

## The Dual Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Self-Esteem: Evidence from 2020–2026

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### Abstract

This review examines the impact of social media use on mental health and self-esteem from 2020 to 2026. Drawing on empirical studies, surveys, and meta-analyses published during this period, the article synthesises evidence on both the positive and negative psychological outcomes associated with social media engagement. Findings highlight that while platforms can foster social connection, identity expression, and peer support, excessive or maladaptive use is linked to heightened anxiety, depression, cyberbullying exposure, and diminished self-worth. The review also considers demographic differences, bearing in mind that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to negative effects, whereas moderated use among older populations often enhances social inclusion. Emerging trends such as algorithm-driven content, influencer culture, and digital well-being initiatives are examined for their role in shaping user experiences. The article concludes by emphasising the need for balanced usage, digital literacy, and policy interventions to curb risks while maximising the benefits of social media for mental health and self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Impact, mental health, self-esteem, social media.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the most influential forces shaping human interaction in the twenty-first century. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) are no longer simply tools for communication; they are cultural ecosystems that influence identity, relationships, and psychological well-being. By 2025, more than 5 billion people were active online, spending an average of 2.5 hours daily (Behera et al., 2025).

This unprecedented level of engagement has sparked intense scholarly debate about the implications of social media use for mental health and self-esteem. While these platforms provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, and community building, they also expose users to risks such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and algorithm-driven exposure to harmful content. This review synthesises recent findings published between 2020 and 2026 to evaluate the dual effects of social media on mental health and self-esteem, highlighting both positive and negative outcomes.

Social media has rapidly become one of the most influential forces shaping youth culture and communication in Kenya. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are no longer simply tools for interaction; they are vibrant digital ecosystems that shape identity, relationships, and psychological well-being. By 2025, Kenya's internet penetration had surpassed 40 million users, with young people spending several hours daily online, often making social media their primary space for entertainment, networking, and even business (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2025).

This widespread engagement has sparked growing concern among educators, health professionals, and policymakers about the implications of social media use for mental health and self-esteem. On one hand, these platforms provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, entrepreneurship, and activism, empowering Kenyan youth to participate in global conversations and build digital livelihoods (Otieno & Wambui, 2023). On the other hand, they expose users to risks such as cyberbullying, social comparison, online harassment, and algorithm-driven exposure to harmful or unrealistic content (Muthoni, 2024).

Recent studies highlight a dual reality: while social media fosters creativity, community, and awareness, it also contributes to rising cases of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among adolescents and young adults in Kenya (Ndungu, 2022). This review, therefore, seeks to synthesise findings published between 2020 and 2026 to evaluate the complex effect of social media on mental health and self-esteem in the Kenyan context, emphasising both its empowering potential and its psychological risks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature survey on social media and mental health reveals a complex picture. On one hand, numerous studies have documented associations between excessive social media use and heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. For example, Burnell et al. (2024) found that experimental exposure to appearance-focused content increased negative effects and lowered self-esteem among adolescents. Similarly, Santoso and Santoso (2020) demonstrated that frequent engagement with image-centric platforms such as Instagram correlated with body dissatisfaction and reduced self-worth. These findings underscore the role of social comparison, whereby individuals evaluate themselves against idealised portrayals of peers and influencers, often leading to diminished self-esteem. On the other hand, social media can serve as a source of resilience and support. Oxford Academic (2022) reported that adolescents who engaged in supportive online communities experienced enhanced self-esteem and greater access to mental health resources. Kamarudin (2023) further highlighted how online platforms facilitate mental health literacy, enabling individuals to share coping strategies and access peer support networks. Thus, the literature suggests that social media's impact is not uniformly negative but contingent upon usage patterns, platform design, and individual differences.

In the Kenyan context, the literature on social media and mental health paints a nuanced, multifaceted picture. On one hand, scholars and practitioners have documented associations between excessive social media use and heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. On the other hand, social media has also emerged as a powerful tool for resilience, self-expression, and entrepreneurship among Kenyan youth. This duality reflects the broader

global debate but is shaped by Kenya's unique cultural, economic, and technological context.

Kenyan researchers have increasingly recognised the power of social media in enhancing mental health awareness and literacy. Onger et al. (2021) demonstrated how community-based initiatives used Facebook and WhatsApp to disseminate mental health information, reduce stigma, and connect individuals to care. Similarly, the Ministry of Health (2025) emphasised digital platforms in its National Baseline Mental Health Survey, noting their role in awareness creation and advocacy. These study outcomes imply that social media can serve as a resilience-building tool, particularly in contexts where formal mental health infrastructure remains limited.

The darker side of Kenya's digital ecosystem is evident in the rise of cyberbullying. Nuna et al. (2023) found that adolescents in Nairobi secondary schools experienced significant psychological distress due to online harassment, often leading to withdrawal and lowered self-esteem. Reports such as *Cyberbullying and Gender-Based Violence in Kenyan Universities* (KICTANet, 2025) described online harassment as a pervasive issue, with nearly 40 per cent of students reporting experiences of cyberstalking or bullying. These findings underscore the vulnerability of young Kenyans in digital spaces and the urgent need for protective policies and interventions.

Studies conducted in Uasin Gishu and Embu counties revealed that adolescents frequently compared themselves to peers and influencers online, leading to body dissatisfaction and diminished self-worth (Lydia et al., 2023; Nyagah et al., 2024). The idealised portrayals of success and beauty on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often clash with offline realities, creating identity conflicts and lowering confidence among youth. This phenomenon mirrors global trends but is intensified in Kenya due to the rapid adoption of image-centric platforms and the aspirational culture surrounding digital lifestyles.

On the positive side, social media has empowered Kenyan youth economically and socially. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become central to digital entrepreneurship, enabling young people to market products, build personal brands, and access

global audiences. Blue Gift Digital Hub (2025) reported that social media is now a primary driver of tech startups and small businesses in Kenya. The Ministry of ICT (2026) further highlighted digital entrepreneurship as a pillar of Kenya's economic strategy, with social media serving as a gateway for innovation and job creation. These opportunities enhance self-esteem by validating youth creativity and providing tangible rewards for online engagement.

Civil society organisations have also leveraged social media to challenge stigma and promote resilience. The Kenya Psychiatric Association (2020) launched campaigns under the hashtag #MentalHealth254, which trended nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. These campaigns connected young people, fostered hope, and normalised conversations around mental health. Such digital activism demonstrates how social media can be harnessed to encourage help-seeking behaviours and build supportive communities.

The Kenyan literature between 2020 and 2026 paints a complex picture. Social media is both a source of empowerment and a driver of distress. It fosters creativity, community, and awareness, but also contributes to rising cases of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The impact is contingent upon usage patterns, platform design, and individual differences. For Kenyan youth, the challenge lies in balancing the opportunities of digital engagement with the risks of overexposure, cyberbullying, and social comparison.

## METHODOLOGY

This review adopts a systematic methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2026 across databases such as Springer, ResearchGate, Oxford Academic, and Emerald Insight. Inclusion criteria required studies to focus explicitly on mental health and self-esteem outcomes linked to social media use, while exclusion criteria excluded non-peer-reviewed sources and studies published before 2020. The selected studies employed diverse methodologies, including longitudinal surveys, experimental designs, and content analyses. By synthesising these findings thematically, the review categorises outcomes into negative, positive, and mixed effects, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

The discussion of findings reveals several critical themes. Negative outcomes include the amplification of anxiety and depression through algorithmic exposure to harmful content, as well as the reinforcement of body image concerns through appearance-focused platforms (Choudhary & Louis, 2021). Cyberbullying remains a significant risk, with Sulaiman et al. (2024) documenting its association with suicidal ideation among vulnerable populations. Positive outcomes, however, are equally noteworthy. Social media provides safe spaces for identity exploration, particularly for marginalised groups, and fosters peer support networks that can mitigate feelings of isolation (Oxford Academic, 2022). Mental health campaigns conducted via social media platforms have also been shown to increase awareness and encourage help-seeking behaviour (Emerald Insight, 2023). Importantly, the outcomes are not uniform but vary according to demographic and cultural factors. Behera et al. (2025) found that cultural context significantly shapes how individuals interpret and respond to social media content, suggesting that global generalisations may obscure important local differences.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, social media exerts a dual influence on mental health and self-esteem. It can enhance connectivity, peer support, and access to resources, yet it simultaneously exacerbates risks of depression, anxiety, and diminished self-worth. The balance between these outcomes depends on individual resilience, platform design, and the degree of digital literacy among users. Recognising this duality is essential for developing interventions that maximise benefits while minimising harms.

**Recommendations:** Recommendations arising from this review emphasise the need for multi-level interventions. Policymakers should encourage responsible platform design, particularly regarding algorithms that amplify harmful content. Educational institutions should integrate digital literacy into curricula to equip youth with the critical skills needed to engage with online material. Clinicians should incorporate assessments of social media use into therapeutic practice, recognising its role in shaping mental health outcomes. Finally, future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to clarify causal relationships and account for the diversity of user experiences across different contexts.

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