

## Should You “Do It for the ‘Gram?” A Review of the Psychological and Sociocultural Effects of Social Media

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### Abstract

*Even though Social Media (SM) has penetrated the lives of roughly half the population of the world, connecting billions of people with friends and family, there are disadvantages that span the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of these users' lives. At the present time, the disadvantages of SM outweigh the advantages. Many users have developed SM-based psychopathologies, such as addiction and depression, and SM is contributing to sociocultural crises, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO), self-objectification, and life dissatisfaction. This awareness has spawned a plethora of studies; researchers are uncovering new complexities about SM, and are expanding communal knowledge of factors that contribute to the psychological and sociocultural lives of SM users. Effects of SM are examined in this integrative review because they directly and indirectly influence the mental and physical health of SM users.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Advantages of Social Media, Disadvantages of Social Media, Social Media Addiction, Depression, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Self-Objectification, Life Dissatisfaction, Parasocial Relationships, and Social Media Connectedness

### Introduction

Social media (SM) has been one of the most revolutionary developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, providing both advantages and disadvantages to users. Constantly evolving, the SM landscape offers easy and streamlined ways to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as a quick way to learn about world news and other viral information. In 2019, the number of SM users reached 3.484 billion, reflecting a 9% year-on-year increase [1]. In 2005, only 5% of American adults used SM; in 2019, the number rose to 72% [2]. We can expect this number to continue growing as the internet becomes available to more people. Even though SM has penetrated lives of roughly half the population of the world, there are some disadvantages that have spanned many aspects of users' lives. Many feel that the disadvantages of using SM are beginning to outweigh the advantages [3]. SM has contributed to the development of sociocultural crises, and many users have developed SM-based psychopathologies. Additionally, SM entities are switching from focusing on delivering relevant, social content to proliferating data-collection and increasing the volume of incendiary content, maximizing attention-engineering strategies [4].

The awareness of the intersection between SM and many psychosocial variables has spawned myriad studies. Researchers are uncovering new complexities about SM and expanding their knowledge of

factors that may contribute to the wellness or maladjustment of SM users. SM's impact has been noted on all aspects of modern living, including commercial, political, romantic, educational, and networking aspects of users' lives. However, the present integrative review focuses solely on the psychological and sociocultural effects of SM because these areas are the basis of mental and physical health of SM users and have not been examined separately by other reviewers. A search was conducted using an EBSCOhost university database, which included other databases such as PubMed, Wiley Online Library, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. Keywords used for this review included Boolean expressions similar to “social media AND effect AND (positive OR negative OR benefit OR advantage OR disadvantage).”

The time limit for the search was set between 2010 and 2019. The initial search resulted in 80 articles, and 56 studies were retained that were relevant to the purpose of this integrative review. An article from 1956 was included in the review due to its foundational documentation of parasocial relationships.

### Positive Psychological and Sociocultural Effects of SM

**Benefits for vulnerable populations:** Vulnerable populations can benefit greatly from SM. For example, a study of 299 Facebook users found social support differences between people with low ( $n = 194$ ) or high ( $n = 105$ ) levels of anxiety [5]. The results showed that Facebook social support significantly increased feelings of well-being in the high-anxiety group, unlike offline social support, which did not contribute to subjective well-being. The low-anxiety group did not have such a pronounced variance between online and offline social support. The authors concluded that Facebook might

act as an alternative social outlet for developing and maintaining relationships with positive psychological results. Similarly, another study found that integrating SM into depression intervention for teenagers could help them recover. People with disorders such as stuttering also find social respite via SM. A study of 96 participants from three Facebook stuttering communities found that stutterers use SM more frequently, feel more confident communicating with the SM users, and feel SM users respond more positively to them [6, 7].

Those who have experienced trauma or traumatic diagnoses also benefit from SM use. In a recent study, 112 survivors of the 2011 terror attack in Utøya, Norway were interviewed. While some survivors felt that SM exchanges were stressful, especially when presented with distressing news and opinions, they generally felt they received social support. In a study of people who were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in China, researchers reported significantly higher perceived online social support derived via SM, compared to perceived offline social support [8, 9].

**Benefits through connectedness:** Social connectedness is considered an important factor in relation to mental health and wellness. Clearly, SM connects people. A study of 274 Facebook users found that Facebook not only helped people develop and maintain social connectedness, but it was also found that Facebook social connectedness is associated with lower depression, lower anxiety, and greater satisfaction in life. The authors concluded that Facebook provides an alternative social outlet offering a range of positive psychological outcomes. Another study explored how to connect adolescents with nature. The researchers interviewed 42 underserved youth in the L.A. Basin area about their perceptions of natural areas and social media use. The researchers concluded that individuals who use social media to highlight themes that resonate with youth (unique experiences, escape, social connections, challenge, adventure, and accessibility) could effectively encourage outdoor activity participation, which positively effects mental and physical health [10, 11].

There are some phenomena unique to SM connectedness such as parasocial relationship (PSR) development. A PSR defines the one-way relationship between a person and a media persona, mediated through television, radio, cartoon, or SM [12]. Needs for social interaction and attachment might lead to PSRs. Like face-to-face relationships, frequent and intimate PSR interactions increase trust and feelings of connectedness [13]. While the persona yields influence that could also negatively influence people, they more often serve as positively influential teachers and, in a way, “friends.” Applications such as YouTube, Vine, Snapchat, Tik Tok, and Twitch are making PSRs increasingly normative, particularly with younger SM consumers.

Social capital is another element that benefits SM users. Social capital is “the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” [14]. Trust and reciprocity between groups or individuals measures how much social capital one has. Benefits of social capital include boosts to self-esteem and psychological well-being, as well as emotional benefits of being part of a group and getting attention. A study of 403 university students in Assam, India found that Facebook facilitated social capital and allowed participants to be more social with more people. In a similar study of Chinese international students studying in Germany, SM use improved users’

psychological well-being, which was facilitated through bonding and maintaining social capital [15].

**Indirect benefits:** Some indirect benefits of using SM are reported [16]. In her review article, Wiederhold discusses studies that found SM could bring attention to health issues and promote healthy behaviors, as well as provide identity, flexibility, structure, narration, and adaption capabilities for chronic disease patients. Also, greater numbers of Facebook friends yield greater perceived social support, which contributes to lower stress levels, and consequently less physical illness and better psychological well-being. Another study found that being authentic on Facebook has health benefits similar to being authentic in-person: higher life satisfaction; higher well-being, contentment, calmness, and social ease; and positive moods. An analysis of 12 million social media profiles against California Department of Public Health vital records showed that people using social media tend to live longer, but this was only true for people receiving requests to connect as friends online and not for those who initiated online friendships [17, 18].

### **Negative Psychological and Sociocultural Effects of SM**

**External psychopathy:** SM is highly addictive across its spectrum of users, from adolescents to the elderly, and the addiction is correlated to maladaptive external effects. Even if one does not have a traditionally defined SM or internet addiction, a person can develop momentary SM addiction symptoms [19]. In a study of over 9000 German adolescent students, it was found that addicted SM users were more likely to experience psychosocial distress. Another study of the 1110 college students found that 29.5% students were addicted to SM, and this group-experienced comorbidity with mania (26.1%), food addiction (10.1%), and shopping addiction (16.8%) [20, 21].

**Internal psychopathy:** Internal psychopathy development is much more common in SM users. In the same study discussed above, researchers discovered that depression (21%) and anxiety (27.7%) were comorbid in the population addicted to SM. A nationally representative sample of 1787 young adults in the U.S was studied [21, 22]. The results showed that high use of multiple SM platforms and higher total time spent on SM were linearly associated with self-reported depression and anxiety, even after adjusting for multiple covariates. In fact, individuals who used 7-11 SM platforms were three times more likely to report depression and anxiety symptoms than those who used 0-2 platforms. Another large sample of U.S. young adults aged 19-32 (N = 1749) was studied [23]. SM was found to be strongly and independently associated with a 9% increase in depressive symptoms. The association between problematic SM use and depressive symptoms was explained by “how” the social media was used and not “how much.” A study of 467 Scottish adolescents examined the relationship of SM with sleep quality, self-esteem, anxiety and depression [24]. Being emotionally invested in SM was linked to poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression.

**Fear of Missing out (FOMO)** is likely derived from primal social fears, such as ostracization and loneliness, and these issues are well documented as reasons for SM use. Two experiments were conducted with German university students (N<sub>1</sub> = 105; N<sub>2</sub> = 85) to examine the effect of cyberostracism (the feeling of being ignored or excluded over the Internet) as a threat to fundamental human needs [25]. Both experiments showed that ostracism negatively affected emotional

states, belongingness, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. This finding is congruent with other research that also suggests that SM use makes users feel lonelier [26]. A sampling of 1787 U.S. adults aged 19-32 discovered that higher social media use was linearly correlated with greater feelings of social isolation. A meta-analysis of Facebook and loneliness examined 18 research effects (N=8798), and confirmed a significant, positive relationship between Facebook use and loneliness [27]. The researchers emphasized that lonely people tend to use Facebook, rather than Facebook making users lonely.

FOMO is an important concept in SM research. In a survey of 207 undergraduate students, researchers examined the effects of extraversion, neuroticism, attachment styles, and FOMO on SM use and SM addiction. FOMO was found to be the only predictor of SM addiction [28, 29]. A study of 16-18-year-old Latin-American SM users (N=1468) also found a link between FOMO and psychopathy. In this study, depression triggered girls to use SM more frequently, while anxiety triggered boys' SM use. Overall, FOMO is associated with experiences of stress due to SM use [30]. A survey of 402 adolescents discovered that those with a higher need for belongingness used Facebook more often and experienced more stress if they were unpopular on the site. A series of studies – which developed a FOMO scale, measured societal FOMO, and identified affective and behavioral correlates of FOMO (total N=3179) – discovered that FOMO was associated with lower need satisfaction, lower life satisfaction, negative mood, distracted driving, and SM use during lectures [31].

**Objectification:** With hate speech and pornography as the exceptions for most platforms, people are generally free to post whatever they want on SM. This freedom affords both positive and negative attributes. On the negative end, SM has indirectly encouraged people, particularly young women, to increasingly objectify themselves. A survey of 61 undergraduate women reported that self-objectification was spurred by desire for attention and facilitated by SM, particularly through “like” and “friends/followers” functions. An analysis of the 20 most-recent Instagram images of 86 young adult women in the UK found that approximately 30% of the women included self-objectifying content, and higher self-objectifying content posting was associated with receiving more likes. Self-objectification has been linked to shame, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, among a host of other issues, and sexualization of women has contributed to poorer body image among women [30-33].

Body dissatisfaction is another consequence of SM use. An assessment of 637 college females who use SM daily discovered that consistent use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat is linked to upward comparison, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating [33, 34]. A similar study was conducted using 363 male and female Singaporean Chinese participants. The researchers were able to develop a psychopathology model for Instagram, and the results supported the claim that Instagram use leads to social comparison, which contributes to rumination and appearance comparison, which further contributes to eating disorders [35]. A survey of 259 women yielded evidence that just following another's appearance-focused Instagram is correlated with thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and drive for thinness [36]. In a different study, researchers required 220 female undergraduates to view randomly assigned sets of thin ideal or average images paired with a low or high number of likes [37]. The results confirmed that exposure to thin-ideal images is associated with body and facial dissatisfaction.

A similar experiment had 128 female undergraduates view positive or neutral comments posted to attractive Instagram photos [38]. The experimenters found that viewing positive comments of another person's appearance led to greater body dissatisfaction.

**Life dissatisfaction:** General life dissatisfaction can result from SM use. Internet and SM addiction, affecting 6% of the world population, is correlated with life dissatisfaction; conversely, happiness and life satisfaction correspond to decreased Internet and SM use, as evidenced in a recent survey and analysis of 251 undergraduates [39]. Three studies extracted data from information technology professionals, information systems undergraduates, and general social media users (total N=1113), and the results suggest SM use decreases job interest, performance, and overall happiness by diverting users' attention from work and inducing “technostress.” SM users also frequently experience envy [40-42]. Researchers conducted a battery of experiments to determine what SM-shared purchases create the most envy: experiential purchases or material purchases [43]. Participants (total N=798) had to look at friends' posts on their own Facebook news feeds, look at simulated feeds, and answer survey questions. The researchers discovered that experiential purchases increase envy in SM users more than material purchases because they are more self-relevant. Lastly, an experiment in which 78 university students took either a selfie or a neutral picture revealed that taking and sharing selfies resulted in higher social sensitivity and lower self-esteem [44]. Furthermore, just saving selfies on one's phone resulted in lower self-esteem than posting selfies to SM.

#### **Miscellaneous Negative Effects of SM**

SM is associated with other negative effects. When questioned about nighttime SM use, 467 Scottish adolescents reported, on average, they received poorer sleep [24]. Using SM was also associated with anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, especially when the users were emotionally invested in SM. In a self-reported, cross-sectional study of 851 Norwegian middle and high school students, researchers discovered that the more time adolescents spend on SM, the more likely they are to engage in episodic heavy drinking, even after adjusting for confounding variables. Finally, another review article outlines studies, which suggest SM facilitates increased cyberbullying and sexting, and lowered scholastic achievement in adolescents [45, 46].

In a yearlong study of 341 participants, researchers discovered that taking more selfies increases narcissism. Another study identified a different surprising phenomenon [47, 48]. Researchers studied 274 university students by questioning their Facebook use (thus, introducing the students' craving for SM), determining if any students were addicted to Facebook, and asking students to complete a 20-minute survey about SM. They found that people at risk for SM addiction are more likely to experience upward time distortion when they cannot access Facebook.

A study of 1157 Polish students found that about 12% of the students had a Facebook addiction. Facebook addiction was related to higher extraversion, narcissism, loneliness, social anxiety, lower general self-efficacy, and impoverished well-being (impaired general health, decreased sleep quality, and higher perceived stress). A larger study of 23,532 Norwegians discovered that addictive SM use was associated with being young, female, and single. Further, it was found that addictive use was related to higher narcissism and lower self-esteem [49, 50].

An additional study of 405 adults found that those who scored high on a SM self-control failure scale had higher levels of SM use, SM addiction, deficient self-regulation, depletion sensitivity, and guilt due to SM use, and lower levels of self-control and subjective wellbeing [51]. All participants were likely to admit that SM use most often conflicted with their professional achievements, educational achievements, and housework.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The studies on effects of SM have contradicting findings. Some examples where certain situations produce polar outcomes include studies on well-being, self-esteem, social adjustment, and social support for deployed service members [48, 52-54]. While only a few articles [e.g., 5, 6, 10, 17] found that Facebook use could lower depression, can lower anxiety, and can increase life satisfaction in certain situations – findings which contradict the majority of research – these contradictory studies are still worth expanding and reanalyzing, as causation and directionality are hard to establish regarding SM use and respective outcomes. Most studies on SM have used self-report measures, small samples, samples of convenience, and samples of adolescents/college students, which pose some methodological concerns.

Notwithstanding, certain frequently reported findings can be established. On the positive side, SM can connect people and provide social support for vulnerable populations. On the negative side, damaging effects arise from FOMO, objectification and other forms of social comparison, SM addiction, and comorbid factors, which are linked to SM use. While we cannot conclude that all SM use is maladaptive, the research [e.g., 20, 21, 22, 23, 26 45, 48, 49, 50, 51] suggests that moderate and severe users are at the highest risk for a host of psychological and sociocultural issues, regardless of age or platform.

While researching the effects of SM use, we found more studies pointing to negative effects than positive effects. It is difficult to assess if this is due to a bias in the research community or simply the existence of more negative than positive effects of SM use. Overall, we were surprised to find the amount of evidence condemning SM use. Diffusion tensor imaging of 20 individuals found that excessive SM use is even associated with white matter deficits in the corpus callosum [55]. The fact that such a commonplace activity might literally change one's brain structure demands further study of SM's effects. Based on research of 528 Chinese SM users, it is possible that one day, SM users will reach a point where they are simply burned out on SM [56]. According to the study, constant connectivity to SM contributes to information overload, which leads to SM exhaustion and contributes to disuse. Until people are exhausted of SM, it would be best for SM users to limit their use to no more than 30 minutes per day, as research recommends [57]. For future study, instead of conducting surveys, researchers should conduct more experiments to better establish the aforementioned linkages to find causation and directionality. Despite the complexity of the issue at hand, it appears that SM is damaging to moderate and heavy users, and merits international attention and intervention.

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