**The Role of Social Media in the Rising Prevalence of Mental Disorders Among Youth: A Review**

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**ABSTRACT**

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| **Introduction:** Currently, high levels of psychological problems among young students have been observed in correlation with social media use. Excessive use of social media has been linked to an increase in mental disorders among young students. Studies point to significant correlations with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and cognitive and social difficulties, with particularly pronounced effects on children and adolescents, especially females. By collecting data, this study seeks to deepen the scientific understanding of how excessive social media use affects the brain and also contributes to cognitive and behavioural psychology by identifying patterns of dependency. **Objective:** To analyse, through a literature review, the relationship between frequent social media use and the rising rates of mental disorders in children and adolescents, highlighting emotional, social, and behavioural consequences. **Methodology:** This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach, based on a literature review of scientific publications from 2020 to 2025. Sources included full articles in Portuguese and English available on SciELO, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. The descriptors used were: “mental disorders,” “social media,” and “child,” combined with Boolean operators. The analysis was guided by three thematic axes defined according to the specific objectives. **Results and Discussion:** The findings indicated a strong link between prolonged social media use and disorders such as ADHD, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Constant social comparison, cyberbullying, and sleep loss emerged as the main contributing variables. Youth with pre-existing disorders are the most vulnerable, and intensive use contributes to low self-esteem, social isolation, and poorer academic performance. The impacts are reinforced by neurofunctional changes and impairments in family and social interactions. **Conclusion:** Prolonged use of social media represents a significant risk factor to the mental health of children and adolescents. This article has presented alarming data, showing that many children and adolescents spend excessive time on social media. This high level of connectivity is tied to a series of negative consequences such as anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, and poor academic performance. The research highlights the urgent need for preventive and educational measures, with direct involvement from parents, educators, and institutions to promote the mindful use of technology and mitigate damage to mental health. |

*Keywords: Social media; Mental health; Adolescent disorders; children; anxiety*

**1. INTRODUCTION**Social media has become an indispensable aspect of young people’s digital interactions, as they use it mostly for entertainment and communication purposes. Consequently, it has the potential to have both positive and negative effects on them. Deterioration in mental health is one of the side effects stemming from social media overuse (Beyari, 2023). Currently, high levels of psychological problems among young students have been observed in correlation with social media use. Studies such as those by Abu-Taieh (2022) have highlighted the relationship between social networks and psychological disorder rates, while more recent reviews, like that of Cao Y (2023), have consolidated this link with new findings on the cognitive impacts of social media use. Furthermore, this issue affects public health, as the intensity of social media use can influence and impact levels of anxiety and depression (Abu-Taieh et al., 2022, *IJERPH*). The negative aspects associated with mental health and social media engagement encompass persistent comparisons leading to diminished self-esteem, the facilitation of harassment and ridicule, the potential for dependency and social isolation through excessive use, and the perils of consuming misinformation or biased advice from unqualified sources (Shalaby, 2024).

According to Mundy LK (2022), “women with high social media use were more likely to exhibit symptoms, while men with similarly high usage were 1.60 times more likely to report depressive symptoms.” Although universal screening for mental health problems related to social networks in youth is still debated, more consistent guidelines are needed for accurate diagnoses. Therefore, such research should aim to reduce frequent harm and identify effective solutions, expanding studies among student users of digital networks.

From an epidemiological standpoint, a 2020 study found that about 7% of the global population shows signs of internet addiction, and prevalence estimates have increased over time, especially among young people (Fineberg et al., 2024). Additionally, researchers found that 95.4% of the study sample suffered from mild to severe depression due to social network use on smartphones, and women were more affected than men (AlHamad & AlAmri, 2021, p. 2).

In Brazil, the country ranks second in the Americas in terms of the rate of people with depression, with about 5.8% of the population. Besides depressive disorders, Brazil also leads in cases of anxiety (SAMP, 2021). These data highlight a concerning correlation between excessive social media use and the rise in mental disorders, pointing to a phenomenon of global epidemiological relevance. The predominant impact on young people reinforces the need for deeper investigations into specific vulnerability factors.

Given this scenario, it is essential to broaden epidemiological studies to better understand the magnitude of the problem and formulate effective prevention and intervention strategies, especially considering that scientific literature on the topic remains limited. Moreover, the effects of excessive social media use hinder young people's interaction both within and outside the family environment, resulting in elevated levels of anxiety and depression symptoms (Abu-Taieh et al., 2022). Adolescents who spent more time on new media (including social media and electronic devices such as smartphones) were more likely to report mental health issues, and adolescents who spent more time on non-screen activities (in-person social interaction, sports/exercise, homework, print media, and attending religious services) were less likely (Twenge et al., 2018).

Such use can also contribute to the development of emotional disorders in childhood and hyperkinetic disorders, triggering difficulties in collective life and being associated with isolation, school dropout, and negative dynamics between children, their families, and friends (Titze, Jaite, Winter, 2022). These factors significantly impact the mental and emotional well-being of young people, compromising their proper development and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, it is essential that these issues be highlighted and addressed through well-planned and effective interventions. Based on research and academic articles, there has been a significant increase in social media use among the general population, with particularly excessive use among children, especially those with mental disorders. As this topic has grown substantially in recent years, this research aims to explore the relationship between social media use and the increase in mental disorders among children, which contributes to social difficulties such as delayed development in communication.

By collecting data, this study seeks to deepen the scientific understanding of how excessive social media use affects the brain and also contributes to cognitive and behavioural psychology by identifying patterns of dependency. This may lead to the creation of more effective therapeutic approaches and encourage changes in screen time regulations for children. The emphasis is on raising awareness among parents and educators about the risks of excessive social media use, promoting healthier habits with the goal of digital detox.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

This was a descriptive bibliographic study with a qualitative approach, using the collected data for the development of the scientific article. Data collection was carried out through a bibliographic survey based on research of scientific publications related to the proposed topic, covering the period from 2020 to 2025. Inclusion criteria for content selection included: full-text publications aligned with the theme “Impacts of social media on the development of mental disorders,” including documents, regulations, health authority guidelines, scientific articles, and institutional directives, published in Portuguese and English.

Exclusion criteria included: articles not directly related to the topic, duplicate materials, incomplete works, reviews, abstracts, debates, and non-full-text content. The literature search was conducted in the following databases: SciELO, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. Searches were carried out using Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) from the Regional Library of Medicine (BIREME), as shown in Table [01]: *transtornos mentais*, *mental disorders*, *rede social*, *social networking*, *criança*, and *child*, using the Boolean operators “AND,” “OR,” and “NOT.”

The methodology employed in this study began with a careful selection of descriptors in DeCS, followed by research in indexed databases. Using the main terms and their equivalents, tables were created to organise the articles found in each database. Duplicate articles were removed, and then a relevance screening was conducted based on titles. Following this step, abstracts were read, and subsequently, the full texts of articles that met the established criteria were reviewed.

For data analysis, three thematic axes were defined, built from the specific objectives and formulated as guiding questions. These questions guided the reading and critical analysis of the selected articles, forming the conceptual basis for the discussion and interpretation of the data. The responses obtained provided the theoretical foundation for constructing the results and reflections proposed in this study.

**DISCUSSION**

**Observing the High Rates of Common Mental Disorders**

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurobiological condition characterised by symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, often associated with anxiety (Wu ZM et al., 2022). Furthermore, young people with psychiatric disorders frequently show heightened impulsivity, low self-esteem, and a tendency toward social isolation—symptoms that are intensified by constant exposure to social media (Schwartz-Lifshitz et al., 2022). These conditions usually require specialised treatment, including medication, to relieve severe and persistent symptoms (Maršanić et al., 2011).

Depressive and anxiety symptoms are strongly linked to heavy social media use, especially due to frequent exposure to idealised body images and lifestyles (Vannucci et al., 2020; Xiang & Kong, 2024). Research shows that adolescents with low self-esteem and fragile interpersonal relationships are particularly susceptible to developing anxiety, as they tend to perceive their ability to manage emotions negatively (Fiorilli et al., 2019). Interpersonal conflicts may also deepen insecurity and feelings of inadequacy, increasing the risk of mental disorders.

Adolescents who overuse social media often report impaired psychological well-being, with a greater predisposition to disorders such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Sauve et al., 2024; Vidal et al., 2020). Factors such as constant social comparison, cyberbullying, and exposure to negative content are cited as aggravators of depressive symptoms (Barry et al., 2017; Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016). This context is supported by evidence showing a significant increase in depressive symptoms among frequent users of social media.

Neuroimaging techniques reveal neurofunctional alterations, such as structural changes in the hippocampus and amygdala, which are directly associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. These alterations affect cognitive and emotional functions, resulting in academic challenges, social isolation, and a lower quality of life (Serra-Blasco et al., 2021). Young people with pre-existing mental disorders tend to experience these effects more intensely and persistently.

Studies also highlight the significant prevalence of anxiety and depression among youth regularly exposed to social isolation and loneliness, conditions exacerbated by excessive social media use (Swinkels et al., 2023; Titze et al., 2022). The absence of adequate social connections contributes to worsening symptoms and lower treatment adherence, resulting in recurrent relapses and deeper social isolation—a cycle of mental vulnerability among highly connected adolescents.

**Identifying the Frequency of Social Media Use Among Young Students**

The frequency of social media use among teenagers is high; studies reveal that 45% of young people admit to spending excessive time online, especially compared to previous years (Pew Research Centre, 2022). Adolescents often use electronic devices at night, which leads to significant issues with sleep quality and duration (Gomes, 2020; Godoy et al., 2024; Vernon et al., 2016).

Constant exposure to social media among children and adolescents is marked by intensity and prolonged duration, reducing their ability to discern and self-regulate the content they consume (Xiang & Kong, 2024). This behaviour often replaces in-person interactions with virtual ones, worsening symptoms like anxiety and social isolation (Frieiro et al., 2022; Vernon et al., 2015).

Frequent notifications and rapid stimuli from social media significantly impair selective and sustained attention in youth, particularly those with ADHD, exacerbating academic and personal challenges (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2021). Digital multitasking further undermines cognitive and socioemotional control, directly affecting academic performance (Chen et al., 2016; Van der Schuur, 2015).

Adolescents with mental disorders tend to use social media more intensely, exacerbating pre-existing symptoms such as low self-esteem and impulsivity, and further increasing the risks associated with excessive use (Schwartz-Lifshitz et al., 2022). This behaviour is often driven by phenomena like fear of missing out (FoMO), which increases compulsive use and impairs academic and social focus (Gupta et al., 2021).

Uncontrolled social media use leads to substantial sleep loss and reduced engagement in daily activities, such as physical exercise and face-to-face interaction, which are crucial for healthy emotional and physical development (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vernon et al., 2016). This directly contributes to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychopathologies among young students (Vannucci et al., 2020).

**Relating Frequent Social Media Use to High Rates of Mental Disorders**

Frequent and excessive social media use intensifies core ADHD symptoms—such as distractibility, impulsiveness, and difficulty maintaining structured routines—due to the constant stimulation and compulsive behaviours encouraged by these platforms (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Wu ZM et al., 2022).

Frequent users of social media are more likely to develop depressive symptoms and eating disorders, directly related to ongoing comparisons with unrealistic body standards (Xiang & Kong, 2024; Sauve et al., 2024). Cyberbullying and constant exposure to negative content are additional factors that significantly raise the risks of depression and anxiety in adolescents (Barry et al., 2017; Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016).

Sleep-related issues—common among adolescents who use social media excessively at night—are associated with symptoms like depressed mood, irritability, and reduced academic performance, intensifying existing psychological disorders (Alonzo et al., 2021; Vernon et al., 2016).

Social media dependence further reinforces harmful health behaviours, such as reduced participation in physical activities and in-person interactions. These behaviours aggravate social isolation and intensify depressive and anxious symptoms (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Hussong et al., 2019).

**4. CONCLUSION**

In the current context, where technology is an increasingly pervasive factor in society, irregular consumption has become a major concern. The consequences of careless internet and social media use can be alarming and degenerative. Children and adolescents are immersed in these technologies without boundaries or supervision, leading to mental, social, and emotional issues.

This article has presented alarming data, showing that many children and adolescents spend excessive time on social media. This high level of connectivity is tied to a series of negative consequences such as anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, and poor academic performance.

These findings underscore the urgent need for more active involvement from parents or guardians in monitoring and managing the screen time of children and adolescents, in an effort to mitigate the harmful effects of prolonged useof social media and the internet.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

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Details of the AI usage are given below:

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