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**Exploring Psychological Impact of Social Media on Teenagers: A Qualitative Study in District Mansehra**

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**Abstract**

The psychological impact of social media on teenagers in District Mansehra was explored in this study using qualitative research methods. A phenomenological research design was utilized in order to reveal teenagers' lived experiences with social media in regard to their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with purposively selected 40 respondents (aged 13 to 19 years), from different educational institutions through purposive sampling. A thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke was used to identify some of the main themes, including anxiety related to social media, body image and self-esteem issues, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep, academic issues and social isolation, despite being visible online. Studies show that social media use is linked to anxiety, low self-esteem and cyberbullying; The study was conducted adhering to strict ethical guidelines. All participants gave informed consent, and parental consent was obtained for minors. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and any identifiers were removed to effectively anonymize them. In addition, they were informed that they could quit the study at any time without any consequences. experts say the platforms also impact sleep and grades. Despite enabling online connectivity, it contributes towards social isolation in world. These findings underscore the urgent need to implement school- and family-based interventions geared towards reducing the pernicious psychological effects of the social media environment on adolescents. We can overcome these challenges only by running awareness campaigns, guiding parents, and mentoring our children on the importance of digital literacy to create a healthier environment for online life. The results add to a growing conversation about adolescent mental health in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Self-Esteem, Cyberbullying, Anxiety, Social Isolation, Qualitative analysis

**Introduction**

Through social media explosion, there is a revolution in how teens communicate, access information, and view themselves. Social media has taken such a vice grip over adolescent life, shaping identity, self-esteem, and mental health (Daniels, 2021) with platforms like Instagram,

TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat. Such platforms are ubiquitous, ensuring that teenagers are always connected, able to express their identity, have a conversation with their peers, and remain aware of developments happening across the world. But with these benefits likewise come concerns about the negative psychological effects of excessive social media use (Cardillo et al., 2025). Studies show that the more teens are involved with social media, the higher their levels of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Landa-Blanco, et al., 2024). The curated nature of online content promotes unrealistic beauty ideals, wealth representations, and life achievements, where adolescents determine their perceived failure in comparison to others. Social comparison has been associated with body dissatisfaction and declining self-worth (Cramer et al., 2016). Additionally, cyberbullying is frequently funneled by social media platforms, inflicting emotional turmoil and, in more extreme examples, leading to adolescent suicidal ideation (Kang et al., 2023). Besides, overuse of social media leads to sleep disturbance and decreased in-person interactions, both risk factors to cognitive development and emotive growth (Kolhar et al., 2021). Social Media can be addictive and teens are addicted to social media and spend hours on them which can directly impact their studies, relationships and health. In light of these increasing worries, it is essential to delve into the complex influence of social media on adolescent mental health and to consider ways to encourage responsible and conscious use of social media platforms.

### **Problem Statement**

As teenagers spend more time on social media, concern has grown about its psychological effects. Although social media platforms enable of communication and self-esteem, over use have associated with anxiety, depression and self-esteem. District Mansehra, a district where the scope of digital engagement is growing, has also expose teenagers to positive and negative side of the social media platforms. Yet, little research has been conducted investigating how extended use affects their emotional and mental well-being in a particular socio-cultural context. The focus of the qualitative study was to explore teenagers lived experience of social media use and the psychological impact it had on their mental health.

### **Objectives**

- To explore the relationship between social media usage and teenager's mental health.
- To analyze the effects of social comparison and cyberbullying on teenagers' self-esteem.
- To examine the impact of social media addiction on sleep patterns and cognitive development.

### **Literature Review**

Many previous studies have examined the relationship between social media use and youth development, with one common finding that social media use can have negative impact on health. Overindulgence in social media promotes more anxiety, depression, and agitation, warn scientists (Weinstein, 2018). Social comparison, cyberbullying, and compulsive online behavior are the main mechanisms by which these psychological effects occur, as each contributes to the overall influence social media has on adolescent self-perception and emotional stability.

### **Self-Esteem and Social Comparison**

The most concerning aspect of social media, however, seems to be that it facilitates social comparison, the act of judging oneself based on the apparent picture-perfect lives of influencers and teenage peers (Ekinici et al., 2025). Unlike people who one meets in person who most accurately reflect reality, social media offers access to an idealized and filtered version of it, which tends to exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and promote a poor body image, particularly among adolescents. Research shows that upward social comparison—where people view others as more

successful or more attractive than themselves—harms self-esteem and body image (Hamilton et al., 2021). The study explains that people who often compare themselves to others on social media tend to measure their success based on other users, leading them to experience more envy, dissatisfaction and depression compared to those who do not compare themselves to social media users (Appel & Crusius, 2016). The pressure to align with societal expectations of beauty and lifestyle, which social media perpetually promotes, also worsens body dissatisfaction and self-doubt among adolescents. Studies show that exposure to unrealistic images, especially on visually oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok, is associated with higher levels of body surveillance and eating pathology (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). These results highlight the importance of finding ways to increase digital literacy and resilience among adolescents, allowing them to engage online content in a healthier way.

### **Cyberbullying and Emotional Distress**

Another critical risk is cyberbullying, which has a very high prevalence in social media and profoundly affects adolescents' psychological health. Unlike other forms of bullying, online harassment is omnipresent, impersonal, and inescapable, which contributes significantly to the distress of the individuals affected (Sun, 2023). Research indicates that adolescents who undergo cyberbullying are more vulnerable to anxious and depressive symptoms, as well as suicidal ideation (Maurya et al, 2023). And yet social media offers such pervasive anonymity that perpetrators feel emboldened to exhibit aggressive and harmful behavior (Bottino et al., 2025).

The impact of cyberbullying is not just limited to their intense emotions in the short term, they often develop long-lasting mental health challenges as well (Jiang et al., 2025) Cyberbullying victims demonstrate symptoms of social withdrawal, poor academic performance, and drop in self-esteem. In fact, the tireless nature of cyberbullying nurtures despair, even leading to self-inflicted violence and suicidal ideation in adolescents. These solutions can include comprehensive anti-cyberbullying initiatives, active involvement of parents and the education sector, and more stringent regulatory measures on platforms to ensure safe digital environments for teenagers (Iranzo et al., 2019).

### **Social Media Overuse and Sleep Disruptions**

Social media is, by nature, addictive, which creates further complications for the well-being of adolescents. Studies show that adolescents with higher amounts of time spent on networking platforms show signs of addiction including compulsive use, withdrawal, and neglect of real-life duties (Zaborskis et al., 2018). A study by John et al. (2018) linked high levels of social media use and poor sleep quality, which is itself linked to emotional instability and cognitive deficits.

Endless late-night scrolling and too much screen time mess with the body's natural sleep-wake cycle, and it's just plain sleep deprivation. And, lack of sleep has been connected to greater irritability, higher stress levels, and poorer decision-making skills in adolescents (Kee et al., 2024). Also, habitual sleep disturbances have adverse effects on memory consolidation and academic performance, making the developmental processes of teenagers even more questionably. As such, solutions aimed at encouraging digital detox, time management and healthier sleeping patterns are critical to easing the onslaught of negative effects from engaging too much on social media.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study adopted a qualitative research method which was used to explore the psychological effects of social media on teenagers in District Mansehra. The phenomenological approach was selected as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of how teenagers live through their social media experience, including feelings, thoughts, and behavioral changes. Semi-structured

interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed to collect rich and meaningful data. It allowed for all individual respondents to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions of how social media impacts their psychological well-being through semi-structured interviews. Respondents with significant exposure to social media were purposively selected. The study was conducted on the population of college and school students aged 13 to 19 years old from each of the different educational institutions through purposive sampling techniques. Forty respondents were recorded in the study, ensuring diversity in representing teenagers with diverse usage of social media. Data were systematically identified, organized, and interpreted for patterns using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. This enabled close exploration of themes which emerged repeatedly, enabling further understanding of the psychological impact of social media on teenagers. The study was conducted adhering to strict ethical guidelines. All participants gave informed consent, and parental consent was obtained for minors. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and any identifiers were removed to effectively anonymize them. In addition, they were informed that they could quit the study at any time without any consequences.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the research findings, which are based on a thematic analysis of the study data. The extracted themes provide insights into the psychological impact of social media on teenagers in District Mansehra. The key themes identified include anxiety related to social media, body image and self-esteem issues, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep, academic issues, and social isolation despite being visible online. Each theme is discussed in detail, highlighting its significance and implications.

### **Social Media Anxiety**

All day long, people are notifying them, and they are comparing themselves with their peers on social media or on whatsapp or on facebook, and then they got anxiety that they are being left alone. This results in emotional turmoil and reliance on online affirmation, respondent narrated "Every time I see my friends posting photos of parties or outings I didn't get invited to, I feel like I don't belong. And that makes me ruminate about everything — do they not like me? Did I do something wrong? I replay conversations in my mind, wondering if I said something that upset them. I know I shouldn't take it personally, but I feel sad and anxious anyway. I find myself checking my phone over and over again, hoping to see a message or a comment to validate my existence for them. It's draining because even when I try to focus on other things, I keep looping back to what I read on social media." Another respondent added "If I haven't checked my phone for a couple of hours, I feel kind of anxious, like 'Oh my god, something important is happening and I'm missing it.' Even when I am busy doing something else my hands automatically pull out my phone. It has become a habit. In class, I begin to panic, constantly thinking about the unopened messages, the unread posts. When I am around the family, I cannot connect with them as my mind is distracted with what is happening on the internet. There have been nights when I've jolted awake, an impulse to check my notifications flooding my mind. Even if there is nothing to tell, I feel relief to only see some updates. It feels like my phone is in charge of my feelings and I don't know how to make it stop." These answers demonstrate the unhealthy feedback loop of anxiety and dependence that social media creates. The constant need to connect often creates emotional stress, leading teenagers to neglect their actual relationships and obligations.

### **Self-Esteem and Body Image**

Teenagers' self-esteem is affected by unrealistic beauty standards on social media. And lots are pressured to change the naturalness of their looks, and end up no longer feeling good about their own looks, respondent narrated

“It makes me feel insecure when I’m scrolling on Instagram and TikTok. Everyone seems so perfect — flawless skin, tiny waist, fashionable clothes. I know that most of those girls edit their pictures and use a lot of filters, but I still can't help comparing myself. I take so many selfies and never post them because I feel like when I post I don't look as good as everyone else. I'm using beauty filters now just to feel confident, and I don't even like my real face anymore. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to see my own pictures without filters... how many people would like me if they really see my face.” Another respondent added “I never used to think about my weight before fitness influencers. They are always talking about diets and weight loss — as if you can only be attractive if you are skinny. I began skipping meals, drinking only water, and avoiding food in front of my family because I didn't want them to ask questions of me. When I was weak, I still told myself that looking good mattered more. My girlfriends are always talking about certain celebs with perfect bodies and the next thing I know I need to change myself pretty much so I can join in on the conversation. “I wish I could be happy with how I look, but whenever I go on social media I feel like I have to better.” These experiences illuminate the ways social media exacerbates insecurities in teenagers. They feel less than due to the edited and idealized images they are always bombarded with leading to loss of confidence.

### **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**

Cyberbullying has grown pervasive among teens, with daily harassment that is inescapable online. Social media is all about feeling free to let go without discipline, because there's no one stopping them. respondent shared “I used to be very active on social media until I was cyberbullied. And by the way, I posted a picture of myself, and they posted mean comments about how I look. I had initially dismissed them but more people jumped on. Even, some created memes on my image and started to share those in other groups. It was as if the entire school was laughing at me. I stayed off the internet for days, but the damage had been done. Even now I don't want to post anything because I'm scared I will fall through that humiliation again.” “I wonder why people like to hurt people like this.” Another respondent shared “Somebody created a fake account a few months before and was spreading false news against me. They ironed out my photos to make it seem like I had said or done things I hadn't done. I was seen in a different light by people at school, and my friends started to shun me. I tried to explain that it wasn't me but nobody believed me. I had no clue who was behind it, so I felt totally helpless.” I couldn't sleep and I stopped studying because I was thinking about what people were saying about me. Even though I blocked the account, I would feel paranoid every time a new friend request popped up on my timeline, worrying it was some fake profile trying to harass me.” These cases highlight the intense emotional toll that comes with cyberbullying. Teenagers' mental well-being is affected as the fear of online ridicule triggers stress, social withdrawal, and low self-esteem.

### **Sleep Disruptions and Impact on Academic Performance**

The addiction of social media also interrupts their sleeping pattern and makes them feel tired and affects their studies, respondent shared “I always say I will go on my phone for a few minutes before I sleep, and those minutes end up being hours. Or I check messages, then I watch videos, and I wake up and it's 3 a.m. Even when I'm tired, I scroll some more, convinced I'll stop after one last video. The next morning, I wake up groggy and barely pay attention to class. My teachers notice that I'm not raising my hand as much as I used to, but they don't realize that the reason I'm

not getting enough sleep is because of my phone addiction.” Another respondent added “My studies have been badly affected by social media. When I sit down to do homework, I can't stop looking at my phone. I tell myself I'll check it for a minute, but then I lose track of time. I find myself submitting late assignments and even forgotten work. I check notifications repeatedly even when I am studying. My parents reprimand me for not doing well in studies, but they don't realize how tough it is to overcome this habit. I have a guilty feeling but I cannot help but surf social-media.” These statements underscore the impact of social media addiction on the sleep and academic performance of teenagers. The constant demand to remain online leads many to skip sleep, which influences their levels of energy and cognitive sensation.

### **Social Isolation**

Even as social media gives a feeling of connection, the vast majority of teenagers feel isolated in real life. Too much time spent online desensitizes face-to-face conversation skills, causing socialization to feel jarring. respondent narrated “I have hundreds of friends on social media, but don't have a single friend in real life. I can talk to people for hours online, but in person I just don't know what to say. So, I get nervous and awkward and it feels awkward. My parents tell me that when I'm home, I'm always on my phone but I don't feel like I talk to them. Even at family get-togethers, I am scrolling through social media rather than talking to relatives.”

Another respondent added “Playing outside with my friends was one of my favorite things to do. Now I stay in playing video games and texting. When I do go out, I get anxious in social situations. I go from texting up a storm to freaking out about talking to people because it makes me uncomfortable; it gets me anxious. It's ironic, because I'm never offline, but I feel lonelier than ever.” These experiences provide a glimpse of the paradox of social media connection. Although teenagers are always online, they feel as though they have no bonds to real-life relationships, which leads to social isolation and emotional numbness.

### **Discussion**

This study reveals the psychological influence of social media among the teenagers in District Mansehra. The thematic analysis indicates that high dependence of social media further exacerbates the issues of anxiety, low self-esteem, cyber bullying, sleep disturbances, academic underperformance, and social isolation. These psychological effects are in line with previous literature, which does indicate that social media creates anxiety and discontent through peer comparison and fear of missing out (Jiang et al., 2025) The descriptions of how the respondents experience the consumption of curated online personas show that this creates a warped sense of self, exacerbating social exclusion and feelings of being inadequate. A study by John et al. (2018) further confirm the association between compulsive use of social media and higher levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents. The study also highlights the negative aspects of social media for self-esteem and body image. Respondents explained how being exposed to messages about edited body images and idealized body types made them feel insecure about their own bodies. Similar findings have been reported in research conducted by Perloff (Kee et al., 2024). which shows that social media audiences, particularly young people, are susceptible to the onset of body dissatisfaction due to unrealistic beauty depictions. Such exposure raises the probability of unhealthy behaviors, including extreme dieting and use of beauty filters which aggravates Cyberbullying is another essential matter that comes up in the research. Several respondents recounted frightening experiences of online harassment, false rumors and public shaming. Because of social media anonymity, cyberbullying can occur with little to no accountability, and that makes the psychological impact extreme (Maurya et al., 2023). The victims of cyberbullying may experience increased stress, social withdrawal, and, in extreme cases, symptoms of

depression. The results echo research by Jiang et al. (2025) clearly articulates the negative impact of cyberbullying on adolescent mental health (Weinstein, 2018). The study also shows that overreliance on social media affects sleeping habits and results in poor academic performance. Respondent frequently staying up to check social media, resulted once again into sleep deprivation and reduced interest in studies. Research by Maurya et al. (2023) shows that social media, specifically at night, significantly impacts sleep quality leading to cognitive deteriorations and poorer academic achievements. Moreover, the inclination to prioritize online interactions over studies aligns with the findings by Kee et al. (2024), who claim that students' use of social media has a negative impact on their academic performance. Finally, this study outlines the contradiction of online connections and offline social isolation. Many respondents indicated that even though they had a lot of friends online, they didn't feel connected in conversations that took place in real life. which claims that too much time on social media makes real-life social skills worse, which leads teenagers to loneliness and emotional detachment

### **Conclusion**

This research study has brought useful insight in the psychological outcomes of social media upon teenagers in District Mansehra. Overindulgence in social networks leads to increased anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and a higher risk of cyberbullying, according to the findings. Additionally, it disturbs sleep cycle, hampers academic performance and reduces face-to-face interactions in the real world, creating a paradox of isolation in reality in spite of apparent socialization through social networks. Although social media has many advantages like getting information and opportunity to communicate with others, there is no overstatement of the negative effects of social media on the mental health of teenagers. With social media becoming more common in everyday life, steps must be taken by parents, teachers and policy makers to make responsible use of social media. Digital literacy programs, awareness campaigns, and promoting offline social interactions are some of the initiatives that can help avoid the harmful effects. Hoping for further studies on the lasting effects regarding an appropriate digital balance.

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