



Scrolling and Self-Perception: A Qualitative Study on Social Media and Mental Health in Young Adults

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Abstract

This study looks at how social media affects mental health in young people, with a focus on racial and cultural influences. Two focus groups were held over Zoom with eight college students in the United States, ages 19 to 23. The students were Chinese American and African American, from the Washington, D.C., and Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina areas. They were asked to talk about their thoughts and feelings related to social media. The conversations were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to find common patterns. Findings indicated that students had three big concerns: Comparing themselves to others online, social media being more of a distraction rather than a tool, and feeling tired or stressed from overuse of social media. Notably, racial identity shaped these experiences—African American students described witnessing more online harassment but also feeling empowered to speak up, while Asian American students tended to internalize their discomfort or stay silent. This study shows that social media can sometimes harm mental health and that support should focus on helping teens handle these emotional challenges with attention to cultural differences.

Introduction

Social media has become a central part of life for teenagers and young adults. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat allow users to stay connected, share updates, and express themselves creatively. However, widespread media coverage and public conversations have highlighted growing concerns about the mental health impacts of these apps. Headlines frequently report on “Instagram anxiety,” “TikTok depression,” and the pressures of online comparison, showing that social media can influence how young people feel about themselves, even outside of research studies. Viral trends, influencer culture, and algorithm-driven content can amplify comparisons, encourage perfectionism, and create a sense of constant evaluation. Many teens report feeling pressure to maintain a curated, “perfect” image online, while others experience stress from cyberbullying, exclusion, or exposure to harmful content.

Research supports these concerns. Studies have linked frequent social media use to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among adolescents and young adults (*Twenge et al., 2017; Keles et al., 2020*). Yet most of this research relies on surveys or quantitative data, which may not fully capture the personal experiences and emotional nuances of diverse users. There is also limited work examining how social media affects people from different racial and cultural backgrounds, as most studies focus on White populations. Young adults from minority communities may experience social media differently, depending on online representation, safety in expressing themselves, or reactions to racialized stressors. For example, a 2025 United Kingdom study, *Youth, Race and Social Media*, found that over half of Black and racially minoritized young people encountered racist content online at least once a week, and 42% reported that it harmed their mental health. This shows that social media stress is not only about appearance but can also be tied to identity and racialized experiences.

This study focuses on two main questions: (1) How do teens and young adults perceive the effects of social media on their mental health? and (2) How do these experiences differ across racial backgrounds? To answer these questions, I conducted two focus groups with Asian American and African American college students in the United States. The goal is to understand their emotions, behaviors, and coping strategies around social media, while also exploring how identity shapes these experiences.

Literature Review

Research consistently shows that social media plays an important role in the mental health of young people. *Twenge et al. (2017)* analyzed national survey data from U.S. adolescents. They looked at how much time teens spent on digital media, including social media, and found that those who used social media more often reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower overall happiness compared to teens who spent less time online. This study highlighted the connection between frequent social media use and poorer emotional well-being on a population level.

Keles et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 43 quantitative studies from multiple countries, focusing on social media use and mental health in adolescents and young adults. Their review found consistent associations between social media use and depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Across different ages and cultural contexts, heavier social media use was linked to worse mental health outcomes, suggesting that these patterns are widespread and not limited to a single country or group.

Fardouly et al. (2018) focused specifically on image-based social media platforms. They conducted an experiment with 112 female college students in Australia, exposing them to idealized images of peers online. Participants were randomly assigned to spend 10 minutes browsing either their Facebook.

Chae (2018) conducted a quantitative study with young adults in South Korea to explore how they present themselves on social media. Participants described pressure to curate their profiles carefully, editing photos and posts to maintain a certain image. Many reported that this process caused mental exhaustion and confusion about their identity, showing how social media can shape self-perception and emotional experience.

Przybylski et al. (2013) surveyed young adults in the United Kingdom about the role of “fear of missing out” (FOMO) in social media use. They found that participants who experienced higher levels of FOMO were more likely to check social media compulsively and reported greater emotional dependence on online interactions. This study highlights the ways that social media can create ongoing cycles of engagement and emotional impact.

Race and cultural context also play a role in how social media affects young people. *Nakamura (2015)* examined the experiences of people of color particularly Black, Asian, and Latina women, on digital platforms. She found that these users often face extra emotional labor, such as responding to racist or sexist comments or managing stereotypes. *Tynes et al. (2008)* studied African American adolescents and found that exposure to online racial discrimination was associated with stress and negative mental health outcomes. At the same time, many participants responded with assertiveness or support from their communities. *Lee and Wong (2021)* studied Asian American college students and found that racial discrimination online often led to withdrawal or self-blame, showing that different groups respond differently to online stressors.

Han et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study examining Korean college students and found that both the amount of time spent online and the type of content consumed were important. Participants exposed to appearance-focused posts or negative content reported higher stress and lower self-esteem, while positive or supportive interactions online were linked to better emotional outcomes.

Overall, these studies show that social media can influence mental health in multiple ways: through social comparison, pressure to present a curated self, addictive engagement, and exposure to discrimination. Most studies focus on quantitative patterns, which are valuable for showing trends but do not fully capture how individuals experience social media in daily life. There is also limited research comparing experiences across racial and cultural groups. This shows a need for qualitative, identity-aware research that listens to diverse voices and captures the complexity of social media's impact on mental health.

Theoretical Expectations

Based on previous research, social media is expected to affect mental health in several ways. *Twenge et al. (2017)*, using national survey data of U.S. adolescents, found that those who spent more time on social media reported higher depressive symptoms and lower overall happiness. *Keles et al. (2020)*, in a systematic review of 43 quantitative studies, concluded that frequent social media use was consistently linked to depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in young people. *Fardouly et al. (2018)* conducted an experimental study with female college students and showed that exposure to idealized social media images led to increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood. Together, these studies suggest that comparing oneself to others online can contribute to anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem.

The research also shows that content matters. Seeing racist or discriminatory material online can harm the mental health of marginalized groups (*Tynes et al., 2020; Del Toro et al., 2022*). Minority stress theory (*Meyer, 2003*) suggests that Black and Asian American young adults may feel extra stress from online racism, cultural invisibility, or pressure to fit stereotypes.

Finally, studies suggest that both how much time people spend online and what they see are important. *Keles et al. (2020)*, in their systematic review, found that heavier social media use was strongly associated with negative outcomes like depression and anxiety, especially when paired with passive scrolling. *Han et al. (2023)*, studying Korean college students, showed that the type of content mattered as much as time spent; appearance-focused and comparison-heavy posts were linked to stress and low self-esteem, while supportive or interest-based content was tied to more positive outcomes. Based on this, it is expected that participants who see appearance-focused posts or racially harmful content will report more negative feelings, while positive or supportive interactions online may help reduce stress.

In short, these expectations come directly from the literature: social comparison, type of content, and racialized experiences are likely ways that social media affects mental health. This study will explore these ideas in more depth by hearing directly from Black and Asian American young adults about their experiences.

We expect that young adults who use social media more often, especially platforms focused on photos and videos, may feel more stress, self-consciousness, or negative emotions, which fits with what earlier studies have found.

Race may also change how social media affects mental health. Asian American and African American young adults may face unique challenges online, like seeing few people who

look like them, encountering racial content, or receiving different types of social feedback (Tynes *et al.*, 2008; Chou & Edge, 2012). Because of this, social media might affect mental health in different ways depending on group identity.

Finally, since social media use occurs within real social and cultural contexts, we anticipate that participants will describe a range of experiences, sometimes feeling worse, sometimes finding ways to cope. This highlights the value of qualitative research methods, such as focus groups, which allow researchers to explore the complexities of individuals' lived experiences and perceptions in depth (Valentine *et al.*, 2020).

Methodology

Participants

Eight people took part in this study ($n = 8$), including six females and two males. They were between the ages of 19 and 23 and all were undergraduate students at universities in the United States. Participants were found through a non-random “snowball” sampling method. This means that the first few participants helped connect the researcher to others. This method worked well because the topic can be personal, and it can be hard to find people willing to participate (Naderifar & Ghaljaie, 2017). The first group of students was recruited through a flyer shared on social media, focused on universities in the Washington, D.C., and Research Triangle Park areas of North Carolina, United States—based students were chosen because most of the research on mental health and social media comes from studies in the United States. These locations were chosen because they have relatively large but manageable student populations and include a high proportion of African American college students.

Data Collection

Two focus groups were conducted via Zoom, each lasting approximately one hour. The first group consisted of Chinese American students residing in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The second group included African American students based in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina. Since the Principal investigator for this study is a high school student residing in Tokyo, Japan, and participants are in the United States, Zoom-based focus groups provided the most convenient approach to data collection.

Focus groups were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study because they are particularly well-suited for exploratory research. They create a group social dynamic in which participants can engage in more in-depth conversations. Additionally, focus groups allow researchers to observe visual responses and gather more nuanced details about participants' experiences (Rutledge, Gilliam, & Closson-Pitts, 2023). The research used a semi-structured interview guide to facilitate discussion around key themes, while allowing flexibility for participants to share experiences in their own words.

This method facilitated deeper insights than might be elicited through individual interviews alone, as participants were able to articulate personal experiences while also responding to the experiences of others in real time. The group format also encouraged a conversational tone that aligned with the study's semi-structured and exploratory approach, allowing themes to emerge organically. Additionally, the virtual format facilitated geographic diversity and scheduling flexibility while maintaining a comfortable environment for open



dialogue (Archibald et al., 2019). All focus groups were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure data accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2012). This method allowed for a deep and flexible exploration of participant narratives. The process involved initial familiarization with the transcripts, generating initial codes, and organizing these codes into broader themes. The analysis followed a six-phase process: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated readings of transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes using a combination of open coding and in vivo coding to preserve participants' language, (3) identification and grouping of codes into potential themes, (4) review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence and relevance, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) final write-up of findings.

Themes were refined through iterative review, with attention to both shared and divergent experiences across the two focus groups. This approach allowed for a deeper interpretation of the participants' perspectives, grounded in their cultural and regional contexts. Constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences both within and between the two focus groups, enhancing the depth and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Findings

The findings reveal that participants' experiences with social media are complex and multifaceted. While some aspects of use contributed to stress, anxiety, or comparison, other aspects, such as seeking inspiration, information, or academic support, had positive effects. The following sections summarize these experiences and highlight patterns in how different platforms influenced emotional responses.

Emotional Responses to Social Media Platforms

Three main themes emerged from the focus groups:

1. Comparing Yourself to Others

Many students said they often compare themselves to people they see online. Even though they know that pictures and videos are edited or filtered, they still feel like others have better looks, lives, or success. One African American student said,

"When I was younger, I'd compare myself to people who use Photoshop online. It lowered my self-esteem."

Two Asian American students claimed that,

"Everyone wants to show their perfect lifestyles. I only post when I'm doing an interesting activity. I try not to create anxiety for myself."



“I encounter people fat-shaming on platforms on a daily basis.”

Students talked about feeling worse about their looks, relationships, or success when constantly exposed to idealized content. Asian American students, in particular, mentioned comparing academic or career milestones. However, some students also said that following people who look like them or talk openly about mental health helped them feel less alone. Representation, when positive and authentic, was described as encouraging. One African American participant noted that seeing other people succeed in their particular fields of interest was “motivating.”

2. Feeling Pressure to Act a Certain Way

Several students talked about how they feel like they have to act or look a certain way on social media. They said they spend a lot of time choosing the right pictures, captions, and posts. One African American student said,

“I think it has a very negative impact, you start to compare your life with these fabricated lives posted online.”

This made some students feel like they were hiding their true selves or trying to fit into what was “popular” online.

3. Feeling Tired or Burned Out

Students also talked about feeling mentally tired or drained after using social media. Many said they check apps out of habit, especially when they’re bored or anxious. But instead of feeling better, they often felt worse. 4 of the Asian American students shared,

“When I need to do my homework, the process gets interrupted because of distractions from social media.”

“Watching reels or TikTok shortens my attention span.”

“There’s a lot of activism on social media, and it creates a sense of urgency to make a difference. It stresses me out.”

“I’ve been using social media way too much. That’s why I went on a social media hiatus; it was distracting me from things I needed to get done.”

Most students said they tried to take breaks or delete apps, but it was hard to stay away for long because they didn’t want to miss out. Social media is a main form of communication for many, making it nearly impossible to maintain their social lives.

However, not all screen time felt negative. Several students mentioned that platforms like YouTube and TikTok were helpful for studying or learning about new topics. Educational content, from study tips to finance advice, was praised as being both engaging and practical. Two Asian American students said:

“Social media is a good way to stay on top of the news.”

"I can study with social media. There's so many sources online that watching famous YouTubers can teach better than my professor at times."

While students recognized the emotional toll of scrolling aimlessly, many also found value in using social media intentionally, for inspiration, information, and academic support. This dynamic is captured in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. The model illustrates how patterns of use (intentional vs. passive scrolling), content type (appearance-focused, racialized, informational), and social context (peer interactions, cultural representation) interact to influence emotional experiences. It highlights that social media's impact is shaped not only by the amount of use but also by the meaning and context of engagement, reflecting both risks and coping opportunities as described by participants.

Discussion

While many outside factors affect mental health, this study shows that social media plays a unique emotional role in the lives of young adults, and that racial identity can shape how those effects are experienced and expressed.

The first theme, comparing yourself to others, confirms what past studies have found (Twenge et al., 2017; Keles et al., 2020): even when users know content is curated and filtered, it still triggers negative self-comparison. For Asian American students in this study, comparison often felt tied to quiet expectations, such as beauty standards, academic success, or lifestyle goals, that led to internalized pressure. For African American students, the comparison was more about frustration with unrealistic portrayals of wealth or beauty that didn't reflect real life. These differences suggest that race and cultural values influence what students compare themselves to and how they process those feelings.

The second theme, feeling pressure to act a certain way, revealed that social media is often a performance space, especially for students of color. African American students spoke about feeling more empowered to push back against stereotypes or speak up against harmful content, while Asian American students often described staying quiet or disengaging, even when they disagreed with something. This aligns with Nakamura's (2015) research on how racial identity impacts behavior in online spaces. Some students expressed that even witnessing racism or discrimination online, without directly experiencing it, contributed to their mental exhaustion and sense of being "watched" or judged.

Finally, the third theme, feeling emotionally drained, highlights that social media can be mentally taxing even when it's meant to be relaxing. The emotional labor of staying "caught up" while also managing how you appear to others online created a cycle of stress. Many students used social media to avoid boredom or anxiety, but said it often left them feeling worse. The way burnout was described also differed: Asian American students tended to speak about subtle, quiet feelings of emotional fatigue, while African American students voiced more outward frustration and overstimulation.

These findings suggest that support programs should go beyond simply reducing screen time. Mental health resources should help teens and young adults reflect on how their identities, especially race, affect their experiences online. Programs should focus on helping users become more aware of their emotional patterns, normalize breaks, and create space for culturally sensitive dialogue about digital pressure. Future research could build on these findings by conducting larger, in-depth qualitative studies to capture a wider range of experiences across



different communities. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track how social media use and its mental health effects evolve over time, providing insight into long-term patterns and outcomes.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was small ($n = 8$), consisting of only two focus groups, which limits the generalizability of the results. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, which may have introduced selection bias by favoring individuals within similar social networks and potentially limiting the diversity of viewpoints. The sample also included only African American and Chinese students, which restricts the applicability of the findings to other racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, participants were drawn from only one southern U.S. state and Washington, D.C., limiting geographic contextual diversity.

Another limitation is that both focus groups were conducted via Zoom, which may have influenced the depth and nature of participant interactions compared to in-person discussions, potentially affecting group dynamics and data richness.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of underrepresented student populations in specific sociocultural contexts. The use of semi-structured focus groups allowed for rich, in-depth discussion, and the findings may inform future research and practice aimed at understanding the experiences of marginalized student groups in higher education.

Conclusion

This study looked at how young adults from different racial and cultural backgrounds feel social media affects their mental health. Like past studies, participants talked about the negative effects of social comparison, pressure to look perfect, and the stress of spending too much time online (*Twenge et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2018*). At the same time, many shared that social media can also be helpful, giving them inspiration, support for school, and ways to connect with others. These mixed results show that social media's impact depends on how it is used, which platforms are used, and the context of the user's life.

Using focus groups made it possible to hear details that large surveys often miss, especially about how race and culture shape online experiences. These findings add to the growing idea that we cannot study social media in one broad way—we need to listen to the different voices and situations of young people (*Nesi, 2020*).

Overall, this research shows that social media is not simply good or bad for mental health. Its effects depend on the situation and the way it is used. Future research should include larger and more diverse groups of students and also look more closely at how design choices on apps influence mental health. This can help us better understand how to reduce the harms of social media while keeping its benefits.

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