across all regions is constantly increasing. In 2024, over 5 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to over 6 billion in 2028 [14].

When Facebook launched in 2004, it changed the way people connect. Apps such as Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp further empowered billions around the world. In its launch year, Facebook reached 1 million users. By 2010, 500 million people were active on the platform, and by 2012, the number had grown to 1 billion. In 2017, Facebook reached 2 billion monthly users, while WhatsApp had 1 billion daily users. The following year, in 2018, Instagram reached 1 billion monthly users, and in 2021 WhatsApp amassed approximately 6 billion downloads. By 2023, Facebook had 2 billion daily active users [15]. As of April 2024, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp remain the most popular social networks worldwide, each surpassing 1 billion monthly active users [16].

The manner of accessing these platforms varies; however, it is primarily done through mobile phones. As of July 2021, it was found that 98.5% of active users accessed their Facebook account from mobile devices. In fact, almost 81.8% of Facebook audiences worldwide access the platform only via mobile phone [17].

In terms of the time spent, on average, internet users spend 151 minutes per day on social media and messaging apps, an increase of 40 minutes since 2015. On average, internet users in Latin America had the highest average time spent per day on social media [14].

As the data show, the use of social media is an activity with a very high consumption rate, and it tends to increase over time.

2.2 Social media during adolescence

Adolescence is a stage marked by significant emotional, social, and cognitive development. In this context, social media has become a fundamental means of interaction and self-expression [18]. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and, to a lesser extent, Facebook, are used daily by millions of teenagers around the world, and this growing prevalence of social media use has sparked concerns about its potential effects on adolescents' health and well-being [11].

The Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, which surveyed nearly 280,000 adolescents across 44 countries in 2022, found that 11% of adolescents exhibit problematic social media behavior, with higher rates among girls (13%) than boys (9%). Besides, over a third (36%) stay in constant online contact with friends, particularly 15-year-old girls (44%) [19].

This use shows both the advantages and disadvantages. Social media enable adolescents to stay in touch with friends, meet new people, and strengthen interpersonal bonds. Moreover, these platforms offer a space for sharing interests, thoughts, or emotions, contributing to identity development, and, in some cases, they can serve as a source of peer support in the face of personal challenges. Moreover, on other side, they facilitate access to educational content, news, and cultural resources.

However, social media also show a negative side in adolescence stage. Constant exposure to idealized images can generate feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, or depression [20]. Adolescents may be vulnerable to sharing personal information without fully understanding the associated risks, which could affect their privacy or even

their security [21]. Moreover, with the explosion of a variety of platforms over the last decade, social media have emerged as the most common vehicles for cyberbullying victimization and perpetration, with serious psychological consequences [22, 23].

The excessive use may lead to dependence, negatively impacting areas, such as academic performance and sleep quality. Problematic social media use is defined by addiction-like symptoms, including an inability to control usage, withdrawal symptoms, neglect of other activities, and negative life consequences. Research links it to poor mental and social well-being, substance use, sleep issues, and lower academic performance [11, 24]. Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, emphasizes the need for better digital literacy education and immediate action to address the issue. Some governments are considering restrictions or bans on social media for younger children to mitigate its negative effects, which can include depression, bullying, anxiety, and academic struggles [25].

2.3 Negative consequences in general population

Social media have become a necessity for everyone; it is almost impossible to do without it. Teenagers constantly update their personal profiles and check their homepages, tapping on social media app icons on their smartphones without respecting usage limits [26]. However, the use of social media has an important negative side.

The ease of sharing information can lead to the spread of false information or “fake news”. Using social media for news consumption is a double-edged sword. On one hand, its low cost, easy accessibility, and rapid information dissemination encourage people to turn to social media for news. On the other hand, it facilitates the widespread distribution of “fake news,” meaning low-quality information that intentionally contains false content. The extensive spread of such content can have highly negative effects on both individuals and society [27].

Currently, there is growing concern about privacy and data security risks, especially among minors. Teenagers disclose a variety of personal information on social media platforms, which are specifically designed to promote sharing and network growth. However, most teens do not opt for a completely public presence online. Instead, they implement various strategies to limit and carefully manage their profiles [21].

Previous researches have demonstrated that Millennials have a strong desire to live publicly, willingly sharing information that was once considered private online. However, despite this openness, findings indicate that they still expect a certain level of privacy within their networks and prefer to keep their audiences separate, expressing strong opposition to being compelled to share their content with unintended viewers [28].

Another negative consequence of using social media is that it affects academic performance. Previous studies have found that the amount of time one spends using social media is negatively correlated with their academic performance [24, 29–31]. Specifically, Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. [31] found that spending 2 hours or less per day on social media use was positively linked to higher levels of school connectedness among high school students. In contrast, social media use exceeding 2 hours per day was negatively associated with school connectedness and academic performance. Additionally, the study found that the connection between social media use and school connectedness varied significantly by age, with stronger effects observed in older students. Gender did not play a significant role in moderating these relationships [31].

2.3.1 Negative health consequences

From a health perspective, social media can have negative effects on mental and physical health.

Inactivity, long sedentary time, and lack of sleep may impact young individual's physical and mental well-being. Too many hours hunched over a screen can lead to muscle pain, such as neck and shoulder pain, eye irritation, and difficulty focusing. Additionally, losing valuable sleep can have negative consequences in user's lives, such as fatigue, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, substance abuse, and poor academic performance. These health disorders can be influenced by various factors, including screen size, the number of text messages sent, and the hours spent each day [32–34].

The widespread availability of social media platforms and the easy access to the Internet may lead to the compulsive and excessive use of social media that it interferes with other aspects of daily life [35, 36]. This excessive use has even been associated with disordered eating and poorer body image outcomes [20].

Different terms have been used to refer to this behavior, such as problematic social media use or social media addiction [37], but social networking sites addiction has not yet been recognized as a legitimate disorder. However, recent research has indicated that the use of social media could become problematic and be characterized by addictive-type symptoms [38].

For people who develop this disorder, a type of social anxiety develops. The strong desire to stay connected with the activities of others and the fear of being excluded from events, experiences, or social contexts cause anxiety and a high level of stress in young people. The compulsive need to stay connected becomes so essential that it is impossible to do without it [39, 40].

Several studies have linked excessive social media use to lower psychological well-being [41]. Studies have also linked social media addiction to numerous issues, including emotional, relational, health, and performance-related problems [24]. Some studies suggest problematic social media use may lead to psychological distress and reduced well-being, while others argue it is actually a result of issues, such as depression, loneliness, or poor social health [42–44].

Since Facebook is still the most popular social network sites with more than 2 billion monthly users, most studies are done using Facebook. Research has found a link between problematic Facebook use and mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Users with depression may turn to Facebook to manage their mood [45], while socially anxious individuals might use it to compensate for low self-esteem and poor offline communication skills [46]. Although social media can offer short-term relief and a sense of support, it often does not lead to improved real-life social abilities. In some cases, it even serves as an escape from real-life problems, which may worsen symptoms, such as depression and suicidal thoughts [47]. Overall, problematic Facebook use is connected to several negative mental health outcomes [42].

Instagram has risen in popularity and recently reached a milestone of 1 billion monthly active users, and the majority of studies examine the relationship between Instagram use and indicators of body image and disordered eating. Researchers found strong evidence that links Instagram use with negative outcomes related to social comparison, body image dissatisfaction, and disordered eating behaviors [48–50], but the relationship between Instagram use and factors such as self-esteem, stress, and substance use, remains unclear due to limited or inconsistent findings [18]. There is a need for more longitudinal and experimental studies to better understand causal relationships and underlying psychological mechanisms.

YouTube is one of the most visited web platforms in the world. It allows anyone to create, share, and consume videos worldwide, and its influence extends across education, culture, entertainment, and even mental health. In this regard, a review of 32 empirical and theoretical studies examining how YouTube usage influences mental health found that while YouTube offers beneficial resources for mental health support, its impact is nuanced. Frequent YouTube users, especially those below 29 years old, exhibit higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, and this is notably prevalent among individuals who regularly watch content about other people's lives [51].

Different studies have investigated how depression, bipolar disorder, and general mental health are portrayed on YouTube and the implications of these portrayals on public perceptions, stigma, and mental health literacy [52, 53]. The authors emphasize that YouTube serves as a significant platform for disseminating information about mental health. However, the predominance of content created by non-professionals highlights the need for more balanced and accurate narratives that can improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma [53]. Additionally, they stress the powerful role of personal storytelling in engaging audiences on mental health topics, while also pointing to the need for guidance in assessing the quality and reliability of such content [52]. Overall, it highlighted the importance of strategic interventions to strengthen YouTube's role in promoting mental well-being.

Another one of the most popular and most recent social networks is TikTok. The international version of TikTok was launched in September 2017, and by the end of 2024, TikTok had more than 1840 million monthly active users worldwide.

A systematic review and content analysis of how TikTok is used in the context of public and youth mental health examined existing literature and analyzed TikTok content to assess the platform's role in disseminating mental health information, shaping perceptions, and influencing behaviors among young users [54]. The study found that TikTok has emerged as a significant platform where youth actively engage with mental health topics, both through content creation and consumption. Videos often address issues, such as anxiety, depression, self-care, and therapy, frequently using humor, personal storytelling, or trends to communicate messages [54].

O'Donnell et al. [55] examined how TikTok's #EduTok campaign disseminates health-related content and engages audiences. By analyzing 400 videos, the researchers aimed to understand the effectiveness of educational and motivational health messages on the platform. The study suggests that while TikTok can be an effective platform for health education, the content often prioritizes engagement over informative value. Health professionals and educators are encouraged to collaborate with influencers to create content that combines personal storytelling with evidence-based information, ensuring that messages are both relatable and actionable. This approach could enhance the credibility and effectiveness of health communication on social media platforms [55].

While TikTok offers opportunities for raising awareness and reducing stigma, studies also highlight concerns regarding the accuracy of information, potential for misinformation, and the platform's impact on vulnerable populations. The authors call for increased collaboration between mental health professionals and content creators, as well as the development of guidelines to ensure safe and effective communication on the platform [54, 56].

2.4 Social media and drug consumption

Due to the widespread and global use of social media, recent research has explored how these platforms can be used to identify or detect patterns of substance use, as well as how social media influence drug consumption, whether it promotes or reduces it.

Studies have examined how feedback on social media influences individuals who disclose drug consumption online. Authors analyzed user's posts related to drug use and examined the type and tone of feedback received—such as supportive, neutral, or critical responses. The research found that feedback plays a significant role in shaping future behavior and content shared by users. Specifically, supportive feedback was more likely to encourage further disclosure and engagement, while critical or negative feedback could lead to reduced posting or changes in how individuals talked about their drug use. The paper suggests that understanding these interactions can help design more effective online interventions and support systems for people at risk of substance abuse [57].

Other articles have explored how social media big data can be used to enhance research on drug abuse and addiction [58–61]. Authors have argued that traditional methods such as surveys and clinical studies are limited in scale and timeliness. In contrast, social media platforms provide real-time, large-scale, and naturally occurring data that reflect people's behaviors, emotions, and social interactions [58].

The authors have discussed the potential of data from platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook to uncover trends in drug use, identify at-risk populations, and inform public health interventions. They have highlighted the use of machine learning, natural language processing (NLP), and data mining techniques to analyze this unstructured data [58–61].

Castillo-Toledo et al. [62] analyzed Twitter data to explore how cocaine is discussed online, focusing on public perceptions, patterns of use, and geographical differences. The authors conducted a cross-sectional analysis of tweets containing cocaine-related keywords to identify trends and regional variations in discourse, and they concluded that Twitter can serve as a valuable tool for real-time drug trend surveillance, helping inform public health efforts [62].

A systematic review examined a range of studies that analyze user-generated content on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit to monitor drug-related behaviors and trends [59]. The review found that social media can serve as a valuable tool for early detection of emerging drug use patterns, geographic hotspots, and public sentiment around substances. Various computational techniques, including natural language processing and image analysis, were used in the studies reviewed [59, 60].

Other findings suggest that social media data can reveal meaningful patterns in how individuals transition from one drug to another, which may be useful for early intervention and prevention strategies [60].

Despite the opportunities, the authors also address several challenges, including privacy concerns, ethical considerations, and data quality. They caution about the limitations of interpreting social media content, such as the presence of irony, sarcasm, and the lack of representativeness in the data. They call for interdisciplinary collaboration and the development of standardized frameworks to responsibly and effectively use social media data for addiction research [58–62].

3. Conclusions

The use of social media constitutes a powerful tool that, when managed appropriately, can provide significant benefits for both personal and social development, including opportunities for communication, learning, self-expression, and the creation of supportive communities. Nevertheless, a growing body of research highlights that excessive or unregulated engagement with these platforms is associated with a variety of health-related issues. This correlation appears to be particularly pronounced among the most vulnerable segments of the population—adolescents—who are in a critical stage of cognitive, emotional, and social development. The negative consequences most frequently reported include increased levels of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and diminished self-esteem, often linked to mechanisms such as social comparison, cyberbullying, or the constant exposure to unrealistic standards of success and beauty. For these reasons, it is essential to encourage a more critical and responsible use of social media, emphasizing the development of digital literacy skills from an early age. This process requires the active involvement not only of individuals but also of families, educators, and institutions, who must work together to create environments that foster healthy online habits, promote resilience, and mitigate potential risks while still enabling young people to take advantage of the positive aspects that these technologies can offer.

Conflict of interest


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author details

Lucía Fernández-López, Elena Martínez Laorden, Fatima Martín Sánchez, Pilar Almela Rojo and Javier Navarro-Zaragoza*
Department of Pharmacology, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain

*Address all correspondence to: jnavarrozaragoza@um.es

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