

Social media use and loneliness among young adults: Beyond screen time to social context and patterns of engagement

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ABSTRACT

Research on social media and loneliness has produced mixed findings, partly because studies often treat use as a single quantity rather than distinguishing the activities and social conditions involved. This integrative review examines how patterns of social media engagement relate to loneliness among young adults. It synthesizes recent peer-reviewed reviews, cohort research, qualitative studies, and cross-sectional investigations, with emphasis on publications from 2024 to 2026. The literature does not support a simple conclusion that social media either causes or prevents loneliness. Total time online is an inconsistent indicator, while compulsive use, cybervictimization, comparison, and passive exposure may be associated with poorer experiences in some contexts. Direct communication, maintaining existing relationships, and purposeful participation can support belonging, although active posting does not guarantee connection. Recent cohort evidence suggests that the type of online experience may matter more than use of particular mainstream platforms, while a 2026 meta-analysis reports a stronger association between problematic use and loneliness than between time spent and loneliness. The review proposes a context-and-engagement framework linking individual motives, interaction patterns, relationship quality, platform affordances, and offline circumstances. It recommends that researchers measure specific behaviors and longitudinal change rather than relying on screen time alone. Because the evidence remains heterogeneous and predominantly observational, causal claims should be cautious. The review also identifies a need for cross-cultural research, including studies in underrepresented linguistic and national contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become part of the everyday infrastructure through which young adults maintain relationships, encounter news, express identity, and participate in communities. These platforms make contact possible across distance and can help people sustain weak ties or find others with shared interests. At the same time, online interaction can expose users to social comparison, exclusion, hostile communication, and the impression that others enjoy more rewarding lives. The coexistence of these experiences helps explain why research on social media and loneliness has not produced a single, consistent conclusion.

Loneliness is a subjective perception that one's social relationships do not meet one's desired level of connection. It differs from objective social isolation, which concerns the quantity or structure of social contact. A person can have frequent online interactions yet feel misunderstood or unsupported; another may have a small network but experience meaningful belonging. Treating loneliness as equivalent to time spent alone, number of contacts, or amount of screen use obscures these differences. The distinction is particularly important when examining social media, because platform metrics quantify visible activity more readily than relationship quality.

Recent reviews have renewed attention to the question while also warning against broad claims. Hall (2025) organizes the literature around possible pathways through which social media can increase belonging and summarizes findings at trait, longitudinal, and momentary levels. A 2026 systematic review of 21 empirical studies on social media and social isolation among young adults found mixed results: some usage patterns were associated with greater isolation, some with connection, and others with no significant relationship (Liu et al., 2026). The variation suggests that the relevant question is less whether people use social media and more how, why, and under what circumstances they use it.

Evidence focused on young adults illustrates the same complexity. In a cohort of 1,632 UK young adults, Matthews et al. (2025) found that overall time online was associated with greater loneliness, but time spent on mainstream social media platforms was not. Loneliness was associated with compulsive digital use and online victimization; use of some services was associated with greater loneliness, while WhatsApp use was associated with lower loneliness. These results are observational and do not establish that a particular platform causes the outcome. They do, however, suggest that experiences and patterns of use may be more informative than a general measure of social-media exposure.

Qualitative work also shows that loneliness and social media are experienced as a double-sided phenomenon. Käckö et al. (2024), in a study based on essays from nine young adults aged 19–27, found accounts of both negative and positive experiences of solitude and described social media as having a mixed relationship with loneliness. The small sample does not establish prevalence, but it helps explain why average effects may conceal different meanings and functions of online engagement. For some people, online contact offers reassurance and continuity; for others, it intensifies awareness of exclusion or replaces interaction they would prefer to have in person.

This article addresses three questions:

- (1) What patterns of social media use are most consistently associated with loneliness among young adults?
- (2) Through which social and psychological processes might these associations occur?
- (3) What methodological and practical implications follow from the mixed evidence?

The article contributes an integrative framework that distinguishes exposure, engagement style, social experience, and offline context. It does not present new empirical data or claim to be a fully systematic review. Its purpose is to synthesize recent research and clarify which conclusions are supported and which require further testing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article uses an integrative literature-review design to compare findings from different research approaches. The review draws on peer-reviewed systematic reviews, meta-analyses, cohort studies, qualitative investigations, and cross-sectional research published mainly between 2024 and 2026. Earlier foundational work was considered where necessary to clarify the distinction between loneliness, social isolation, and patterns of digital engagement. Recent studies were identified through searches combining terms such as “social media,” “loneliness,” “young adults,” “social isolation,” “problematic social media use,” “active use,” and “passive use.” Reference lists of relevant reviews and studies were also used to locate additional publications.

Studies were considered relevant when they examined social media use or online experiences in relation to loneliness or social isolation, with a focus on adolescents, emerging adults, or young adults. Priority was given to research that described its sample and measures clearly and to reviews that reported search or synthesis methods. Institutional or general-audience commentary was not used as evidence for causal claims. Where a study used a cross-sectional design, its results were interpreted as associations rather than evidence of direction or causality. Where a review combined studies with different populations or measures, its conclusions were treated as a summary of heterogeneous evidence rather than a universal estimate.

The synthesis proceeded thematically. Findings were grouped into four areas: overall time and frequency of use; active, passive, and problematic engagement; relationship quality and online experiences; and methodological limitations and implications. Contradictions were retained rather than resolved by selecting one preferred result. The analysis also distinguished loneliness from social isolation because the concepts are related but not interchangeable. No original participants were recruited, and no new quantitative analysis was conducted.

This review has limitations. It is integrative rather than systematic, does not claim exhaustive coverage of all databases, and did not use duplicate screening or formal risk-of-bias scoring. Studies differ in age ranges, platforms, cultural settings, measurement instruments, and definitions of use. As a result, the synthesis can identify recurring patterns and gaps but cannot provide a single causal estimate of social media’s effect on loneliness.

RESULTS

Total Time and Frequency of Use

Across the reviewed literature, total time spent on social media is an incomplete and inconsistent indicator of loneliness. The 2026 meta-analysis by Feng et al. included 59 studies, 67 independent samples, and 81,344 participants, with a mean age of 17.6 years. It reported a small positive correlation between time spent on social media and loneliness ($r = .07$), compared with a moderate association for problematic social media use ($r = .29$). Substantial heterogeneity was observed across studies, indicating that estimates varied considerably. The findings support distinguishing duration from the quality and regulation of engagement rather than assuming that additional minutes have a uniform effect.

Matthews et al. (2025) similarly found that overall time online was associated with loneliness in a cohort of 1,632 young adults, while use of mainstream platforms such as Facebook,

Instagram, and Twitter was not. Their findings point to compulsive use and online victimization as more relevant correlates. Since the data were observational, it remains possible that loneliness contributes to certain patterns of digital behavior, that online experiences influence loneliness, or that both are shaped by other factors. The study therefore challenges simple time-based interpretations without proving that time online is irrelevant in every population.

A systematic review of social media use and social isolation among young adults likewise reported a mixture of negative, positive, and null associations (Liu et al., 2026). Across the studies included in that review, excessive or passive engagement without interaction was more commonly linked to isolation, whereas purposeful interaction sometimes supported connection. These results concern social isolation rather than loneliness in every case, so they should not be treated as direct equivalents. Together, however, they indicate that crude measures of exposure may obscure the social function of use.

Active, Passive, and Problematic Engagement

A common distinction in the literature is between active use, such as messaging or participating in a discussion, and passive use, such as browsing other people's posts without interacting. This distinction can be useful, but it should not be treated as a universal rule. Active posting may provide support and reciprocity, but it can also involve impression management, conflict, or repeated checking for approval. Passive browsing may trigger upward social comparison, yet it can also provide information or a sense of connection for users who cannot participate directly. The meaning of a behavior depends on its purpose, content, and interpersonal setting.

Problematic or compulsive use appears more consistently associated with loneliness than duration alone. Pezzi et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 12 studies involving 4,009 young adults, found that most studies reported a positive association between general loneliness and problematic social media use. The review also noted that few studies examined solitary experiences beyond general loneliness and that possible relationships varied according to dimensions of loneliness and platform type. These limitations suggest that "problematic use" should be measured carefully and not used as a synonym for frequent use.

Problematic use may reflect difficulty regulating behavior, continued checking despite negative consequences, or reliance on platforms to manage distress. Such patterns could reduce time or attention available for desired offline activities and expose users to repeated social comparison. However, loneliness may also motivate more intensive online engagement as people seek contact or reassurance. A reciprocal relationship is therefore plausible, but the direction and timing need to be established with longitudinal or experimental designs rather than inferred from a single survey.

Relationship Quality and Online Experiences

The type of relationship maintained online appears central to understanding whether social media supports belonging. Messaging a close friend, coordinating family contact, joining a supportive group, and browsing curated images of acquaintances are different activities, even when they occur on the same platform. Hall (2025) describes several possible pathways through which social media can increase belonging and reviews research at different levels of analysis, including momentary experiences and change over time. This approach moves the

discussion beyond a single average association and asks when online contact provides meaningful connection.

Qualitative findings are consistent with this context-sensitive view. Käckö et al. (2024) describe young adults' experiences of loneliness as varied and social media as a double-sided influence. Their participants' accounts suggest that the same general category of technology can be associated with support in one situation and painful comparison or disconnection in another. Because the study involved nine participants, it cannot establish how common each experience is. Its contribution lies in identifying meanings and processes that standardized measures may miss.

Online victimization is another relevant experience. Matthews et al. (2025) found that young adults reporting online victimization were lonelier on average. This association is socially important because it shifts attention from the amount of communication to its quality and safety. Platforms can enable contact while also allowing harassment, exclusion, and persistent unwanted interactions. Measures that record only frequency of use may therefore classify a harmful experience as simply "more engagement," failing to capture the mechanism likely to matter for well-being.

The literature also cautions against assuming that a platform's name determines its effect. Matthews et al. (2025) reported different associations for different services, but platform use is entangled with users' motives, social networks, and the activities they undertake there. These findings should not be interpreted as a universal ranking of platforms. A service used primarily for direct communication may have a different relationship to loneliness than one used mainly for browsing public content, but the relationship can change as platform features and user practices evolve.

Summary of the Main Patterns

Table 1 summarizes recurring patterns across the reviewed sources. The categories indicate the general direction of findings reported in the cited literature; they are not causal conclusions or effect estimates for all young adults.

Table 1. *Patterns reported in recent research on social media and loneliness*

Aspect of use or experience	Pattern in reviewed evidence	Interpretive caution
Total time spent	Small or inconsistent association with loneliness	Time alone does not identify motive, content, or relationship quality.
Problematic or compulsive use	More consistently associated with greater loneliness	Direction may be reciprocal; definitions and measures vary.
Active interaction	Can support connection, but findings are not uniformly positive	Posting or messaging does not guarantee meaningful support.

Passive browsing	May be associated with comparison or disconnection in some contexts	Passive use can also provide information and a sense of contact.
Online victimization	Associated with greater loneliness in cohort evidence	Observational associations do not establish causality.
Purposeful communication	May help maintain existing relationships and belonging	Effects depend on the relationship and wider offline context.

Note. Synthesized from Feng et al. (2026), Hall (2025), Käckö et al. (2024), Liu et al. (2026), Matthews et al. (2025), and Pezzi et al. (2024).

Research Design and Evidence Gaps

The reviewed studies use different age ranges and definitions of loneliness, social isolation, and social media use. Some measure daily time, others frequency, motivations, problematic use, or experiences on specific platforms. These measures cannot be assumed to capture the same exposure. Likewise, an association with loneliness does not necessarily imply an association with social isolation, and neither outcome should be used as a proxy for the other without justification.

Cross-sectional designs remain a limitation because they cannot reliably establish temporal order. Longitudinal cohort studies can help determine whether patterns of use precede changes in loneliness, although they still require careful control of confounding variables. Experience-sampling designs may be useful for identifying short-term links between a specific online interaction and feelings of connection or exclusion. Qualitative work can clarify why users engage in a particular way and how they interpret their experiences. A stronger evidence base will require complementary methods rather than reliance on a single design.

Cultural and geographic coverage also needs improvement. Many studies are conducted in Europe, North America, or East Asia, and results may not transfer unchanged to settings with different family structures, communication norms, platform access, languages, or offline opportunities. Research in Afghanistan and other underrepresented contexts could examine how online contact intersects with mobility, education, migration, gender norms, and access to in-person social spaces. Such studies should not presume that the same patterns will occur everywhere; they should test how context changes the relationship between digital activity and belonging.

DISCUSSION

The main finding of this synthesis is that the relationship between social media and loneliness depends on patterns of engagement and the social meaning of online experiences. A general question such as “How many hours do you spend on social media?” cannot distinguish meaningful conversation from compulsive checking, supportive group participation from harassment, or active contact from passive comparison. The small association between time

spent and loneliness reported in the 2026 meta-analysis, compared with the stronger association for problematic use, supports this distinction (Feng et al., 2026). Because the meta-analysis found substantial heterogeneity, the result should not be interpreted as a uniform effect across users or contexts.

These findings also help explain why public discussion sometimes produces contradictory conclusions. Studies that emphasize connection may focus on communication that sustains existing relationships, while studies that emphasize harm may examine compulsive use, victimization, or comparison. Both can be accurate descriptions of different processes. Hall's (2025) review and the qualitative findings of Käckö et al. (2024) support examining multiple pathways rather than searching for one overall verdict. Social media is better understood as a set of environments and practices than as a single exposure with a stable effect.

A practical implication is that interventions should target the problem being observed. If a person's loneliness is connected to online harassment, safety and reporting mechanisms may be more relevant than reducing screen time. If compulsive checking displaces desired activities, self-regulation strategies may be appropriate. If social media helps someone maintain distant relationships, a blanket reduction could remove an important source of support. These implications are reasoned from the pattern of evidence; the reviewed studies do not establish that one intervention is effective for every individual.

For researchers, the most important recommendation is to measure use in greater detail. Studies should report the age range and context of participants, distinguish active and passive behaviors, measure problematic use separately from duration, and record experiences such as support, comparison, conflict, and victimization. Where possible, research should measure both loneliness and objective social isolation. Longitudinal studies and repeated assessments would help clarify directionality, while qualitative interviews could explain why similar levels of use are experienced differently.

For universities and youth-serving institutions, the evidence supports avoiding alarmist messages that treat all social media use as harmful. Education can instead help young adults reflect on whether particular online activities support the relationships they value, recognize signs of compulsive engagement, and respond to hostile interactions. This should be paired with attention to offline conditions, including access to safe social spaces and opportunities for participation. Digital behavior does not occur separately from material and institutional circumstances.

Several limitations constrain these conclusions. The article is an integrative review, not an exhaustive systematic review or meta-analysis. The sources vary in design, sample size, measures, and publication context, and much of the evidence is observational. Findings from one cohort or platform cannot be generalized automatically to all young adults. The conceptual framework also requires direct empirical testing. Future studies should examine whether specific patterns of engagement predict changes in loneliness over time and whether those associations differ across cultural settings, socioeconomic circumstances, and relationship types.

CONCLUSION

The available evidence does not support a simple claim that social media either causes loneliness or reliably prevents it. Total time spent online is an imperfect indicator; problematic or compulsive use and negative online experiences appear more consistently related to loneliness, while purposeful communication can help maintain relationships in some circumstances. These patterns are not universal and do not establish causality. Research should distinguish loneliness from social isolation and measure motives, engagement styles, relationship quality, and online victimization rather than relying on screen time alone. Practical responses should be proportionate to the specific problem and should preserve the potential benefits of online contact. Longitudinal, qualitative, and cross-cultural research is needed to clarify how these relationships develop and how they vary across social contexts.

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