

The Psychological Pathways from Social Media Use to Anxiety in American Youth: Mechanisms, Manifestations, and Multi-Stakeholder Interventions

Zhiyuan Luo

School of Mathematics and Statistics, Northeastern University at Qinhuangdao, Qinhuangdao, China
202315302@stu.neu.edu.cn

Abstract. Social media has become a constituent of life for young people in the United States. At the same time, anxiety disorders are common among this group. This study examines how social media use is linked to anxiety symptoms in youth aged 13–25. Based on existing research, the paper identifies three main psychological mechanisms: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), upward social comparison, and cyberbullying. These mechanisms are shaped by platform features such as endless scrolling, curated content, and public feedback. Together, they contribute to negative outcomes including social withdrawal, sleep disturbance, and reduced academic performance. The study further discusses how these effects interfere with daily functioning and increase anxiety levels. To address these problems, a multi-stakeholder intervention framework is proposed. This framework includes digital literacy education in schools, well-being-centered platform design, and stronger mental health support from families, schools, and professionals. By focusing on specific psychological pathways rather than general screen time, this study provides a clearer understanding of how routine social media behaviors may increase anxiety and offers practical directions for prevention and intervention.

Keywords: Social Media Use, Anxiety Disorders, Adolescent Mental Health, Digital Well-being, Psychological Mechanisms

1. Introduction

1.1. Research context and significance

The social media has become a constituent of life. It has transformed drastically the interpersonal communication and consumption patterns. This is largely promiscuous among the teens and young adults. As per recent statistics in the United States, it is projected that approximately 95 percent of the youth population between 13-17 years old access the social media platforms with majority of them accessing it almost all the time [1]. Meanwhile, the epidemiological studies have portrayed that among the most common mental health problems in this group of individuals is the occurrence of anxiety disorders where an estimated 31.9 percent of teenagers have been observed to have

developed anxiety disorder [2]. This temporal coincidence is one of the potential cause-effect relationships that have to be explored in a systematic manner. The bloom of social media and the fact that the amount of the people having anxiety disorders increases as well has brought about much controversy whether the two could be related. It is not only an academic assignment but a burning social issue since it has a striking position in developing efficient mental health interventions, educates the digital citizenry, and develops ethical design of technological gadgets to safeguard the well-being of adolescent individuals.

1.2. Literature review and theoretical foundations

The overlap between social media use and psychological distress has seen a broad literature written wherein the investigations have been uniform in showing that the more people engage, the more they report anxiety and depression [3]. More precisely defining this knowledge, Primack and colleagues demonstrated that dose-response relationship existed, and those who engaged in a greater number of different elements of social media depicted more cases of perceived social isolation and depressed moods [4]. The other necessary research area determines the distinction in the types of engagement. Vannucci et al. found that under passive consumption of content (browsing and no interactions) a symptom increase of social anxiety was better explained by the nature of use than by active communication which means that the nature of use is clear on the effects [5]. All these studies agree that social media is not a free agent; it can affect the psychology of the people at a micro-level, basing on the different dimensions on which the people can utilize it. Combined, these studies demonstrate that the use of social media is a multiplex predictor of mental health outcomes.

1.3. Research gaps and study objectives

Although a lot of effort has been dug in the connection between the two and the evolution of some of the differences, a lot of gaps exist. Most of the existing studies have focused on aggregate time at the computer (or platform) or platform diversity as predictor of overall mental health outcomes [3,4]. However, most of the studies have gaps at the current time. Majority of the studies have been regarded with rather general pointers, such as total amount of time spent on the screen or the amount of platforms used; however, few research works have been delved deeper in as far as particular high-threaten utilization behaviors on currently existing video-based social networks are concerned, such as compulsive use and superficial social comparison as a result of using algorithms. Such behaviors are explained by the use of social comparison theory and cognitive-behavioral theories of anxiety. To take an example, being obsessed with short videos recommended on the algorithm, constantly comparing your appearance and life due to watching the posts of so-called fitness or beauty bloggers, or the need to look perfect, how exactly the specific behavior in question leads to the syndrome of various types of anxiety (including the case of generalized anxiety when you are constantly tense and anxious) the literature on social anxiety (or fear of social situations) is relatively sparse. More so, most of the existing literature simply demonstrates that there is a relationship between the usage of social media and the experience of anxiety but does not give a systematic explanation of the mechanism through which it occurs: how exactly does the daily routine of scrolling Instagram feeds, giving likes, and commenting like turn people into people who are constantly anxious? In order to cover these gaps, a mechanism-based approach will be needed based on psychological social comparison theories, cognitive-behavioral theories and digital well-being paradigms. Such gaps are especially supposed to be addressed by this research work, which is

to be beyond general correlations and profound analysis of specific, problematic patterns of usage and the psychological specifics of effects they yield.

1.4. Research framework and contributions

To find answers to this complex relationship, the paper shall be working with a systematic framework of exploring it. First of all, the context of social media and anxiety rate of the American young generation will be described as the means of establishing the current situation and the scale of the problem. Second, the key psychological and behavioral mechanisms such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), upward social comparison, exposure to cyberbullying will be examined and identified as the mechanism by which the use of the platform affects the emergence of anxiety symptoms, and the subsequent negative impact on the functioning of daily activity. In addition, it is based on this analysis that the paper shall serve to provide certain, multi-stakeholder recommendations, which would be channeled towards mitigation and prevention. Finally, there will be the conclusion that summarizes the most significant results, reflects on the practical implications of the study, and creates limitations to develop the future research. It is against this framework that this paper will aim to provide a nuanced and practical understanding of the contribution of social media settings in bringing about anxiety to young Americans. It is within this context that the paper shall attempt to fulfill the theoretical and practical contributions to the social media as a source of anxiety by the clear explanation of the specific psychological processes that are involved, and the design of a piece of evidence-based intervention to respond to the various stakeholders.

2. Case description

This study examines the concurrent phenomenon of high social media engagement and the high prevalence of anxiety symptoms coexisting among young people in the United States. Research defines youth in a broad sense as people aged between 13 and 25. This group is the first generation to experience adolescence in a highly interconnected digital environment, making their experiences an important case study of mental health in the digital age. The characteristics of the landscape described in this case are that two data-supported trends coexist in contemporary American society [1]. The descriptive landscape of this case is characterized by two dominant, data-supported trends that coexist in contemporary American society.

The penetration of social media is almost everywhere. Research has shown that apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are the hubs of the social and recreational activities of American youth. According to a recent report, most teenagers go to these sites on a daily basis, and a significant number of them are virtual regular customers and visit them several hours almost daily [1]. The concept of participation is complex, which involves the sharing of information, posting of content, consumption, and interaction of digital communities. The common feature of these usage methods is the frequent checking behavior, and the mobile phone is precisely the bridge connecting people to the Internet. This constant connectivity creates unprecedented opportunities for both social engagement and psychological vulnerability. Concurrent with high social media engagement is a well-documented mental health condition characterized by severe anxiety. Accompanied by the high social media interaction is a documented mental condition accompanied by extreme anxiety. The statistics of epidemiological research always indicate that anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent psychological issues in youth in the United States. Research shows that more than 30 per cent of teenagers will qualify as having an anxiety disorder, and the symptoms of the condition include constant worry, nervousness, physical tension, and, in severe instances, social anxiety, a

pronounced fear of social interactions and critique [2]. These symptoms are reported to interfere with academic performance, extracurricular activities, and face-to-face social relationships, representing a substantial public health concern.

The essence of this case is on the temporal correlation that has been observed and the potential socio-technical background of the connection between these two trends. The era of the increasing level of anxiety among the young population has been associated with the intensive use and development of social media platforms, with the highest levels of involvement. Researchers, educators, and clinicians have grown increasingly alarmed that elements that these platforms may introduce, including quantified social feedback, unending flows of personalized peer content, and the erosion of public and personal life, can pose new stressors that may worsen or occasion anxious dispositions in susceptible people [6]. This example, then, is not a mere coincidence, but a highly complicated socio-technical scenario in which a near-universal behavior meets with a common psychological state, beckoning one to take a critical look at the mechanisms that are at work. This timing and context consistency gives a strong explanation as to why causal processes should be examined as opposed to finding mere correlations. The next section will make an elaborate study of these suggested mechanisms and their problematic results.

3. Analysis: psychological mechanisms and negative outcomes

Further developing the descriptive geography of the mass utilization of social media and the anxiety rates among American youngsters, this part will offer a more specific account of the causative factors and the consequent adverse effects. This section will briefly describe the key psychological tracks, according to which the involvement of social media fosters anxiety, and then discuss its damage to everyday life.

3.1. Psychological mechanisms linking social media to anxiety

Table 1. Key psychological mechanisms linking social media use to anxiety among youth

Mechanism	Core Concept & Platform Feature	Key Manifestations & Outcomes	Supporting Evidence / Theory
1. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Design-driven “anxious connectivity”: endless scrolling, real-time notifications.	Compulsive checking; addiction-like patterns; habitual anxiety reinforcement; passive browsing fueling social inadequacy.	Meta-analysis links FOMO to problematic use; Cycle of compulsive use and distress.
2. Upward Social Comparison	Exposure to curated, idealized portrayals of peers’ and influencers’ lives.	Negative self-evaluation; internalization of unattainable standards; anxiety about social evaluation, appearance, and achievement.	Meta-analysis links use to negative self-image; Passive, comparative use as key pathway; Social Comparison Theory.
3. Cyberbullying & Social Threat	Anonymity, permanence, and limitless audience of online interactions.	Direct victimization leading to anxiety/depression; ambient climate of social threat; hyper-vigilance and anticipatory anxiety.	Reviews confirm severe impacts on victims; Features mirror/exacerbate social anxiety disorder.

Table 1 synthesizes three core psychological pathways through which social media engagement contributes to anxiety among youth. The mechanisms operate synergistically, with platform design

features creating an environment that fosters compulsive use, negative self-evaluation, and persistent social threat, ultimately leading to significant functional impairments in daily life.

3.1.1. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and the reinforcement of anxious connectivity

The design architecture of social media platforms, characterized by endless scrolling and real-time notifications, directly cultivates a state of “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO). Meta-analytic research has confirmed a significant association between FOMO and both the level of social media engagement and the development of problematic, addictive use patterns [7]. This pervasive fear fosters compulsive checking behaviors, which are manifested as users seeking to frequently update their social status to alleviate the fear of being alienated by others. The quantification of social feedback likes comments makes this behavior more common, embedding young people’s anxiety into their platform usage habits. This habitual anxiety reinforcement creates a self-perpetuating cycle of compulsive use and heightened distress. This state of anxious connectivity perpetuates a cycle where passive, comparative browsing amplifies feelings of social inadequacy, thereby fueling the very anxieties that drive compulsive use.

3.1.2. Upward social comparison and the internalization of idealized standards

Social media platforms provide an unparalleled environment for social comparison, primarily of an upward nature. Constant exposure to curated, highlight-reel presentations of peers’ and influencers’ lives, bodies, and successes facilitates negative self-evaluation. The evidence of meta-analysis proves that there is a strong correlation between problematic social media use and negative self-evaluation, including fears of body image [8]. Moreover, theory focuses on establishing that an active, comparison-based consumption is one of the critical routes by which social media can erode well-being [9]. The assimilation of these frequently unachievable ideals creates a sense of incompetence that is constantly felt and anxiety, which is based on social judgment, appearance, and personal success. The edited quality of the internet information implies that such comparisons are founded on false data; however, their psychological effects on self-worth and nervous anxiety are considerable and thoroughly investigated [10]. This is in line with the social comparison theory predicting that upward comparison with unattainable standards will result in reduced self-evaluation and anxiety.

3.1.3. Cyberbullying and the pervasive climate of social threat

Cyberbullying represents a direct, severe, and inescapable stressor inherent to digital social spaces. Its unique features—anonymity, permanence, and a limitless audience—intensify its psychological harm. Comprehensive reviews of the global situation indicate that victims of cyberbullying experience substantially heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation [11]. Beyond direct victimization, the omnipresent potential for public shaming, negative feedback, or exclusion creates an ambient climate of social threat. This environment fosters anticipatory anxiety, where users become hyper-vigilant about their self-presentation and the potential consequences of their online actions, mirroring and exacerbating core features of social anxiety disorder [12].

3.2. Negative outcomes and functional impairments

3.2.1. Exacerbation of psychological distress and social withdrawal

The most direct and the first impact is the aggravation of general psychological distress, and it also entails anxiety symptoms. Massive surveys have been able to make conclusive links between the severity of social media usage and more people reporting depression and anxiety [3]. This anguish is likely to be social withdrawal, where Internet communications replace or disable face-to-face relations. It is found that passively reading content on social media, like browsing news sources with no engagement, is linked to a drop in subjective well-being and weakening of engagement in offline social interactions [12]. The fear brought about by the negative online social life, the fear of being bullied or the anxiety due to comparison may cause individuals to shun real-life social events, leaving individuals in a vicious circle where the anxiety due to the influence of the Internet in turn causes people to avoid socializing in reality and to socialize more via the Internet [11].

3.2.2. Sleep disturbance and the weakening of emotional regulation

The intrusion of social media into nighttime routines disrupts sleep through both psychological and physiological pathways. Notably, systematic reviews highlight sleep quality as a key mediating factor in the relationship between social media use and poorer mental health outcomes among youth [4]. Engaging with stimulating or emotionally charged content before bed increases cognitive arousal, while blue light emission suppresses melatonin. Studies have discovered that an excessive use of social media, particularly one hour before going to bed, is considerably related to an inability to sleep on time, a low quality of sleep, and dysfunction during the day [13]. The resultant decrease in sleep time and deterioration in the quality of sleep are bidirectionally correlated with anxiety. Some neurobiological studies have proved that lack of sleep may impair the workings of the prefrontal cortex, which plays a significant role in emotion control. Moreover, the lack of sleep can also increase the reaction of the amygdala to adverse stimuli. Accordingly, social media consumption at night has a direct effect on the neurophysiological condition, which reduces the anxiety threshold and reduces the ability to effectively cope, resulting in a vicious circle of insomnia and stress. In combination, these three pathways include social withdrawal, sleep disruption, and cognitive fragmentation, and have a synergistic effect that greatly reduces the functionality and quality of life.

3.2.3. Cognitive fragmentation and academic performance anxiety

The habitual use of social media encourages persistent multitasking and rapid attention switching, a cognitive style that fragments focus and undermines deep, sustained thought. This "continuous partial attention" depletes cognitive resources and is detrimental to academic tasks that require concentration and perseverance, leading to procrastination and lower academic achievement [14]. The consequent academic stress and fear of failure are major causes of anxiety. In particular, it has been shown that more frequent social media usage in academic activities is linked to a decreased grade point average (GPA), and the deterioration of academic performance is a major cause of anxiety [15]. Moreover, performance anxiety in an academic environment may become even stronger because of the need to keep a flawless online image since the fear of failure and inability to live up to high standards (both personal and those of peer-reviewed by online peers) may be overwhelming.

4. Proposed interventions: a multi-stakeholder framework

Through the above-performed-analysis that has indicated that Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), upward social comparison and the resultant impact on sleep, social functioning and academic performance were among the mechanisms through which the use of social media is linked to anxiety; the section proposes a multi-stakeholder framework intervention. Individual competencies, platform design, and more general support systems within the society are the two key areas of focus that need to be minimized to reduce the impacts of these attacks.

4.1. Integrating comprehensive digital literacy and critical engagement into educational curricula

Active education is the most significant in order to reverse the adverse outcomes of passive consumption (Problem 3.2.1) and insufficient sleep hygiene (Problem 3.2.2). School curricula must move away to critical digital literacy rather than the simplistic online safety. This includes training teenagers on how to deceive the edited-down nature of social media information, how to recognize the design patterns applied to persuade them, and how social comparison can be created through the process of algorithmic curation [16]. Meanwhile, the practical skills of self-regulation (intention use planning, notification management, and a few digital curfews introduction as a part of sleep protection) also should be taught. One of the opportunities is introducing the idea of the so-called social media hygiene workshops, which is composed of psychoeducational components on the relationship between the use patterns and anxiety with the real tasks during digital footprint management and formation of the healthy boundaries [17]. The same competencies allow the youth to conquer the digital environments with confidence and strength. Make young people serious consumers and conscious users but not passive targets. This practice can seriously sabotage the powers of coercion and comparisons which were the roots of anxiety.

4.2. Mandating ethical design and well-being-centric features on social media platforms

The platform-engineered drivers of compulsive use and social comparison (Problems 3.2.1 and 3.2.3) should be addressed by putting in place regulatory and design interventions to cope with. Projects will be promoted (or even mandated) to implement user-friendly well-being functionality and interventions. Recent experimental research supports the notion that coaching customers to develop more deliberate, network enhancing mannerisms can be an effective way of reducing the sense of loneliness and Fear of Missing Out [18]. The first steps are the basic solutions, which are the ability to customize the usage dashboards and the default reminder of a break after a lengthy session [17]. More importantly, the issue with the algorithmic recommendation systems prioritizing the engagement at any cost is to be remedied, as the overload of information is a significant source of stress itself and is linked with negative mental health outcomes [18]. The social comparison and performance anxiety can be reduced with an introduction of optional chronological feeds and reduction of the quantitative social metrics. Furthermore, a duty-of-care strategy can impose platforms to determine and respond to harms, such as adopting AI to recognize patterns of cyberbullying or mass harassment and provide victims with simplified support and reporting links. It is intended to transform the paradigm of the designing that is grounded on maximized engagement into responsible facilitation, in such a way, that the platform architecture encourages, instead of exploits human psychological vulnerability. This shift corresponds to the recommendations of developing technologies in a humanistic manner and the archetypes of digital health.

4.3. Building a robust, multi-tiered social and mental health support ecosystem

To minimize the anxiety induced by cyberbullying and academic pressure and help the already symptomatic people (Problem 3.2.3), the support of offline and online sources should be reinforced. At institutional front, schools and colleges must make sure that they display obvious and readily report actions about cyberbullying, as well as corrective actions that recover the cut rather than merely convict the aggressor [10]. Resourcing of integrated mental health must be advanced to a considerable extent to lessen the risks of barriers to help seeking. It consists of training teachers and counselors on how to detect digital distress and motivate them to adopt evidence-based digital mental health interventions, such as apps that have the potential to provide either Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or mindfulness meditation, which can provide scalable and low-stigmatized support [19]. Notably, the parents and caregivers will be invited as partners through the assistance of the community education programs that will equip them to discuss the online experiences without being judgmental and have an example of healthy digital practices. A network of peers, family, and professionals should also be offered where the youths will find it easy to address the issues that they encounter online and request an intervention before their anxiety can render them helpless. A combination of these multi-level responses creates a safety net, which is directed to the underlying anxiety and creates a long-term resilience.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

This study has systematically investigated the psychological mechanisms between social media use and anxiety symptoms among American youth. The analysis identified three core psychological and behavioral mechanisms as primary conduits for anxiety: the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which drives compulsive use; constant upward social comparison with curated online content, which erodes self-esteem; and exposure to or fear of cyberbullying, which creates a climate of chronic social threat. These mechanisms manifest in significant negative impacts on daily functioning, namely increased social withdrawal and avoidance, pervasive sleep disruption, and cognitive fragmentation, leading to academic impairment. All these observations prove the systematic destruction of adolescent mental health as a result of regular use of social media in many ways. In order to correct these mutually influencing problems, a complex intervention model is offered, which includes the introduction of critical digital literacy to education, the facilitation of the well-being-centered design of the platforms by ethical standards and feature development, and the reinforcement of multi-level mental health support systems at family, school, and community levels.

5.2. Research significance

The practical significance of this research is that, it starts from the perspective of mechanism, analyzes the process of problem formation, and finally finds methods to solve public health problems. The findings describe the specific pathways from daily online behaviors to anxiety symptoms, to provide valuable empirical basis for targeted adolescent mental health education programs. For clinicians and counselors, this analysis explains that online behavior is one of the influencing factors of anxiety, providing a clear framework for assessing in anxiety symptoms. Moreover, the design and policy suggestions that are presented in this research act as a beginning of social media ethical reform. They push platforms to a radical change: shifting away from the endless

chase after the time of user engagement to creating systems that support the health and well-being of users. This study contributes to the study of digital well-being by combining psychological theories and the creation of platforms. Finally, the research provides a significant emphasis on the fact that reducing the state of anxiety will take a more systemic approach and helps to address the greater societal objective of creating a healthier digital landscape among youths.

5.3. Limitations and future studies

This study must illustrate some limitations. The conclusions are based on a series of existing literature and secondary data. Although these data are very helpful for exploring the issues of this article, there may be errors in the causal relationship between social media use and anxiety. Meanwhile, the reliance on self-reported data may also contain personal biases. Future studies should introduce more rigorous method to eliminate these errors. For example, longitudinal designs of long-term tracking adolescents could better explore causal relationship. Experience sampling methods which capture real-time moods and social media use would provide more valid data on immediate response to different online behavior. Finally, mixed-methods research containing surveys and interviews can provide a richer understanding of individual differences in such complex relationships

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