

Digital Exposure and Adolescent Mental Health: A Decade Review of Social Comparison Impact

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, digital platforms have become an integral part of adolescents' lives. This paper aims to examine the impact of constant exposure to digital social environments on adolescent mental health from 2015 to 2025. It emphasizes the role of digital platforms in influencing thoughts, feelings, overall personality development, and mental health outcomes among young people. This review highlights key psychological mechanisms, notably upward social comparison, through which adolescents evaluate themselves against idealized depictions of appearance, abilities, and success. Growing evidence links these processes to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Furthermore, this paper addresses moderating factors such as gender differences and active versus passive usage patterns, alongside post-pandemic challenges arising from heightened screen engagement during COVID-19. Finally, the necessity of psychoeducational interventions, digital literacy, and multi-tiered social support systems to foster resilience is discussed.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the digital space has become an indispensable facet of adolescents' day-to-day experiences. Digital platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube have fundamentally transformed how young people communicate, construct identity, and perceive both themselves and others (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). These environments are predominantly visual in nature, emphasizing curated images and audiovisual content that often reflect edited, idealized representations of users' daily lives (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Constant exposure to such idealized digital content can profoundly shape how adolescents evaluate their physical appearance, social status, and personal competence. Exposure to unrealistic aesthetic and lifestyle standards frequently triggers intensive social comparison, rendering it a pivotal mechanism for understanding contemporary youth psychological well-being (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

Unlike previous generations, adolescents today are navigating developmental milestones entirely within hyper-connected digital ecosystems, prompting widespread clinical and public health concerns regarding social media's mental health repercussions (Keles et al., 2020). While numerous studies have identified links between screen

exposure and psychological distress, findings in the literature remain fragmented, limiting a unified, longitudinal perspective on the cumulative psychological toll of digital exposure. Consequently, there is a critical need to synthesize empirical findings from 2015 to 2025 to identify overarching trends, psychological underpinnings, and moderating dynamics. This narrative review aims to examine the multifaceted impact of a decade of digital exposure on adolescent mental health, with a specific focus on upward social comparison, affective outcomes, post-pandemic shifts, and strategic intervention frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this review is grounded in Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory. The theory posits that individuals possess an inherent drive to evaluate their abilities, appearance, and opinions through comparison with others. In contemporary digital ecosystems which serve as a primary ecological context for adolescent socialization and identity development this mechanism manifests predominantly as upward social comparison. The interactive, visually dense, and feedback-driven nature of modern platforms accelerates opportunities for selective comparison against idealized depictions of peers and public figures, leading to cumulative effects on psychological functioning (Vogel et al., 2014).

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative literature review approach to synthesize empirical findings and theoretical developments concerning adolescent mental health in digital environments between 2015 and 2025. A narrative review design is suitable for examining complex psychological phenomena, mapping developmental trajectories, and establishing conceptual integration across diverse empirical sources.

Data Collection and Literature Identification

Literature identification was conducted across major academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering publications released from 2015 through 2025. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal theoretical papers, and systematic reviews examining the intersections of digital exposure, social media engagement, upward social comparison, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, anxiety, and adolescent mental health. Key inclusion criteria encompassed: (a) studies focused on adolescent and young adult populations, (b) investigations addressing digital media environments and psychosocial mechanisms, and (c) publications published in English.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The retrieved literature was analyzed using thematic qualitative synthesis. Extracted findings were systematically organized around key psychological mechanisms (upward social comparison, internalization of ideals, feedback-seeking), mental health outcomes

(internalizing symptoms, body image concerns), moderating variables (gender differences, active vs. passive usage), and systemic intervention strategies. Critical narrative integration was applied to identify overarching developmental patterns and formulate evidence-based preventive recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Mechanisms

The relationship between digital exposure and adolescent mental health is driven by distinct psychological processes. Foremost among these is upward social comparison, wherein youth evaluate their attributes against highly curated depictions of others' successes and aesthetics. Chronic engagement in upward comparison routinely fosters feelings of inadequacy, diminished self-worth, and persistent self-criticism.

Over time, sustained exposure to curated imagery leads to the cognitive internalization of unrealistic beauty and lifestyle benchmarks (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Furthermore, the quantifiable, feedback-driven architecture of modern platforms operationalized through metrics such as "likes", shares, and comments generates externalized feedback-seeking loops (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). This heightens the need for validation and exacerbates emotional vulnerability when social approval is perceived as insufficient.

Mental Health Outcomes in Adolescents

Empirical investigations spanning 2015–2025 consistently document that frequent digital platform engagement is associated with adverse psychological outcomes. One of the most pervasive consequences is body dissatisfaction and heightened appearance anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2015). These appearance-related concerns frequently cascade into eroded global self-esteem and maladaptive self-evaluations.

Moreover, intensive social media use has been linked to elevated rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and generalized psychological distress among adolescents (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2018). Paradoxically, despite being hyper-connected digitally, many young people report pervasive subjective loneliness, social isolation, and reduced life satisfaction, underscoring the nuanced and sometimes detrimental nature of digital connectedness.

Moderating and Protective Factors

The severity of digital media's impact is moderated by individual and behavioral factors. Gender plays a notable role; adolescent girls report higher vulnerability to appearance-based comparisons and subsequent body image distress relative to boys (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Furthermore, behavioral usage patterns are critical: passive consumption (e.g., mindless scrolling and observing others) poses a significantly higher risk to mental health than active, communicative engagement (e.g., direct messaging and collaborative creation) (Verduyn et al., 2017).

Conversely, internal and external protective factors can buffer youth against these negative effects. Robust interpersonal social support, critical digital literacy, self-compassion, and adaptive coping mechanisms empower adolescents to interpret curated content realistically, mitigating maladaptive comparative processing.

Recent Trends and Post-Pandemic Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated adolescent immersion into digital spaces, establishing digital platforms as the essential medium for education, socialization, and entertainment. This structural shift led to sustained increases in daily screen time and digital dependency.

However, prolonged isolation combined with heightened exposure to digital spaces disrupted normative social development. The overreliance on virtual interaction alongside reduced face-to-face peer engagement amplified stress, emotional fatigue, and interpersonal difficulties in the post-pandemic landscape (Ellis et al., 2020).

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Addressing digital vulnerabilities in adolescents requires proactive psychoeducational and systemic strategies. Core initiatives must include evidence-based psychoeducation on digital hygiene, cognitive reframing of curated online representations, and explicit instruction on navigating upward comparison.

Additionally, multi-tiered support networks encompassing families, educators, and mental health professionals are vital. Fostering balanced, intentional screen habits, enhancing media literacy curricula in schools, and cultivating supportive real-world environments remain essential strategies to support adolescent mental health in an increasingly digital era.

Conclusion

Over the decade from 2015 to 2025, digital platforms have evolved into a central developmental context for adolescents, offering meaningful socialization avenues while presenting distinct mental health vulnerabilities. The evidence underscores that upward social comparison and the internalization of curated ideals significantly contribute to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among youth. Understanding these underlying psychological pathways enables clinicians, educators, and policymakers to design targeted psychoeducational interventions and digital literacy programs that promote resilience and safeguard adolescent psychological well-being.

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