The Influence of Exposure to Social Media on Mental Health and Well-being among Nepalese Young Adults

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of exposure to social media on the mental well-being among Nepalese young adults, as mediated by attitudes toward its positive and negative impacts. A total of 200 respondents aged 18–25 years were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Regression analysis revealed two key findings. First, social media exposure alone did not significantly predict mental well-being. However, when attitudes toward the negative impacts of social media were considered, YouTube exposure was a significant negative predictor, while Twitter exposure positively influenced mental well-being. Second, when mediated by attitudes toward the positive impact of social media, YouTube exposure again showed a negative association with mental well-being, whereas the positive perception of information-sharing needs significantly improved mental health outcomes, although the predictive power was low (R^2 = 0.172). These findings highlighted the platform-specific risks and benefits of social media use among Nepalese youth. Limitations include cross-sectional design, cultural specificity, and reliance on self-reported data. Future interventions should focus on digital literacy and promoting positive engagement with social media to support youth mental health.

Keywords: Media Exposure to Social Media, Nepalese Youth, Positive Impact and Negative Impacts of Social Media, Mental Wellbeing

Introduction

Social media exposure creates both optimistic connections between young adults alongside adverse psychological effects that affect global adolescent mental health. Existing research on anxiety and depression concerns alongside social comparison problems came from Western societies (Stroud et al., 2015), limited research was examined about their effects in Nepal. Nepalese young adults' culture depends heavily on social media tools such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram since these platforms have reached 77% of the population while preserving their traditional heritage and modern digital behavior. Analysis requires attention because cyberbullying issues, along with

unrealistic beauty norms and mental health discrimination, need focus. Social media uses together with appraisal of beneficial and detrimental aspects affecting Nepalese adolescent mental health according to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Media Effects Theory (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019). Social Comparison Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Media Effects Theory collectively explain how exposure to social media influences mental well-being by shaping how adolescents perceive themselves in relation to others, form their identity, and react to media content. These perceptions, whether positive or negative, impact their attitudes toward social media, which in turn mediate the effects of social media on their mental health. Social media platforms facilitate better community bonds while they amplify feelings of being insufficient and disconnected from others. There is a lack of research that applies universal conclusions to Nepal's distinct socio-cultural characteristics. Research addresses an important omission by studying how Nepalese young adults connect with social media and their resulting mental health conditions. The research seeks to develop culturally compatible interventions and digital literacy programs as well as advance knowledge about adolescent digital well-being in modern times.

Objectives

The research aimed to investigate how exposure to social media influences Nepalese young adults' mental health while determining their overall well-being.

1. To examine the influence of media exposure to social media on the mental well-being of Nepalese young adults as mediated by their attitudes toward the positive impacts of social media.
2. To examine the influence of media exposure to social media on the mental well-being of Nepalese young adults as mediated by their attitudes toward the negative impacts of social media.

Literature Review

Research has intensively examined how social media changes adolescent mental health conditions because of the fast-expanding social media adoption among teenagers. The analysis of Nepalese adolescent attitudes toward social media impacts depends on Social Comparison Theory with Social Identity Theory and Media Effects Theory as a foundational theoretical backup to explain behavioral and mental health effects. The evaluation process, according to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), involves people assessing themselves through evaluations of others' lives. Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram present carefully selected and perfect representations of lives, which result in adolescent users making comparisons that lead them upwards in ranking.

Social media comparisons create feelings of inadequacy and anxiety and deterioration of self-esteem, according to Chadee (2022). Young Nepalese adults who are rampantly engaging with global platforms become more psychologically vulnerable because they encounter unattainable lifestyle standards along with unrealistically achieved goals that especially affect young people from lower economic backgrounds.

The self-concept develops through group membership according to Social Identity Theory, which Tajfel and Turner introduced in 1979. The online world allows young adults to join multiple communities where they share mutual interests, values, and goals. Students construct digital identities through online platforms, which produce either increased confidence or worsen their feelings of social inferiority depending on their experiences with acceptance or online mistreatment. The involvement in supportive social media communities minimizes stress while strengthening personal resilience (Stevens et al., 2021), although this advantage becomes established through mindful social media use. The research model presented by Media Effects Theory (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019) shows how media exposure modifies human behavioral responses. The mental health results of young adults emerge from their media exposure (either positive or negative content) together with their specific usage behaviors. Positive interactions on the internet, which include engaging in mental health advocacy and educational knowledge retrieval, lead to emotional support, but negative content such as cyberbullying and unattainable standards increases mental health risks (Barroso-Corroto et al., 2023).

Several past studies confirmed the negative impact on social media usage on young adults' anxiety and depression. Research conducted in Nepal by Adhikari and Pandey (2020) demonstrated that regular social media usage caused university students to develop anxiety and depression symptoms because they encountered negative content and excessive screening practices between themselves and others. International academic research also demonstrates these results. Huang's (2017) also found that passive social media browsing leads to increased depressive symptoms among American young adults.

On the other hand, the act of involving oneself in supportive online communities has shown a positive link to better emotional resilience (Best et al., 2014). Social media produces positive effects when teenagers use it as an information source along with building social relationships while receiving confirmation for their actions. Nepalese young adults use Facebook groups to access academic resources, maintain community bonds, and conduct social activism, which helps them feel more purposeful and part of a social group. Users experience negative attitudes that form during cyberbullying situations and social exclusion events as well as through unachievable beauty standards and financial success images. Mental health outcomes heavily depend on the way positive and negative digital communication experiences with social media interact with each other. This study

extends current theoretical and empirical work by studying how Nepalese young adults interact with social media content, which forms their assessments of its effects, while their attitude acts as a connection between social media contact and mental wellness. The research integrates findings from both local and global research studies to examine the dual effects of social media on Nepalese adolescent mental health in a culturally relevant setting, thus filling a knowledge gap in this field.

Hypotheses

H1: Media exposure to social media is a significant predictor of Nepalese respondents' mental well-being as mediated by their attitude toward the negative impact of social media.

H2: Media exposure to social media is a significant predictor of Nepalese respondents' mental well-being as mediated by the attitude toward the positive impact of social media.

Concept Theory Framework

This conceptual framework highlights the impact of exposure to social media on the young Nepalese adults' mental well-being as mediated by their attitude toward the negative impact and the positive impact of social media. The study underscores the psychological gratifications that young social media users seek and obtain, and how these gratifications, in turn, affect their mental health.
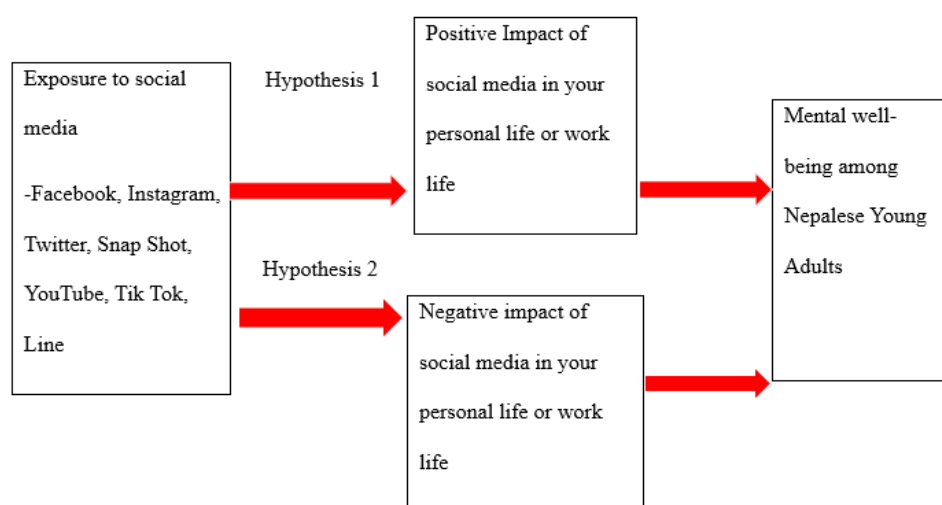

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative survey approach to analyze the effects of young adults' social media interaction and their perceptions about social media benefits and risks on their psychological status. Professional questionnaires served as the data collection method for youths within the age range of 18–25 years old in Nepal. The design structure enabled researchers to conduct statistical tests that produced recommendations to enhance young adults' mental health.

Population and Sampling Methods

The Nepalese young adults aged 18–25 years who maintained social media usage for one year or more constituted the study population. The increasing digital connectivity in Nepal has established Facebook (60.93%), TikTok and Instagram (14.14%), and YouTube (0.87%) as essential components of young adults' culture (Stroud et al., 2015). The researcher used purposive along with convenience sampling methods. By using purposive sampling, the researcher selected participants with certain requirements (age and social media experience), and by employing convenience sampling, they successfully recruited participants through online methods. Given its convenient nature, the sampling process might produce biased results that reduce the transferability of study findings. The surveyed group consisted of two hundred subjects who resided in urban and rural communities to obtain diverse insights from Nepalese youth.

Research Instrument

This research employed a survey composing four sections. Section I (seven questions) asked about demographic factors of young Nepalese adults, including gender, age, educational background, personal income per month, location of residence, hours spent on social media per day, types of content usually engage in social media, using nominal-and-ordinal questions. In addition, Section I also asked about the media exposure to various social media in the past one-year period, including Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter, Line, Snapchat, YouTube, and others, using 5-point Likert scale, arranging from 1-Never, 2-Rarely 1-2 times per week, 3-Sometimes (4-5 times per week).

Section II inquired about attitude toward the negative impact of social media measuring general anxiety disorder among young Nepalese adults. This section used the General Anxiety Disorder scale adopted from Chadee (2022), having seven questions, with 4-point Likert scale, arranging from 0-Not at all, 1-Several days, 2-More than half the day, or 3 Everyday.

Section III probed the attitude toward the positive impact of social media, adopted from Barroso-Corroto et al., (2023), having 20 questions using 5-point Likert scale, arranging from 1-Strongly agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neutral, 4- Agree, 5-Strongly agree. The scale for

measuring the positive impact of social media has three constructs, including information need importance, entertainment need importance, personal need importance, and social need importance. Higher scores on "positive attitudes" reflected favorable perceptions, while higher scores on "negative attitudes" reflected stronger perceptions of harm.

Finally, Section IV gauged the mental well-being of respondents, adopted from the Mental Well-Being scale in Liu & Zhang (2019), Liu et al. (2016), and Przbylski et al. (2013). The scale comprises anxiety, depression, self-confidence, and social comparison. The questionnaire was dependable because each section was higher than 0.70. The scale for measuring exposure to social media had Cronbach alpha of 0.90, attitude toward the negative impact of social media had Cronbach alpha of 0.81, attitude toward the positive impact of social media had Cronbach alpha of 0.75, and mental well-being got 0.71, respectively. The independent variable was exposure to social media, and the dependent variable was the mental well-being. Finally, the mediating variable was attitude toward the negative impact of social media and attitude toward the positive impact of social media.

Data Analysis and Rationale for Regression Models

The research applied Multiple Regression analysis for assessing the different predictive associations between variables. Multiple regression analysis provided an appropriate approach to evaluate the combined media exposure effects with attitudes on mental health alongside exploring the intervening impact of both positive and negative attitudes. Regression modeling seemed appropriate to analyze complex sequential relations because it follows Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for mediation analysis. The research presented beta weights along with R-squared values and statistical significance to determine both model accuracy and variable predictive power.

Results

Descriptive Findings

The study examined the impact of social media on the mental well-being of Nepalese youth, with a sample of 200 participants. The majority of participants were male (64.5%, n = 129), followed by females (30%, n = 60), and LGBTQ+ individuals (5.5%, n =11) Most participants (84.5%, n = 169) lived in rural areas, highlighting different social media usage patterns influenced by access to technology. Occupationally, 56.5% (n = 113) were students or unemployed, with other groups including business professionals (16%, n = 32) and farmers (9.5%, n = 19). Income was in lower to middle ranges, with 48% (n = 96) earnings between NPR 20,201 and NPR 40,400. Social media use was significant, with 47.5% (n = 95) spending 3-4 hours daily and 37% (n = 74) spending more than 4 hours.

Most respondents reported that they sometimes exposed to social media per week ($\bar{x}$ = 3.35, SD = 0.62). YouTube and Facebook were the most frequently accessed platforms, followed by Instagram, while Snapchat, TikTok, and Line were less frequently used. Regarding the positive impact of social media, respondents ranked it at a medium level ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32, SD = 0.59). When examining each dimension, the results revealed that majority of the respondents ranked social need importance ($\bar{x}$ = 3.69, SD = 81) in the medium level having the highest mean, followed by entertainment need importance ($\bar{x}$ = 3.88, SD = 0.64), information need importance ($\bar{x}$ = 2.94, SD = 0.92), and personal need importance ($\bar{x}$ = 2.72, SD = 0.98), respectively.

The negative impact of social media on anxiety was perceived as minimal, with low scores for symptoms like nervousness and trouble relaxing ($\bar{x}$ = 1.17–1.20). Most respondents reported medium mental well-being ($\bar{x}$ = 2.88, SD = 0.35), with higher rankings for statements about life satisfaction and finding beauty in things, suggesting a moderate sense of well-being.

Inferential Findings

In line with Social Comparison Theory and Media Effects Theory, the study hypothesized that exposure to social media would influence mental well-being, mediated by attitudes toward its positive and negative impacts. Regression analysis was conducted to assess these theoretical relationships. Two models examined how social media exposure, content type, and engagement patterns influenced anxiety symptoms and psychological health. The three predictors of mental well-being were analyzed using R-squared values, significance levels, and regression coefficients to determine their impact. H1: Media exposure to social media is a significant predictor of Nepalese respondents' mental well-being as mediated by their attitude toward the negative impact of social media.

Regression results (Table 1) indicated that exposure to social media alone was not a significant direct predictor of mental well-being (β = -0.656, p > 0.005). However, when negative perceptions were considered as mediators, YouTube exposure was found to negatively predict mental well-being (β = -0.153*, p < 0.005), while Twitter exposure positively predicted well-being (β = 0.042*, p < 0.005). Other platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok, were excluded due to their lack of significant contribution. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported, suggesting that the effects of social media on mental health depend heavily on the type of platform used and the users' perceived negative impacts.

Table 1: Summary of Regression Analysis of Hypothesis 1

Predictors	B	S.E.	Beta	t	Sig.
Media exposure to all social media	-0.656	-0.057	-0.136	-0.656	0.513
Media exposure to YouTube	-0.153	-0.316	-0.136	-4.557*	0.000
Media exposure to Twitter	0.042	0.019	0.155	2.221*	0.028
Negative impact of social media	-0.080	0.027	-0.206	-2.978*	0.003

Remarks:

Predictor: Media exposure to social media, Mediating variable: Positive impact of social media, Dependent variable: Mental well-being, F = 0.003, R^2 = 0.142, p* < 0.05

H2: Media exposure to social media is a significant predictor of Nepalese respondents' mental well-being as mediated by the attitude toward the positive impact of social media.

Regression analysis (Table 2) showed that exposure to social media significantly predicted mental well-being when mediated by positive attitudes (F = 15.629*, p < 0.005). However, the model explained only 17.2% of the variance in mental well-being (R^2 = 0.172*, p < 0.05), indicating a modest predictive strength.

Specifically, exposure to YouTube again showed a significant negative association with well-being (β = -0.150*, p < 0.005). In contrast, positive attitudes toward the information need fulfilled by social media significantly predicted better mental well-being (β = 0.108*, p < 0.005). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported, highlighting the importance of platform-specific experiences and the role of positive perceptions in mitigating the negative psychological impact of social media exposure.

Table 2: Summary of Regression Analysis of Hypothesis 2

Predictors	B	S.E.	Beta	t	Sig.
1. Media exposure to YouTube	-0.150	0.033	-0.310	-4.55*	0.000
2. Media exposure to Twitter	0.017	0.020	0.063	0.860	0.391
3. Attitude toward the positive impact of social media	-0.006	0.027	0.107	1.147	0.253
4. Attitude toward the positive impact of social media	0.107	-	-	1.147	0.253
5. Positive impact on information needs importance	0.108	0.027	0.289	3.953*	0.000
6. Attitude toward the positive impact on entertainment need importance	0.074	-	-	0.105	0.916
7. Attitude toward the positive impact on personal need importance	0.074	-	-	1.069	0.287
8. Attitude toward the positive impact on social need importance	0.105	-	-	1.458	0.109

Remarks:

Predictor: Media exposure to social media, Mediating variable: Positive impact of social media, Dependent variable: Mental well-being t, $R^2 = 0.172$, F= 15.629, p* < 0.05.

Conclusions and Discussion

Findings for Hypothesis 1 revealed that exposure to social media alone does not directly predict mental well-being. However, when mediated by attitudes toward negative impacts, platforms such as YouTube were associated with increased anxiety and low self-esteem. Young adults who frequently engaged with unrealistic portrayals, cyberbullying, or negative content experienced heightened distress, which aligned with Social

Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) that emphasized the detrimental effects of upward social comparisons. Similarly, Media Effects Theory (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019) supported the idea that prolonged exposure to curated digital content reinforces self-doubt and emotional distress.

Conversely, findings from Hypothesis 2 suggested that social media can enhance well-being when young adults engage positively. Those who participated in online support communities, accessed educational content, and followed mental health initiatives reported greater emotional support and a stronger sense of connection. This finding aligned with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggested that belonging to positive online groups fosters self-esteem and reduces feelings of loneliness. Additionally, the Positive Psychology Framework (Barroso-Corroto et al., 2023) reinforces that social media, when used positively, can serve as a tool for empowerment and emotional resilience.

In conclusion, this study highlighted that the influence of social media on mental health is complex, presenting both risks and opportunities. Policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals should promote digital literacy programs and responsible social media use to help Nepalese young adults critically assess content, engage positively, and avoid harmful online behaviors. These findings contribute to advancing knowledge by validating theoretical models in a Nepalese context and illustrating how platform-specific and attitude-based factors mediate the effects of social media on adolescent mental health. Future research should explicitly challenge and refine existing theories by incorporating longitudinal designs to better understand causality and developmental changes over time.

Limitations of the study

1. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Future research should employ longitudinal studies, such as cohort designs or panel data analysis, to track changes in social media behaviors and mental health outcomes over time.

2. The focus on Nepalese young adults restricts the generalizability of the findings. Cultural factors, such as collectivism, family influence, and societal expectations in Nepal, likely shape how young adults perceive and are affected by social media, which may differ from young adults in more individualistic cultures.

3. The exclusion of emerging platforms like TikTok from primary analysis leaves gaps in understanding newer forms of social media interactions and their psychological effects.

4. The use of self-reported data may introduce biases such as recall errors or social

desirability bias, which could affect the accuracy of reported media exposure and mental health states.

5. The emphasis on young adults overlooks the potential mental health effects of social media on other age groups, such as pre-adolescents or young adults aged over 25. Future studies should expand age ranges for broader insights.

Recommendations for Further Application

Based on the findings of this study, two key recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop digital literacy programs that educate young Nepalese adults on critical thinking about social media content, recognizing risks, and fostering healthy online habits. Such programs should also emphasize resilience-building against social comparison and online negativity.

2. Create platform-specific mental health interventions to mitigate psychological risks, such as reducing social comparison on Instagram and TikTok and promoting emotional well-being through constructive content on platforms like YouTube.

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