

GROWING UP ONLINE: HOW EXPOSURE TO MENTAL HEALTH CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES ADOLESCENTS' SELF-PERCEPTION AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has increased adolescents' exposure to mental health related content, including anxiety, emotional crisis and self-diagnosis. This study examined how exposure to mental health content on social media shapes adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing. The study was anchored on Social Comparison Theory and Cultivation Theory. A quantitative survey research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 26,979 public secondary school students in Enugu North Local Government Area, while a sample size of 379 respondents was obtained using an online sample size calculator. Multi-stage sampling technique was employed, and data were collected through questionnaire administration. Findings revealed that adolescents are frequently exposed to mental health-related materials on social media platforms. The study further showed that such exposure influence adolescents' self-understanding and emotional wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. In addition, supportive and solution-oriented mental health content was found to produce more positive emotional outcomes than problem-focused content. Based on the findings, the study recommended improved digital literacy and proper guidance to help adolescents engage responsibly and constructively with mental health content encountered on social media platforms.

Key words: adolescents; emotional wellbeing; mental health content; self-perception; social media.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology and the widespread use of social media have transformed communication, relationships, behaviour, and self-perception, especially among adolescents. Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period characterized by significant social and biological changes, identity development, and heightened sensitivity to social influences (Cheng et al., 2024). According to the World Health Organization (2025), adolescents are individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 years. During this stage, young people often rely on their social environment for validation, emotional understanding, and self-worth. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, and YouTube have become major sources of emotional and informational content for adolescents. Unlike traditional media, social media provides continuous and interactive exposure to content, thereby increasing its influence on adolescents' perceptions and emotional wellbeing (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Mental health-related discussions involving anxiety, depression, emotional distress, therapy, and self-care have become increasingly common on social media. Scholars argue that such exposure may help reduce stigma and improve mental health awareness among young people (Naslund et al., 2020; Pretorius et al., 2022). However, concerns have also been raised regarding misleading information, emotional exaggeration, self-diagnosis, and unhealthy social comparison associated with online mental health content (O'Reilly et al., 2023; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Although several studies have examined social media and adolescent mental health, limited attention has been given to how exposure specifically to mental health content influences adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, this study examines how exposure to mental health content on social media shapes adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing.

Statement of Problem

Social media's explosive growth has drastically changed the way adolescents grow up, exposing them to constant and repeated overload of information about mental health, emotional distress, treatment, self-diagnosis, and wellness outreach. Growing empirical evidence indicates that exposure to digital platforms may have complex and sometimes contradictory effects on adolescents' psychological development, despite the fact that these platforms have become crucial forums for peer support and mental health awareness (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Adolescence is particularly important because identity exploration, emotional development and sensitivity to peer influence may make young people responsive to the experiences and representations they encounter online. Supportive and educational content may encourage self-awareness, emotional understanding and help-seeking, whereas misleading, sensationalised or distressing content may contribute to worry, discomfort, self-diagnosis or negative self-evaluation (O'Reilly et al., 2023).

Despite growing scholarly attention to social media and adolescent mental health, limited studies have specifically examined how exposure to mental health content on social media influences adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing, particularly within the Nigerian context. Existing studies have largely concentrated on general social media usage, academic performance, body image, cyber bullying, and psychological distress, with insufficient attention paid to the specific influence of mental health-related content. This gap in knowledge therefore necessitates further empirical investigation. It is against this background that this study examines how exposure to mental health content on social media shapes adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of the research was to determine how exposure to mental health content on social media shapes adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the extent of adolescents' exposure to mental health content on social media.
2. assess how such exposure influences self-perception.
3. evaluate the impact on emotional wellbeing.
4. examine how adolescents' responses vary according to the type of mental health content encountered on social media

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of adolescents' exposure to mental health content on social media?
2. How does exposure to mental health content on social media influence adolescents' self-perception?
3. What is the impact of exposure to mental health content on adolescents' emotional wellbeing?
4. How do adolescents' responses vary according to the type of mental health content encountered on social media?

Review of Literature

Mental Health Content

Mental health refers to a state of psychological wellbeing that enables individuals to recognize their abilities, cope effectively with life stressors, maintain healthy relationships, and function productively within society (World Health Organization, 2025). Good mental health involves effective stress management, healthy social relationships, emotional control, and sound judgment even during difficult situations. Mental health is therefore essential throughout all stages of human development, including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

In this study, mental health content refers to digital materials that communicate information or experiences relating to emotional and psychological wellbeing. Such content may include personal accounts of mental health struggles, coping strategies, recovery experiences, emotional expressions, and advice or information about mental health (Turuba et al., 2025). Social media provides opportunities for adolescents to encounter supportive and educational material that may promote awareness, emotional support and resilience (Naslund et al., 2020). At the same time, inaccurate or sensationalized content may encourage misconceptions, self-diagnosis or distress (O'Reilly et al., 2023).

Adolescents' Perception of Mental Health Content

Adolescents may interpret mental health content according to their existing knowledge, experiences and social environment. Kapanee et al. (2026) found that adolescents may hold misconceptions about mental health and may avoid professional support because of stigma and fear of negative labelling. Similarly, Yani et al. (2025) identified challenges involving emotional regulation, self-esteem, body image, academic pressure and social media influence among adolescents. These findings suggest that what adolescents encounter online may become part of the information environment through which they understand emotional experiences. However, existing literature has generally examined mental health awareness or social media use broadly rather than focusing specifically on adolescents' responses to mental health-related content. The present study addresses this narrower area.

Social Media and Adolescent Self-Perception

Social media enables adolescents to observe, interpret and respond to the experiences of others in real time. Such interaction may strengthen social support and reduce feelings of isolation, but it may also expose adolescents to idealised or emotionally charged representations that encourage comparison and negative self-evaluation (Naslund et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Merino et al. (2024), for example, found that social media exposure to unrealistic ideals can be associated with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. The extent of social media influence on adolescents depend on the following things; activities done online, quantity of time spent online, their mental health level and life experiences (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2025). However, adolescents' responses to potentially harmful social-media content may be influenced by individual and family-related protective factors. Studies suggest that positive family processes and supportive parenting can mitigate some associations between screen-media use and adolescent mental-health difficulties, while social support has also been associated with higher self-esteem and other positive psychosocial outcomes (Liu et al., 2024; Zhou & Cheng, 2022).

Empirical Review

Anwar (2024) reviewed the impact of social media on adolescent identity formation and mental health and reported that social media plays an important role in identity development and wellbeing while also exposing young people to cyberbullying and discrimination. The study recommended culturally sensitive digital literacy. Its broad focus on social media and adolescent mental health leaves room for research on specific forms of mental health content.

Syarifuddin et al. (2025) examined social media and self-perception and found that digital exposure can affect emotional and cognitive dimensions of self-perception and create tension between virtual and real-life identities. Unlike that qualitative library-based study, the present research uses a quantitative survey and focuses specifically on mental health content among secondary school adolescents.

Merino et al. (2024) reviewed the relationship between social media, body perception and psychological wellbeing and reported links between unrealistic online ideals and body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Their focus on body image demonstrates how particular

categories of online content can shape psychological responses; the present study extends the issue to mental health-related content.

Kapanee et al. (2026) explored adolescents' perceptions of mental health in Karnataka, India, using qualitative focus group discussions. The study found limited knowledge, stigma and misconceptions about mental health and mental healthcare. While the study provides evidence about adolescents' understanding of mental health, the present study focuses on the content adolescents encounter on social media and its relationship with self-perception and emotional wellbeing.

Overall, the reviewed studies establish that social media can affect adolescent identity, self-perception and mental wellbeing, but fewer studies have examined the specific role of mental health-related content in these processes, particularly among Nigerian secondary school students. This provides the empirical basis for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Comparison Theory and Cultivation Theory. These theories explain how adolescents interpret and respond to mental health-related content encountered on social media platforms.

Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger (1954), explains that individuals evaluate their abilities, opinions, and self-worth by comparing themselves with others. These comparisons may be upward, involving people perceived as better, or downward, involving those perceived as less successful. The theory is particularly relevant to adolescents because adolescence is a developmental stage associated with identity formation and the desire for social acceptance. According to Butts (2024), individuals often depend on social and environmental cues to assess their personal value. In the context of social media, adolescents may compare their emotions, experiences, and mental wellbeing with content shared by others online. Such comparisons may lead to positive outcomes like emotional

validation and self-awareness or negative outcomes such as self-doubt, low self-esteem, and emotional distress.

Cultivation Theory, introduced by George Gerbner (1969), argues that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of reality. The theory suggests that repeated exposure to particular messages influences how people understand social experiences and behaviours (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Although originally linked to television, the theory is applicable to social media because digital platforms provide continuous and repetitive exposure to content. In relation to this study, repeated exposure to mental health-related content may shape adolescents' understanding of emotional well being and influence what they perceive as normal psychological experiences.

Together, the two theories provide a suitable framework for explaining how exposure to mental health content on social media influences adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing. While Cultivation Theory explains how repeated exposure shapes adolescents' perception of mental health realities, Social Comparison Theory explains how adolescents evaluate themselves based on those perceived realities.

Methodology

This study adopted a **quantitative cross-sectional survey design**. The population of this study comprised students in public secondary schools in Enugu North Local Government Area of Enugu State. According to the Enugu State Annual School Census Report in 2013/2014, the students' enrolment figure for public secondary schools in Enugu North L.G.A was 18,978 students, comprising 10,948 junior secondary students and 8,030 senior secondary students (Enugu State Ministry of Education, 2014). Due to absence of current official statistics for Enugu North L.G.A, the population was projected to 2026 using a 3% annual growth rate, giving an estimated population of 26,979 students. Using online sample size calculator, a sample size of 379 was determined.

A multistage sampling technique was used. Public secondary schools were first stratified into junior and senior secondary categories. Ten schools were then selected through simple random balloting. The sample was proportionally allocated to the selected schools according to population size, after which respondents were selected through simple random sampling from class registers. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire. The instrument was subjected to pretest and retest procedures, and no disparity was reported between the administrations. All 379 questionnaires distributed were retrieved and used for analysis.

Presentation of Data

A total of 379 questionnaires were distributed and retrieved for analysis.

Table 1. Extent of adolescents' exposure to mental health content on social media

S/N	Item	Never	Rarely	Often	Very Often
1.	Posts where people talk about persistent feeling of sadness or stressed	65 (17.15%)	89 (23.5%)	153 (40.4%)	72 (18.9%)
2.	Posts where people share personal struggles	22 (5.8%)	72 (18.9%)	215 (56.7%)	70 (18.5%)
3.	Posts about how people deal with emotions or tough times	32 (8.4%)	79 (20.8%)	204 (53.8%)	64 (16.8%)
4.	People talking about feeling anxious or overwhelmed	77 (20.3%)	87 (22.9%)	203 (53.5%)	12 (3.2%)
5.	Posts explaining why people feel the way they do	60 (15.8%)	76 (20.1%)	206 (54.4%)	37 (9.7%)

Field Survey 2026

Data from the table 1 above showed that adolescents are highly exposed to mental health-related content on social media. Across all the items measured, the majority of respondents indicated that they “often” encounter posts associated with emotional struggles, stress, anxiety, sadness, and coping strategies. This suggests that social media has become an important environment where mental health discussions are increasingly visible among adolescents.

Table 2. How their exposure to mental health content on social media influences their self-perception

S/N	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	What I see online makes me think more about myself	8 (2.1%)	55 (14.5%)	225 (59.4%)	91 (24.01%)
2.	I feel like I understand myself better seeing posts about people's struggles	33 (8.7%)	39 (10.3%)	220 (58.04%)	87 (22.9%)
3.	I sometimes compare myself to what others share online	36 (9.5%)	53 (13.9%)	237 (62.5%)	53 (13.9%)
4.	Sometimes I feel emotionally connected after seeing content about people's tough times	15 (3.9%)	16 (4.2%)	256 (67.5%)	92 (24.3%)
5.	I feel more aware of my mental health because of what I see online	22 (5.8%)	41 (10.8%)	198 (52.2%)	118 (31.1%)

Field Survey 2026

The findings from Table 2 revealed that exposure to mental health-related content on social media significantly influences adolescents' self-perception. The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements presented, indicating that social media plays an important role in shaping how adolescents think about themselves, understand their emotions, and evaluate their mental well being.

Table 3. Adolescents' emotional responses to mental health content on social media

S/N	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Some posts I see online makes me feel better	9 (2.4%)	48 (12.7%)	239 (63.1%)	83 (21.9%)
2.	Some posts I see online makes me feel worse	22 (5.8%)	39 (10.3%)	214 (56.5%)	104 (27.4%)
3.	I feel more worried after seeing certain posts	31 (8.2%)	49 (12.9%)	215 (56.7%)	84 (22.2%)
4.	I feel less alone when I see others share their struggles	31 (8.2%)	45 (11.8%)	208 (54.9%)	95 (25.1%)
5.	I feel more relaxed after watching helpful content	10 (2.6%)	48 (12.7%)	205 (54.1%)	116 (30.6%)

Field Survey 2026

The items in table 3 above shows that content on social media have both positive and negative effects on adolescents' emotional wellbeing. The findings suggest that adolescents reported both positive and negative emotional responses to mental health content encountered on social media.

Table 4. Adolescents' responses to different types of mental health content

S/N	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Positive messages (e.g. encouragement, advice) makes me feel better	7 (1.8%)	32 (8.4%)	135 (35.6%)	205 (54.1%)
2.	Stories about people going through hard times affect my mood positively	182 (48.02)	99 (26.1%)	76 (20.1%)	22 (5.8%)
3.	Emotional videos help me understand myself better	62 (16.4%)	37 (9.7%)	160 (42.2%)	120 (31.7%)
4.	Content that focuses on problems without solutions make me feel uncomfortable	32 (8.4%)	37 (9.8%)	256 (67.5%)	54 (14.2%)
5.	Content that shares stories of recovery and improvement gives me hope	32 (8.4%)	38 (10.02%)	178 (46.9%)	131 (34.5%)

Field Survey 2026

The responses showed that positive, solution-focused, and recovery-oriented content generally produced more beneficial emotional effects, while negative or problem-focused content without solutions tended to create discomfort and less favorable emotional reactions. This indicates that the psychological impact of social media mental health content depends largely on the nature and presentation of the content itself.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding of this study revealed that adolescents are highly exposed to mental health-related content on social media, including posts about stress, anxiety, sadness, emotional struggles, and coping strategies. The finding aligns with Naslund et al. (2020) and O'Reilly et al. (2018), who observed that social media promotes mental health awareness, emotional

support, and peer engagement among young people.

The second finding revealed that exposure to mental health content significantly influences adolescents' self-perception. Respondents reported increased self-reflection, emotional understanding, and mental health awareness after engaging with such content online. However, many adolescents also compared themselves with others on social media. This is consistent with Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which explains that individuals evaluate themselves partly through comparison with others.

The third finding shows that mental health content on social media has both positive and negative effects on adolescents' emotional wellbeing. Supportive and encouraging content helped some adolescents feel better, less isolated, and emotionally relaxed, supporting the findings of Naslund et al. (2020). In contrast, exposure to negative or distressing content contributed to anxiety, worry, and emotional discomfort, which agrees with Keles et al. (2020).

In the fourth finding, responses differed according to content type. Encouragement, helpful advice and recovery stories were associated with favourable emotional responses, whereas problem-focused content without solutions was associated with discomfort. This is also compatible with Cultivation Theory because repeated exposure to particular forms of mental health narratives may contribute to how adolescents interpret psychological experiences.

Conclusion

This study examined adolescents' exposure to mental health content on social media and its influence on their self-perception and emotional wellbeing. Social media has become an important platform influencing adolescents' emotional experiences and mental health awareness. Therefore, there is a need for responsible social media engagement and proper guidance

to ensure that adolescents benefit positively from mental health content online.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Mental health education and digital literacy should be strengthened among adolescents.
2. Adolescents should be guided on healthy social comparison and self-perception.
3. Content creators and mental health communicators should promote supportive and responsible mental health content.
4. Social media platforms and relevant stakeholders should encourage constructive presentation of mental health issues.

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