Implications and prospects of integrating social media in English language teaching in higher education

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between social media usage and mental health, with particular attention to anxiety and self-esteem among young adults. Despite growing scholarly interest, there remains a gap in understanding how digital interactions influence psychological well-being through complex emotional and social mechanisms. To address this, a mixed methods design was employed, combining a survey of 200 participants who completed standardized measures of anxiety and self-esteem with in-depth qualitative interviews. The analysis revealed that frequent engagement with social media corresponded with elevated anxiety and diminished self-esteem. Further examination indicated that social media activity served as a meaningful predictor of these psychological outcomes. Qualitative insights emphasized the roles of social comparison, validation-seeking behavior, and the supportive potential of online communities. The findings underscore the importance of developing digital literacy programs and implementing platform-level interventions aimed at reducing harmful effects while fostering healthier, more reflective modes of online participation.

Keywords: Anxiety; digital literacy; mental health; self-esteem; social media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a dominant force in the lives of young adults. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, and engagement. However, concerns have been raised about the impact of social media on mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety and self-esteem (Tiggemann and Slater 2014). With the rise of social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors online, it is crucial to understand how these platforms influence psychological well-being.

Recent studies suggest that social media use, particularly among young adults, may contribute to increased feelings of anxiety and lower self-esteem (Tiggemann and Slater 2014). The idealized portrayals of life on social media can create unrealistic comparisons, leading to negative body image, feelings of inadequacy, and lower self-worth (Fardouly et al., 2015). However, social media also offers opportunities for support and self-expression, which may buffer against these negative effects (Naslund et al., 2016; Wang & Low, 2024).

The relationship between social media use and mental health has garnered significant attention in recent years (Fassi et al., 2025). Numerous studies have explored both the positive and negative effects of social media on individuals' mental well-being. On the positive side, social media platforms offer a space for connection, particularly for individuals who may feel isolated due to geographic, social, or health-related barriers. Online communities provide support for those struggling with mental health issues, offering validation and shared experiences. For instance, Naslund et al. (2016) highlight how social media can serve as a critical tool for fostering peer support networks, particularly for individuals dealing with chronic conditions like depression or anxiety. Moreover, social media has played a crucial role in raising mental health awareness and reducing stigma by making conversations about mental health more accessible to the public (Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis 2015).

However, despite these positive aspects, there is growing concern about the negative impact of social media on mental health, particularly in relation to social comparison, addiction, and cyberbullying. Research consistently shows that excessive use of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, particularly among adolescents. Fardouly et al. (2015) discuss how the highly curated and idealized representations of people's lives on social media contribute to negative body image and low self-esteem. Social comparison, whether related to appearance, lifestyle, or success, often triggers feelings of inadequacy, especially when users feel they do not measure up to the images portrayed online. Moreover, the addictive nature of social media use has been linked to disrupted sleep patterns, decreased productivity, and mental fatigue. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) argue that the constant need to check notifications or engage with content can lead to compulsive use, which may exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Cyberbullying is another significant concern associated with social media use, particularly among younger users. Studies indicate a strong correlation between exposure to online harassment and negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time, leading to persistent emotional distress and feelings of vulnerability. This is compounded by the public nature of online interactions, which can amplify the harm caused by such harassment.

However, the effects of social media on mental health are not universal and are influenced by a variety of factors, including the nature of social media use and individual differences. Research suggests that passive consumption of content—such as scrolling through feeds without active engagement—tends to have more detrimental effects than active participation, such as creating content or engaging in meaningful conversations (Verduyn et al. 2015). Additionally, demographic factors, such as age, personality, and existing mental health status, play a role in determining how social media affects an individual's mental health. For example, adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison and cyberbullying.

The present study helps identify key areas of interest or concern that are relevant to current issues, trends, or gaps in knowledge. Mobile learning has been on the rise in all forms of education as a tool for effective

learning (Uzunboylu & Azhar, 2023; Çelik & Uzunboylu, 2022). By selecting a focused topic, researchers or individuals can direct their attention to specific questions or problems that need to be addressed. It ensures that the exploration or study is purposeful, meaningful, and aligned with broader objectives. In the case of mental health and social media, for instance, identifying relevant topics allows researchers to understand how these platforms impact well-being, which can ultimately inform policy, interventions, and improve understanding for better mental health outcomes. Topics also provide direction, helping to structure research and guiding the development of ideas, making the findings more applicable and useful for solving real-world problems. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation is to investigate the relationship between social media usage and mental health, with a particular focus on anxiety and self-esteem among young adults. The study aims to explore how different patterns of social media use may influence these psychological outcomes, considering both the negative impacts, such as social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors, as well as the potential positive effects, such as support from online communities. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media engagement affects mental well-being and to inform future interventions aimed at promoting healthier online behaviors.

1.1. Purpose of study

This study aims to investigate how social media usage correlates with anxiety and self-esteem, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the psychological effects of social media engagement. This led to the following questions

RQ1- What is the relationship between social media usage and anxiety among young adults?

RQ2- How does social media usage impact self-esteem in young adults?

The following hypotheses are put forward:

H1- Increased social media usage is positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety among young adults.

H2- Increased social media usage is negatively correlated with self-esteem among young adults.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

Research on the impact of social media on mental health employs a variety of methods, including surveys and questionnaires to assess correlations between social media use and mental health symptoms, longitudinal studies that track individuals over time to observe changes, and experimental designs where participants are assigned to different social media usage groups to measure effects. Additionally, qualitative interviews and focus groups provide in-depth insights into personal experiences, while content analysis examines the types of posts shared on social media and their impact. Some studies also use psychophysiological measurements to gauge physical responses to social media exposure, and big data analytics with machine learning help identify broader trends and patterns in mental health across large populations. These methods together offer both broad and detailed perspectives on the relationship between social media and mental well-being.

2.1. Participants

A total of 200 young adults (ages 18-30) participated in this study. Participants were recruited via online advertisements and social media platforms. The sample included a diverse group, with 70% identifying as female and 30% as male. Participants were asked to report their average daily social media usage in hours and complete the standardized scales for anxiety and self-esteem.

2.2. Data collection instruments

2.2.1. Quantitative measures

In this study, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) were used to assess anxiety and self-esteem, respectively. The GAD-7, which measures the severity of anxiety symptoms, is scored on a 4-point Likert scale for each of its seven items. Based on participants' scores, they were categorized into four levels of anxiety: minimal (0-4), mild (5-9), moderate (10-14), and severe (15-21). Percentages were used to express the distribution of participants across these categories. For example, if 50% of the participants scored in the mild anxiety range, it would indicate that half of the sample experienced mild anxiety based on their social media usage.

Similarly, the RSES measures self-esteem on a 4-point Likert scale for each of its 10 items, with scores ranging from 10 to 40. Higher scores reflect higher self-esteem. The percentage of participants in different self-esteem ranges was calculated based on their scores. For instance, if 40% of participants scored in the lower self-esteem range (scores between 10 and 20), this would show the proportion of the sample with low self-esteem, correlating with higher social media usage. For the study's analysis, the following steps were taken:

1. Participants' daily social media usage was categorized into three groups: less than 1 hour, 1-3 hours, and more than 3 hours per day. The percentage of participants in each category was determined and used for further analysis.

2. A correlation analysis was conducted, and the results were expressed in percentages to reflect the relationship between social media usage and anxiety levels as well as self-esteem. For example, if 65% of participants who used social media for more than 3 hours per day reported moderate to severe anxiety, this would indicate a strong association between high social media usage and increased anxiety.

3. In terms of self-esteem, percentages were used to show how social media usage affected scores. For example, 45% of participants who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media scored in the lower self-esteem range (below 20), whereas only 25% of those who used social media for less than an hour per day fell into this category.

4. Qualitative findings were also analyzed to understand how behaviors such as social comparison and validation-seeking contributed to these percentages. For instance, if 60% of interviewees reported feeling anxious due to social comparison with others' curated posts, this would highlight how the process of comparing oneself to others online affected a significant portion of the sample.

In summary, this study utilized percentages to describe the relationship between social media usage, anxiety, and self-esteem. Higher social media usage (more than 3 hours per day) was associated with higher percentages of participants reporting increased anxiety and lower self-esteem. For example, 70% of participants who reported using social media for more than 3 hours daily had moderate to severe anxiety, while 60% reported lower self-esteem. These findings underscore the significant impact of social media on mental health, with the percentages reflecting the magnitude of the relationship between the variables.

2.2.2. *Qualitative interviews*

A subset of 20 participants was chosen for in-depth interviews based on their reported social media usage and willingness to participate. These semi-structured interviews aimed to explore their personal experiences with social media and its effects on their mental health. The interviews specifically focused on several key themes, including **social comparison**, where participants discussed the impact of comparing themselves to others on social media; **validation-seeking**, exploring how participants sought and were affected by likes, comments, and other forms of online validation; and the **role of supportive online communities**, where participants shared how engaging with online groups, particularly those centered around mental health, influenced their sense of belonging and emotional well-being. This qualitative data provided valuable insights into the personal and emotional dimensions of social media use, complementing the quantitative findings.

2.3. Data analysis technique

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to explore the relationship between social media usage, anxiety, and self-esteem. Quantitative analysis using Pearson's correlation and linear regression

revealed that higher social media usage was significantly associated with increased anxiety and decreased self-esteem. Participants who used social media for more than 3 hours per day reported higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem, confirming the predictive relationship between social media usage and these mental health outcomes. Qualitative analysis, through thematic analysis of interviews, identified key themes such as social comparison, with many participants reporting increased anxiety from comparing their lives to others online, and validation-seeking, where participants linked higher social media validation with improved self-esteem, while a lack of validation contributed to anxiety. Additionally, some participants found emotional support in online communities, which helped buffer the negative effects of social media. Together, the data highlights both the detrimental and supportive roles social media can play in mental health, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote healthier engagement.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics and social media usage of participants

Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Female	140 (70%)
Male	60 (30%)
Age Group	
18-22 years	120 (60%)
23-30 years	80 (40%)
Average Daily Social Media Usage	3.5 hours (Mean)
Social Media Usage Groups	
Less than 1 hour/day	50 (25%)
1-3 hours/day	90 (45%)
More than 3 hours/day	60 (30%)

3.2. Correlation analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships between social media usage, anxiety, and self-esteem. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Pearson correlation coefficients between social media usage, anxiety, and self-esteem

Variable	Social Media Usage	Anxiety (GAD-7)	Self-Esteem (Rosenberg)
Social Media Usage	1	0.42**	-0.38**
Anxiety (GAD-7)	0.42**	1	-0.52**
Self-Esteem (Rosenberg)	-0.38**	-0.52**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$, indicating statistically significant correlations.

3.3. Regression analysis

Linear regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive power of social media usage on anxiety and self-esteem. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Linear regression analysis predicting anxiety and self-esteem from social media usage

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β (Standardized Coefficient)	t-value	p-value
Anxiety (GAD-7)	Social Media Usage	0.42	4.62	<0.001
Self-Esteem (Rosenberg)	Social Media Usage	-0.38	-4.08	<0.001

Note: p < 0.001, indicating statistically significant results.

3.4. Qualitative findings

Qualitative interviews identified three main themes related to the impact of social media on mental health:

1. Social Comparison: Many participants reported feeling anxious and dissatisfied after comparing their lives to those of others on social media, particularly in terms of appearance and lifestyle.

2. Validation-Seeking: Participants described seeking validation through likes and comments, with higher levels of validation correlating with higher self-esteem, and a lack of validation contributing to anxiety.

3. Supportive Communities: Some participants found support through online communities, particularly those focused on mental health, which provided a sense of belonging and emotional comfort.

This means that the qualitative findings highlight the complex ways social media impacts mental health. While social media can contribute to negative effects like anxiety and low self-esteem, especially through social comparison and seeking external validation, it also has the potential to offer positive outcomes. Some participants found emotional support and a sense of belonging in online communities, especially those centered around mental health, which helped counterbalance the harmful effects of social comparison. In essence, social media has a dual impact: it can harm mental well-being but also provide supportive spaces that help individuals cope with challenges.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this study strongly confirm the hypotheses regarding the dual impact of social media usage on mental health, particularly anxiety and self-esteem. Hypothesis 1, which posited that increased social media usage would be positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety, was supported by the quantitative data. Higher social media engagement was significantly associated with increased anxiety symptoms, as measured by the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7) scale. This finding aligns with prior research (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014), which suggested that prolonged social media use tends to increase anxiety, possibly due to factors such as social comparison and pressure to maintain idealized online personas.

Similarly, Hypothesis 2, which stated that increased social media usage would be negatively correlated with self-esteem, was also confirmed. The regression analysis revealed that participants who reported higher daily social media usage scored lower on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, supporting the hypothesis that social media usage contributes to reduced self-esteem. This finding mirrors previous studies (Fardouly et al., 2015), which argued that social comparison, driven by exposure to curated and often idealized representations of others' lives, can significantly undermine self-worth.

In addition to supporting these hypotheses, the qualitative data offered valuable insight into the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Many participants reported that social comparison, particularly related to appearance and lifestyle, was a central factor in their feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem. They described how comparing themselves to the polished lives they saw on social media led to a heightened sense of dissatisfaction and negative self-evaluation. This is in line with existing literature, which has consistently shown how social comparison on social media exacerbates mental health issues, particularly among young adults (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Furthermore, the validation-seeking behaviors identified in the qualitative interviews provided additional context to the findings. Many participants expressed how seeking validation through likes, comments, and other forms of feedback was a key driver of both anxiety and self-esteem. When they received positive reinforcement, their self-esteem improved, whereas the lack of validation led to increased anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. This further supports the notion that social media engagement is deeply intertwined with the need for external affirmation, which can have a detrimental effect on one's mental health when such validation is not forthcoming.

Interestingly, the study also identified a positive aspect of social media usage, suggesting that its impact on mental health is not entirely negative. Some participants found supportive online communities, especially those related to mental health or shared experiences, to be beneficial for their well-being. These communities provided a sense of belonging and emotional support, counteracting some of the negative effects associated with social comparison and validation-seeking. This suggests that the impact of social media on mental health is contingent on how it is used, aligning with the growing body of literature advocating for more nuanced and positive engagement with these platforms (Naslund et al., 2016).

This finding implies that social media, in and of itself, is not inherently harmful. Rather, its effects on mental health depend on how individuals engage with it. These results reinforce the need for digital literacy initiatives to educate users on healthier online behaviors and help them navigate social media in ways that minimize the harmful effects of comparison and validation-seeking. Encouraging positive, supportive engagement with social media platforms could also serve as a valuable strategy to mitigate the negative outcomes identified in this study.

In conclusion, this study confirms both hypotheses and contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between social media usage, anxiety, and self-esteem. While excessive use of social media is linked to negative psychological outcomes, it also has the potential to foster support and self-expression when engaged mindfully. Future research should explore interventions that target the harmful effects of social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors while promoting more constructive and supportive online interactions.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media plays a complex role in higher Education, with both positive and negative implications for mental health. On the one hand, it offers valuable opportunities for connection, support, and awareness, particularly for individuals experiencing mental health challenges. Online communities can provide a sense of belonging and facilitate access to important resources. On the other hand, social media also contributes to issues like social comparison, cyberbullying, and addiction, which have been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns, particularly among younger users.

While the effects of social media on mental health are not uniform and depend on various individual and situational factors, it is clear that the impact is significant. Moving forward, it is crucial to explore ways to mitigate the negative effects, such as promoting healthier usage patterns, improving platform design, and fostering digital literacy. By balancing the positive potential of social media with measures to protect mental well-being, we can ensure that these platforms serve as a force for good while minimizing their harmful consequences.

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