

Exploring the Nexus: Social Media Influence on Mental Health and Eating Behaviors in a Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Social media is implicated in the exacerbation of issues of mental health. This study synthesizes the impact of use of social media on mental well-being and eating behaviors of individuals. After screening papers from Google Scholar, PubMed and JSTOR databases and 19 papers were selected on the specified criteria and assessed for quality. Among these, there were qualitative, quantitative and the literature reviews. The findings were categorized into two key themes: Mental Health and Eating Behaviors. The study suggests that social media usage proved too effective in consuming healthy diet and body shaping. Very few studies declared that it could cause depression and anxiety but majority reveals that it proved to have no relation to create negative impact on mental health. However, the significant variations in results are attributed to the limited selection of literature. To gain a deeper understanding of the influence of social media on mental health, it is crucial to conduct further analysis through qualitative research

KEY WORDS: Social Media, Mental Health, Eating Behaviors, Depression, Body Shaping.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, social media has transformed the way we are connected with each other. The way we share information, we communicate, we collaborate all has been influenced by the use of social media. The mediums like Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook and now a days most common TikTok have added in our lives providing us the novel ventures to interact with people to express their emotions, feelings elsewhere to get the recent information and even to share our information with. Global media statistics research summary of April 2023 states that 60% of the world's population uses social media. The average daily usage is 2 hours and 24 minutes. While the positive aspects of social media use are undeniable, there is a growing concern about its impact on mental health. This research report aims to explore the complex relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes.

Background of the Study

The rise of social media has introduced numerous advantages to society, such as enabling individuals to connect with friends and family, share life experiences, and access a wide range of information. It has also empowered individuals to participate in online communities that align with their interests and values, and it has been instrumental in social and political movements worldwide. But still there are cases where we can see the negativities implied by the use of social media on personality development and mental health of individuals (Akram & Kumar, 2017)

The rapid evolution of social media platforms, characterized by features like instant messaging, live streaming, and algorithm-driven content recommendations, has led to profound changes in how individuals interact with online content. This transformation has raised questions about the potential consequences for mental well-being (Kim, 2017). Issues such as social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out, and the addictive nature of these platforms have all been subjects of intense research and public discussion but on the other hand use of social media has created a positive impact on mind counselling other learning healthy behaviors (Zsila & Eric, 2023). Researchers, policymakers, and healthcare professionals are grappling with the need to understand these complex dynamics and their implications for mental health.

This report seeks to shed light on the multifaceted relationship between social media use and mental health. By examining the existing literature and conducting original research, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how these platforms affect psychological well-being. We will explore both the positive and negative impacts, as well as the moderating factors that can influence the outcomes. Ultimately, we hope this research will inform strategies for promoting healthy and responsible social media use and provide insights for mental health interventions.

The subsequent chapters of this report will delve into the literature review, research methodology, findings, and discussion, as well as offer recommendations for individuals, social media companies, and policymakers. The goal is to foster a comprehensive understanding of the effects of social media use on mental health and to provide a foundation for informed decision-making in this digital age.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research report are as follows:

- To review existing literature to find out effect of use of social media on mental health and eating behaviors of individuals.
- To offer recommendations for promoting positive use of social media for meaningful behaviors.

Scope of the Study

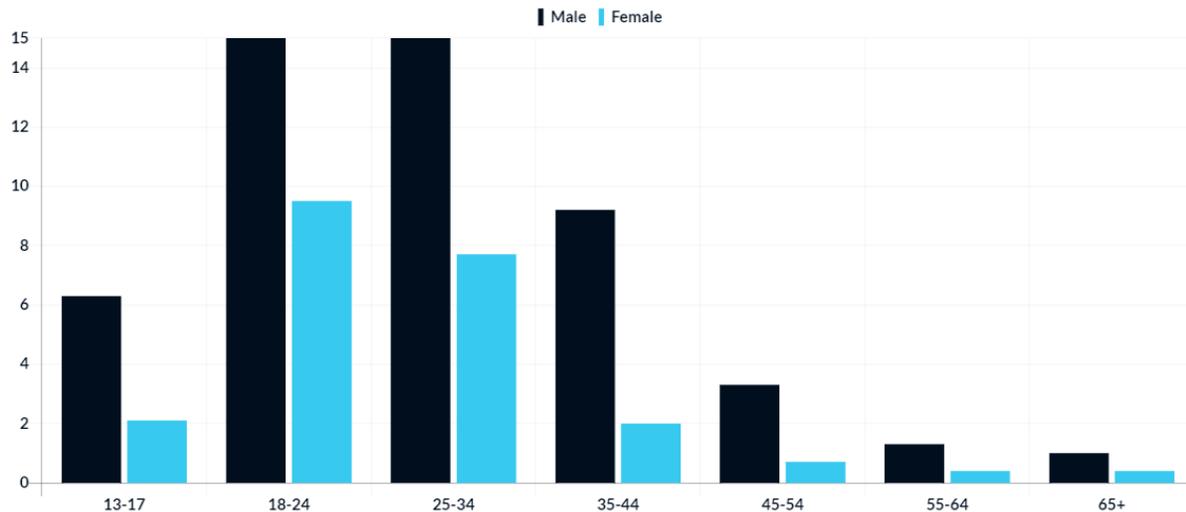
This study focuses on the impact of social media use on mental health, considering various dimensions of mental well-being, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, and body image. The researcher examines different social media platforms, demographics, and usage patterns globally keeping much focus in context of Pakistan. While it provides a comprehensive overview, it may not cover all possible aspects or specific case studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans are inherently social beings who need the presence of others to advance in life. Consequently, establishing social connections with fellow individuals can alleviate stress, anxiety, and sadness, while a deficiency in social interaction can pose significant threats to one's mental well-being.

Social Media Usage

People now a days are in habit of using social media apps and tools serving many hours of usage on these platforms, most popular among them are Facebook, messenger, Instagram and Whatsapp among with new advent of many recent applications as on daily basis innovations are there in terms of technology .Consequently, a multitude of researchers and scholars are delving into the influence of social media and its associated apps on various aspects of people's lives (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017). Furthermore, the global count of social media users in 2019 reached 3.484 billion, marking a 9% increase from the previous year (Jiang & Ngien, 2020 & being (Kim, 2017). Figure: 1 presents statistics on the worldwide gender distribution of social media audiences as of January 2020, categorized by platform. It revealed that Twitter had a predominantly female user base, with only 38% being male, while Snap chat boasted a 61% male user base. In contrast, females exhibited a stronger presence on LinkedIn and Facebook. Undoubtedly, social media has now assumed a pivotal role in the lives of many. While it brings about numerous positive and enjoyable advantages, it also carries the potential to contribute to mental health issues. Previous research indicated that age had no discernible impact, but gender played a significant role, with females being more susceptible to experiencing mental health challenges compared to males (Iannotti et al., 2009; Muris & Steerneman, 2001).



[Figure: 1 Social Media User Demographics: Meta's figure as reference, 2022

Social Media Usage in Pakistan

As per the latest survey recorded in 2023 by OOSGA, there are about 72.9 million people who use social media including those who have logged once a month since 2022 constituting about 31.5% of the population leading to an increase of 4.3 from year 2021-2022.

It has been reported that usage of social media by male is greater than of females. It has further been observed that use of social media is highest in ages between 18-34 years. As the age group declines the use of social media also shows a down towards attitude.

The statistics from Stats Counter 2023 declares the use of diverse types of social media that highlight percentages of different apps. It documents the following statistics:

- Facebook = 84.65%
- Twitter =8.36%
- YouTube =4.6%
- Instagram=1.7%
- Pinterest=0.51%
- LinkedIn =0.1%

There is an estimated increase in recent data published in 20230 that can show us the increased rate of 1.9% leading to approximately 25.2 million Tik Tokers in Pakistan out of which male percent is 0.823 and female is 0.177.

With the more usage of Media, people at one end are saving their time, improving their lives, but on the other end are also becoming victimized for side effects of it.

Impact on Mental Health

According to the World Health Report Mental health (2004 is when people understand their abilities, they will be able to work at a good pace, can face challenges and tries to solve and can contribute well to society. As far as the impact of media on mental health is concerned, this is a controversial issue resulting somewhere in harmful consequences and somewhere the outcomes are desirable. (Martinsen, 2008; Berryman et al., 2018). Social networking is key element in saving us from mental hazards. Number and Closeness of social relationships, both effect our mental health, personality, behavior and emotions. (Iannotti et al., 2009). The issue well explained by theory of Displaced Behavior that states that people who are not interacting with people, spend their life in isolation focusing on virtual reality like screen or social media are less prone to have mental (Coyne et al., 2020; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). On the contrary , other social theories mentions process of how social media produces effects on mental health by influencing how people think, perceive ,view, maintain, and interact with their social network (Rahman et al., 2013). A number of

studies have been conducted on the impacts of social media, and it has been indicated that the prolonged use of social media platforms such as Facebook may be related to negative signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Berryman et al., 2018 ;Keles et al., 2019 ;O'Reilly et al., 2018; Nereim et al., 2020.) Furthermore, social media can create a lot of pressure to create the stereotype that others want to see and also being as popular as others whereas on the other side Social media has the potential to improve the mental wellbeing by building peer relations and social connections. Online communities have been developed that have supported people to gain information about topics and they get chance to discuss their issues there (Naslund et al., 2020:5). When engaging in such discussions people feel they are social and that develops a sense of belonging in them. In context of Pakistan, it is also observed that social media can enhance socialization and help students in their academic activities (Majeed et al., 2022) We need not to forget the positive effects of social media at the time of pandemic COVID -19 that enhances social interaction and the presence of humor on social media that played a key role in relieving stress at those stressful times. (Marciano et al., 2022:4).

Impact on Eating Behaviors:

The influence of social media on eating behavior on individuals differs on basis of many factors (Nguyen et al., 2020; Sun & Zhang, 2020). It affects body shaping and the types of food person eat (Collier & Treasure, 2004; Rodgers et al., 2020). Somewhere it is a tempting force to eat unhealthy food thereby destroying healthy eating habits and at other end it prompts the adolescents to have thin and slim body image, by advertising, by media talks and other factors. (Rodgers et al., 2020). A study focusing on female university students found a significant correlation between the intensity of social media use and increased instances of eating disorders, highlighting the potential adverse effects (Qutteina et al., 2019). In Pakistani context, it is found that that the basic motivation for Pakistani millennial to engage with social media in the health domain is information sharing and communication with each other. Among the various social media platforms, Whatsapp, Facebook and YouTube emerged as the most preferred choices for addressing health-related issues (Rahman et al., 2013). Many health care professionals and institutions are using social media Platforms for creating health Awareness and healthy Behaviors. (Ventola, 2014) thereby suggesting the role of social media as not only negative but rather in many cases serve as positive influencer in body shaping and eating behaviors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Current study is based on systematic review of literature to explore the impact of social media on mental health and eating behaviors. It provide the negative as well as the positive aspects of social media on mental health (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Martinsen, 2008; Muris & Steerneman, 2001). This study bears significance as it sheds light on the scope of peer-reviewed literature, serving as a valuable resource to aid in filling the void in our understanding of the interplay between social media and mental health.

Systematic reviews play a crucial role in the comprehensive analysis of available data, enabling both quantitative and qualitative assessment to provide a thorough and precise response to research inquiries (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). Numerous systematic studies addressing mental health topics have been carried out on a global scale. However, there is a dearth of research integrating social media within the context of social science due to the predominant focus on medical science within the existing literature (Iannotti et al., 2009). Given that social media is a relatively recent phenomenon, investigations into the potential connections between its usage and mental health outcomes remain relatively sparse (Wartberg et al., 2020).

To identify the role and influence of social media, a study was conducted by literature review in which Google Scholar, PubMed and JSTOR were used. Search was started by adding some topics like

- Social media and mental health.
- Social media and eating behavior.
- Impact of social media in context of Pakistan.
- Negative and Positive Effects of social media.

Search was kept focused within a time range between the last 7 years. Eighty-four research articles were screened out of which forty articles were excluded after reading the abstract seven. From the selected forty articles after reading nineteen articles were excluded as they were not aligned with the current study objective. This review does not include any conference paper. For this study, a total of twenty papers were selected. The Inclusion Criteria for selection of articles were peer review journals, the articles selected were of last five years, clearly defines the type of studies. The study does not include any unpublished or grey literature or conference proceedings.

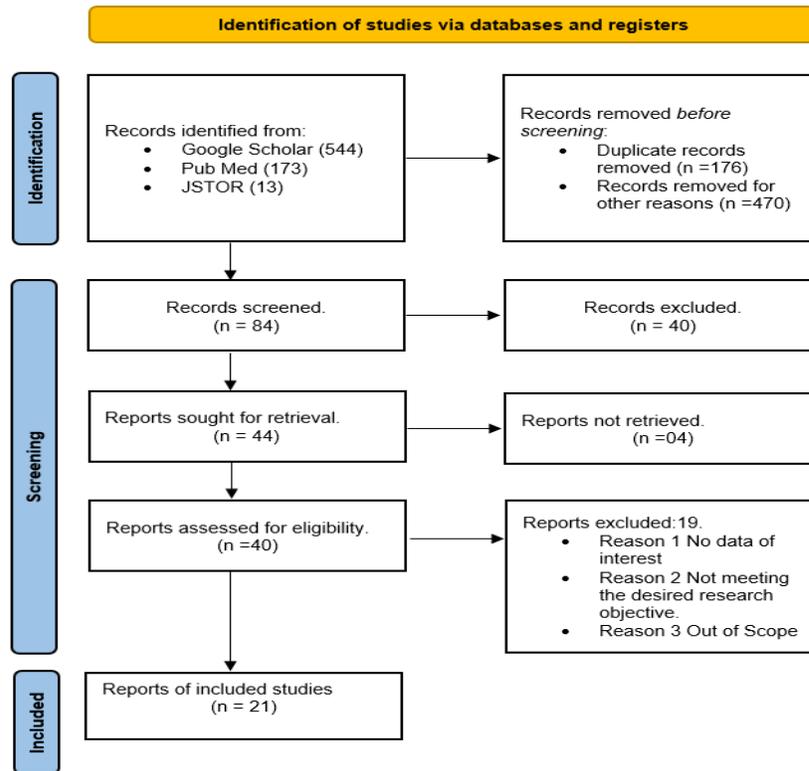


Figure: 2 Prisma Diagram

FINDINGS

Out of the 21 research papers chosen, the investigation primarily centered on mental health and eating behaviors. The research design encompassed qualitative and quantitative studies, with systematic reviews delving into the positive and negative aspects of adolescent social media use.

Systematic Review categorizes the Data into two broad themes: social media and Mental Health and social media and Eating Behaviors.

a. Social Media and Mental Health

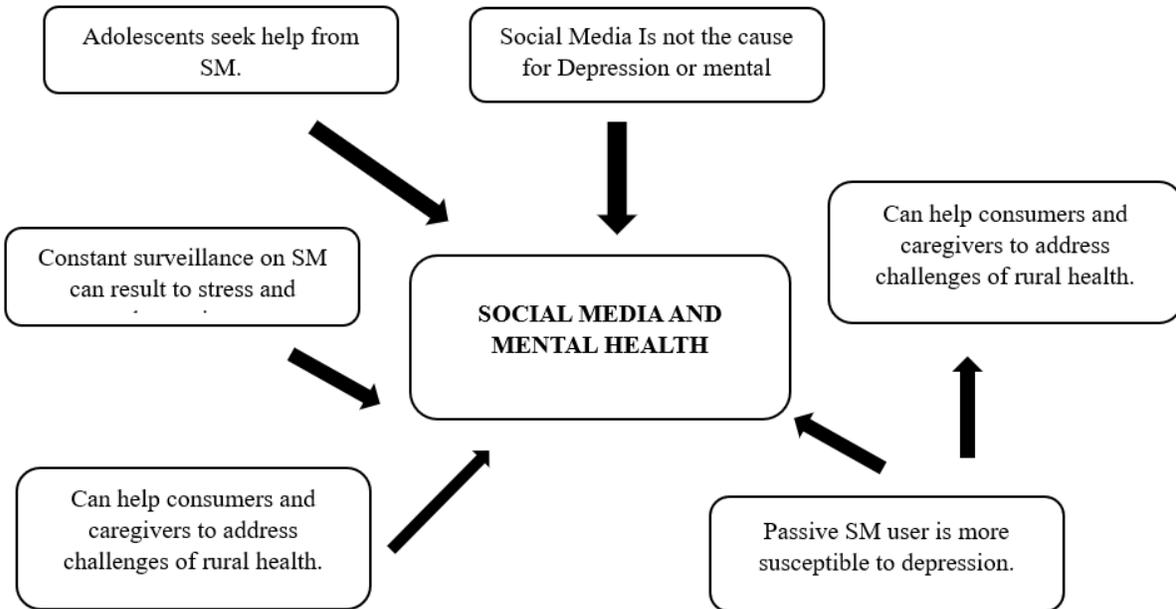


Figure 3: Theme derived from Literature Review; Social Media and Mental Health

It is observed that social media use does not uniformly predict impaired mental health, effects. Vary across age groups and individual levels. Adolescents frequently use social media to seek information about mental health. Frequent social media use is associated with greater symptoms of psychopathology (Berryman et al., 2018). Social Media can be a risk for mental health for some individuals associated with less interaction with family members developing low levels of trust between them (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2013). On the other hand it is revealed that social media supports people to deal with heavy emotions (Rasmussen et al., 2020) and also is one of the tool to create health awareness (Mehmet et al., 2020). It is evident that social media use is impacting mental health in positive and some where it is producing adverse effects.

b. Social Media and Eating Behaviors

It is noticed from the studied literature that excessive use of social media influences youth's lifestyle, attitudes towards food, clothing, and interpersonal relationships. Social media contributes to making youth brand-conscious and can create unrealistic living standards (Ahmad et al., 2023). Significant relationships between Facebook and YouTube usage and increased fast food consumption were observed. Screen time correlates with unhealthy food and drink consumption. Social media addiction is significantly associated with higher levels of body image concern, which, in turn, affects eating behavior. It has been noticed in some of the studies that screen time is correlated with unhealthy and junk food consumption

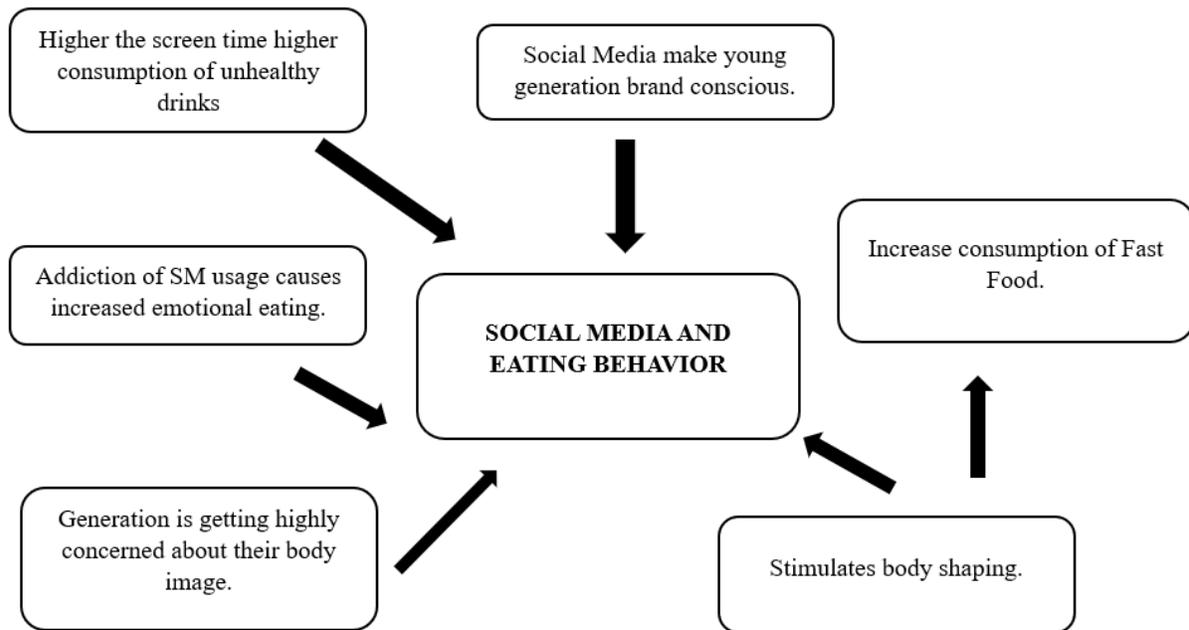


Figure 4: Theme derived from Literature Review; Social Media and Eating Behaviors

The higher the screen time, the higher will be the consumption (Akila Nedjar-Guerre et al., 2023; Nadeem et al., 2023). Social media usage is also one of the influencers in body shaping (Mohsenpour et al., 2023).

Youth and adolescents are much concerned of their images, they frequently observe posts related to body shaping and want to have a slim look, whereas on the other hand Facebook and YouTube videos enhances junk food consumption by advertisement and somewhere by elevating their screen time (Ittefaq et al., 2022).

c. Social media and its effect on Mental Health in context of Pakistan

Pakistani Youth are the intense user of social media (Khalid et al., 2022).. Some cases reveal that social media usage is highly associated with depression, but in another case, it is observed that social media usage is contributing well to social wellbeing of teenagers, they post, they share their developments, like this their confidence rises as well as their personality develops (Mukhtar, 2020).

Social Media in context of Pakistan:

Literature provides evidence that people using social media may develop depression due to self-comparisons with others. The ones who were depressed used to spend more time on social media (Khalid et al., 2022). Studies even show no connection in good mental health and social media (Tajjamul & Aleem, 2022). The concluding result after critical review of past studies shows that the effect of social media is bifold, positive as well as negative. It is affecting positively and somewhere is one of the causes of mental illness and distress (Raza et al., 2022 & Khalid et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study systematically examined the existing literature regarding the impact of social media use on mental health. While the findings were not entirely consistent, a general correlation between social media use and mental health issues was identified. Positive evidence supporting a connection between social media and mental health was observed, but conflicting reports also emerged.

For example one of the past study suggests that there is no link between time spent of media usage or media related activities like posting pictures and selfies on Facebook , Instagram is not directly related to depression (Berryman et al., 2018 : Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2013) . Similarly, Neira and Barber discovered that although a higher engagement in social media (e.g., active use) predicted adolescents' depressive symptoms, there was no association between the frequency of social media use and depressed mood (Coyne et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2020).

Interestingly, passive engagement in social media activities, such as reading posts, demonstrated a stronger correlation with depression than active participation, such as creating posts (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2013). Notably, this review's significant findings propose that factors like interpersonal trust and family functioning might exert a more substantial influence on depression symptoms than the frequency of social media utilization (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). On the flip side, depression emerges as an unintended consequence of excessive social media use. This is not limited to Facebook but extends to other sites leading to the development of psychological problems. A recent study revealed that individuals engaged in social media, gaming, texting, and mobile phone usage are more susceptible to experiencing depression (Keyes & Kreski, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2020).

It is suggested that there is a need for further investigations to elucidate the underlying factors that explain why social media negatively affects the mental health of some individuals while having no or even a positive impact on others' mental well-being. It is also recommended to teach social media literacy that can maximize the balance of safe and meaningful experiences of its usage.

In terms of eating behavior, our research has delved into the intricate relationship between social media usage and eating behavior, shedding light on both positive and negative dimensions. One noteworthy discovery is the substantial association between social media usage and altered lifestyle choices, particularly among the younger demographic. Excessive engagement with social media was found to influence preferences in food, clothing, and interpersonal relationships. Notably, the study illuminated the role of social media in cultivating brand consciousness and fostering unrealistic living standards among youth (Ahmad et al., 2023). Participants exhibiting higher levels of social media addiction reported increased concerns about body image and demonstrated deteriorated eating behavior across various subscales, including emotional eating, external stimuli, and restrained eating. This underscores the importance of addressing the psychological impact of extensive social media use, particularly in relation to body image and eating patterns.

The limitations and recommendations stem from the evidence gathered during the study and review process. Notably, some studies were cross-sectional, posing a slight challenge in establishing a causal relationship between the variables of interest. The findings from cross-sectional studies do not allow for a definitive conclusion that social media use directly causes mental health issues. Only three longitudinal studies delved into the causal connection between social media and mental health, making it challenging to determine whether heightened social media use correlates with more pronounced mental health problems compared to those who use it less or abstain altogether (Karim et al., 2020; Nereim et al., 2020).

In conclusion, our research underscores the need for a balanced and informed approach to the integration of social media into health promotion strategies. By fostering digital literacy, promoting positive content, and addressing the psychological aspects of social media engagement, we can harness the benefits while mitigating the potential harm to individuals' eating behavior and overall well-being.

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