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Social Media Effects on Well-Being, Identity, and Consumer Behaviour: A Thematic Review

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Abstract

The social media has become an important part of today's communication, impacting on interpersonal communication, identification performance, information sharing and consumer behaviour. This study reviews literature published from 2015 to March 2025 in Scopus-indexed journals. The literature is organized by three thematic sections: psychological wellbeing and mental health outcomes, impression management and identity construction, and social media marketing and consumer behaviour. In all of these domains, the initial feelings of optimism regarding connectivity and expression are followed by more nuanced understandings of the platform specific impacts, context specific moderators and user's vulnerability. Social media is also emerging as a double-edged sword with impacts depending on the ways people passively and actively use social media, as well as the nature of the social media platform, their digital literacy, and the social comparison processes (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2020). The literature shows that social media has aggravated the practice of impression management, by establishing collapsed contexts, constant self-presentation, and algorithmic audiences (Iazzi et al., 2025). Social media has been a key component in marketing research since it has become the main source of information in marketing, a central platform for brand communication, a medium for influencing consumers, and even an ethical issue, regional issue and problem with relying too heavily on engagement metrics (Social media marketing research, 2025; Voorveld et al., 2018). Summing up all these domains, the study suggests a framework of Context-Activity-Platform to account for the differences of social media effects on people, practices, and platforms. The future studies should focus on longitudinal designs, comparison of cultural differences, standardized measures and greater integration within the disciplines (Parry et al., 2021).

Keywords: Social media, Mental health, Impression management, social media marketing, Literature review

1. Introduction

Social media has developed from a simple method of online communication to a part of life. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Telegram and Discord are increasingly influencing the ways people establish relationships, create identities, get information, and connect with brands (Mensah et al., 2025). These platforms have evolved beyond just a place to connect, they are now becoming a space where reputation is built, emotions are shaped and economic value is created.

From the beginning of the social media, the research into the social media has grown tremendously in various fields such as psychology, communication, sociology, marketing, information systems and public health (Donthu et al., 2021; Mensah et al., 2025). Despite this, the existing research is very fragmented and each discipline has different theoretical frameworks and findings (Iazzi et al., 2025). For example, research in psychology tends to focus on measures of well-being, such as self-esteem, loneliness, and cyberbullying, while communication and sociological approaches tend to look at the ways in which identity is constructed, how privacy issues are represented, and how self-presentation is enacted (Verduyn et al., 2020). In contrast, marketing research is more likely to focus on how users engage with the product, brand loyalty, the credibility of influencers, and advertisements effectiveness (Alalwan et al., 2017; Voorveld et al., 2018).

A thematic literature review is an appropriate method for this disciplinary spread. The thematic review does not present research studies in a study-by-study descriptive style, instead it summarizes the available research by highlighting common themes, current controversies, and literature gaps. This allows for a more comprehensive knowledge of the field and areas in need of further research.

The four research questions for this review are: What are the main insights from recent research and empirical studies on the relationship between social media and psychological well-being; How does recent research and empirical studies explain impression management, self-presentation, and identity construction in social media environments; What are the main themes and gaps in the research around social media marketing and consumer behaviour; and What cross-cutting factors provide insight into why social media has different outcomes across individuals, activities, and platforms? To answer these questions, the study suggests a framework of Context – Activity – Platform (CAP), a framework that suggests that outcomes of social media are not simply related to the use of the social media platform, but to the interplay between user context, type of activity, and platform design. This framework can help explain the positive, negative, and/or mixed effects that the same platform might have, depending on the psychology, culture, and socialization of the users, how they engage with the site and the affordances of the platform.

2. Methodology

The study used a thematic literature review design, which involved synthesizing recent studies on social media in the three broad areas of psychological wellbeing and mental health, impression management and identity construction, and social media marketing and consumer

behaviour. The review was based on peer-reviewed journal articles from January 2015 to March 2025 in journal articles that were indexed in Scopus. The keywords used for identifying relevant studies were 'social media and mental health', 'social media and well-being', 'social media and self-presentation', 'social media and impression management', 'social media and identity construction', 'social media and social media marketing', 'social media and consumer behaviour', 'social media and brand engagement' and 'social media and influencer marketing'. Articles that were included met the following criteria: relevant to at least one of the three thematic areas and offered theoretical, empirical, or review-based insights relevant to the study objectives. Studies were eliminated if they were on general use of the Internet, not written in English, not published in English-language journals, and/or not directly related to outcomes of social media. This selected literature was thematized by examining the commonalities of concepts, debates, methodological weaknesses and gaps in the literature. The synthesis resulted in the creation of three main thematic sections and contributed to the proposed framework for understanding differences in social media effects across people, behaviours, and platforms: Context-Activity-Platform.

3. Psychological Well-Being and Mental Health

The initial studies of social media focused mostly on the positive aspects. They indicated that platforms like Facebook might be beneficial for social capital, for maintaining relationships and for opportunities to self-disclose and connect with others (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Liu et al., 2016). Social networking sites allowed people to maintain strong and weak ties, reconnect with inactive relationships, and mitigate perceived social distance (Zhou et al., 2022). So social media was mostly seen as positive, especially among college students and young adults.

But, even in the early research, it became clear that results of social media use depended on social media engagement patterns. Over the years, the researchers started to study from critical perspective. The early 2010's saw an increasing number of studies emerging connecting social media usage to negative psychological impacts, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbances and poor self-esteem (Primack et al., 2017; Twenge & Campbell, 2019). However, subsequent research found the relationship between technology use and adolescent well-being was often moderate, and not always a cause-and-effect relationship, but rather more nuanced (Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

Social comparison is a key factor in negative outcomes. Social media shows people carefully edited and polished versions of others' lives, achievements, looks, and social connections, which can make them feel worse about themselves (Fardouly et al., 2015; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Such representations are frequently "constructed" in a selective fashion, making the comparisons asymmetrical and psychologically challenging. This phenomenon is even stronger when used passively, that is, when the user is not actively engaging with the content (Verduyn et al., 2020). Therefore, social media is not the cause of negative consequences; rather, these are the result of specific experiences, including passively using social media, engaging in repeated comparison, being emotionally vulnerable, and prolonged exposure.

Increasingly, in the literature, social media is conceived as a “double edged sword” (Verduyn et al., 2020). While it helps to connect with others, to express oneself and to gain access to support networks, it can also foster social comparison, exclusion, cyberbullying, and psychological distress (Primack et al., 2017). When marginalized people, youth, or those in remote areas use social media actively to connect with others, they tend to feel better and more supported (Cauberghe et al., 2021). Passive consumption, like just scrolling without interacting, is more likely to lead to negative feelings, especially when users see perfect or angry content. Various theoretical models can account for these dynamics. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) explains how individuals compare themselves to others, and studies of cyberbullying emphasize the ubiquity, visibility, and inescapability of cyberbullying. Another factor is fear of missing out (FoMO), which is the constant awareness of what others are doing, leading to feelings of being left out or concerned about missing out (Baker et al., 2016; Dhir et al., 2018; Bloemen & De Coninck, 2020). Empirical research indicates that FoMO is a mediating factor between social media and reduced well-being.

Simultaneously, a number of protective factors have been found. Digital literacy helps to counteract the negative impacts by providing the insights to critically understand curated content, and to reduce the risk of maladaptive comparisons (Gordon et al., 2021). Self-compassion also helps to counteract negative psychological consequences, helping to decrease self-criticism and emotional reactivity (Gobin et al., 2022; Varaona et al., 2024). Active engagement is not as bad as passively using the same site, but it can still have negative side effects as users may be disappointed when their content gets little social feedback (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Verduyn et al., 2020). In general, the influence of social media is very much related with the usage patterns and individual differences.

Although significant advances have been made, there remain methodological problems in the literature. A lot of studies use self-reported data for social media usage instead of actual usage, which can lead to misrepresentation of actual usage (Parry et al., 2021). Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of most of the studies studied limits the ability to make causal inferences, complicating the interpretation of the direction of the relationships found (Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

4. Impression Management and Identity Construction

This study focusses on the theory of social life as a performance of Goffman and applies it to the world of social media. In the digital world, people may be able to choose and manipulate who they are to others (Yang & Ying, 2021). On social media, people carefully choose how they appear, and their posts stay visible for longer. Two things drive this: wanting to look a certain way -impression motivation and actually building that image with photos, words, and profile info -impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

A key problem with social media is "context collapse"—where many different types of people (friends, family, colleagues, and strangers) all see the same post in one space. This makes it harder to manage one's identity because one might want to present oneself differently to each

group. Early research focused on how people move their offline identities online, but newer research now looks at credibility and personal branding.(Iazzi et al., 2025).

The most prominent conflicts that are obvious in this literature include authenticity and strategic self-presentation. Users may want to be genuine, but the rewards of the platform, his or her aesthetic sensibilities and the emphasis on success are not always on their side. This can also promote the development of an idealized self-image, which might not be the same as the actual experience, and, as a consequence, psychological discomfort or a decrease in self-esteem (Gil-Or et al., 2015). Self-presentation, on the other hand, does not have to be taken as a negative term as deceptive, but rather as an opportunity for self-expression, identity exploration and experimentation. Authenticity in digital contexts then has to be seen as dynamic and contextual rather. So, the understanding of authenticity in digital environments should be dynamic and contextual.

In addition to managing others' impression, managing their own impression is another factor of organizational communication. The companies are using social media as a tool to establish trust, convey their values, engage stakeholders and address crisis situations (Sánchez-Arrieta et al., 2025). Impression management is now a tactic and there are growing dangers with regard to perceived inconsistencies. The power of social media can make any mismatches between what is communicated and what actually happens to ignite a public backlash, increasing the reputational vulnerability (Iazzi et al., 2025; Keskin et al., 2024).

Other factors that contribute to variations in impression management are gender and platform affordances. Empirical studies have shown that there is a difference between male and female self-presentation; female self-presentation relates more to relational and appearance information, while male self-presentation relates more to achievement and independence (Sczesny et al., 2018). Moreover, platform design plays a role in regard to identity practices: Facebook offers users the opportunity of a detailed and stable self-presentation, Instagram a visual mode of presentation and comparison, TikTok a mode of visibility based on algorithms, and Snapchat a more spontaneous and less curation-based mode of interaction (Bayer et al., 2016; Hogan, 2010; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The differences shown indicate that impression management may vary from platform to platform based on platform-specific features.

Although these developments have been made, there are still some areas which have not been addressed in the literature. Most of the studies conducted are based on western samples and results may not be applicable to other cultures as norms of self-presentation may differ significantly (White et al., 2018; Deffner et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is little research that has centred on changes and growth of identity construction over time and platform (Iazzi et al., 2025). As more and more individuals have multiple personal, professional and public identities, there is a need for further research to gain a better understanding of these multiple and complex processes.

5. Social Media Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Social media marketing is one of the most developed and maturing research fields in social media. It has now expanded from early research on word-of-mouth communication and brand

communities to on-going research on influencer marketing, AI-driven personalisation, virtual goods and augmented reality experiences (Alalwan et al., 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021). The shift reflects the current role social media plays in today's brand communication and consumer engagement strategies. It is obvious that the literature is multi-disciplinary and contains consumer psychology, information systems, and business strategy.

Of course, this is a positive indicator of growth but the downside to that is that it is still mostly on engagement numbers, and not necessarily on consumer behaviour results; likes, shares and comments are used as short-term engagement metrics. Engagement can be a good sign of initial attention but it is not necessarily a sign of purchase, trust or loyalty (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Dwivedi et al., 2021). This is an important gap in research to date, as current research has demonstrated that users visit some sites without regard to the value or belief they bring, or even purchasing these sites.

Platform-specificity is a relevant topic in the literature. Media platforms capture various types of attention and reactions of their users, which require different marketing strategies; a strategy to fit the media platform affordance and not to be used as a copy-paste (Voorveld et al., 2018; Alalwan et al., 2017). Depending on the type of post, it may be best to use Instagram for more emotional or brand-related content, and something like Twitter or LinkedIn for informational or conversational posts. Tik Tok is a big change in this picture since it values the content being discovered and performed more than the number of followers (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). It's not just in terms of audience management anymore, but rather in terms of creating content according to the logic of algorithmic visibility of the platform.

The literature also shows a rise in the focus on new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), blockchain and big data analytics (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Often the tools are introduced as methods to increase targeting accuracy, personalisation and transparency. AI can enhance recommendation algorithms and content delivery, and AR can create more immersive advertising experiences. Blockchain is proposed to be used to establish influencers' relationship and engagement metrics. There is, however, more of this kind of literature that is more theoretical. A lot of enthusiasm, not a lot of good empirical evidence, and many studies that don't actually test the effect of these technologies on building customer loyalty or ROI in the long-term.

Ethical issues also are key concerns in the literature. But there are issues that arise when it comes to influencer marketing that must be dealt with, which include disclosure and authenticity, and hidden marketing, as well as fake followers and purchased engagement (De Veirman et al., 2017). The same level of concern lies with privacy, with platforms collecting a vast amount of data from users (Taddeo & Floridi, 2018). A second concern is the marketing of vulnerable populations (young children and adolescents, individuals suffering from mental health and behavioral issues, etc)(De Veirman et al., 2019). This is most often done through increased consumption, over-consumption, impulsivity or financial burden, but that isn't always the case when measuring social media marketing.

Finally, there is a great degree of regionalization of the literature. The majority of the research studies have been carried out in North America and Western Europe while there is less research study in the emerging markets (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Countries like India, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Vietnam, on the other hand, could have different social media usage trends due to varying regulations, infrastructure, and preferences for social media platforms (Alalwan et al., 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Further comparative studies will be required to gain insight into these contextual differences and how they affect marketing practice.

6. Cross-Cutting Themes

Several themes run across all three areas. The most important is conditionality. Social media is not always good or bad; its effects depend on who uses it, how they use it, and what platform they are on (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2020). In mental health, passive scrolling and comparison are more likely to cause harm than active connection. In identity research, the outcome depends on audience structure and performance pressure. In marketing, success depends on whether the content fits the platform.

Platform specificity is another major theme. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X are not the same kind of space, so it is a mistake to treat “social media” as one uniform category (Bayer et al., 2016). Visibility, permanence, audience structure, and algorithmic curation all shape behaviour and outcomes.

Algorithmic mediation is now central as well. Users are not only interacting with people; they are also interacting with systems that decide what content becomes visible and what does not. That means social media outcomes are shaped by hidden technical processes as much as by social ones.

The literature still has measurement and diversity problems. Many studies rely on self-report, which can be inaccurate (Parry et al., 2021). Cross-sectional research is still common even though it cannot establish causality (Pérez-Guerrero et al., 2024). In addition, many samples are Western, urban, and relatively privileged, which limits generalizability. There is a need for additional rigorous studies with longitudinal designs and diverse samples.

7. Integrated Framework: Context-Activity-Platform

The literature review serves as a basis for the creation of a framework called Context-Activity-Platform (CAP) for explaining differences in the effects of social media among users and in different contexts. The framework assumes that the outcomes are a result of the interaction between three core dimensions: user context, type of activity, and platform design. This is based on the prior works on social media models which combine the theoretical concepts, empirical measures, and platform-specific characteristics in an integrated model (Ngai et al., 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The Context dimension includes situational and background factors of the user such as mental health background, social support systems, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy. The Activity dimension is the behaviours carried out within the platform, e.g. passive browsing, direct messaging, content posting, information seeking. Technical and design aspects of the Platform, including visibility settings, algorithmic curation, ephemerality and content permanence.

The importance of the CAP framework lies in the fact that it can explain how the same platform can yield vastly different results for different individuals. For example, a passive user who has low self-esteem might feel more social comparison in a platform that is more visual and might feel more psychologically unsatisfied. However, an active user with robust offline support who uses social media mostly for private communication might find an increase in his sense of connection and belonging. So the framework more effectively captures the conditions of social media effects than single factor explanations.

The CAP framework also enhances the review by providing a more operational and testable analysis. The framework does not seek to capture the use of social media as a single construct; rather it invites future research to explore specific profiles of context, activity, and platform features. For example, investigators could look at the effects of passive browsing on the well-being of those with high and low digital literacy, or the effects of visual platforms compared with text-based or professional platforms. Likewise, marketers can analyse the extent to which consumers are engaged by not just the message itself but the algorithmic exposure, feedback and the audience of the platform. As a result, the CAP framework provides a more nuanced description of social media impacts and serves as a useful foundation for empirical research, social media policies, and interventions at the platform level in the future.

The CAP framework is consistent with and builds on the existing theoretical frameworks. It builds on the activity type as a key explanatory variable of the extends uses and gratifications theory. It integrates the concept of platform design with the explanatory model as derived from affordance theory. Besides, it is aligned with the concept of person-environment interaction, which views outcomes as a product of interaction between the user and his computer environment.

8. Implications

The major demand of future research is improvement of methods. Avoid using cross-sectional self-report measures, and where possible use a longitudinal design, ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and objective usage metrics instead. Research should also go beyond a "social media" model, and give greater weight to the difference between platforms. The sampling strategies need to be more varied, especially if they include populations other than Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations with a bias toward young adults. The CAP framework provides a framework for incorporating these methodological developments.

The important thing to take away for practitioners is that having a platform-specific strategy is more important than being present in several platforms. The key for marketers is to tailor content to suit every platform rather than just posting the same content on multiple platforms. Reducing screen time is not the only thing educators and parents should be focused on; digital literacy and self-compassion training are also important. Authenticity is not just an ethical obligation, it's a strategic one as well: When there is a disconnect between a brand image and its actions, trust can be quickly lost.

The literature suggests that the design of platforms is not neutral. Elements like algorithmic amplification, promoted views, and ongoing feedback mechanisms are a product of design, not necessity, and could have detrimental effects on user well-being. Meanwhile, social media offers important resources for marginalized people. For this reason, policy interventions should seek to minimise the harm but not limit access to essential support networks. Disclosure policies, data privacy and protection for children and adolescents should be taken into account in the regulatory frameworks for influencers.

9. Conclusion

This literature review shows that the research on social media has become more widespread, specialized, and situational in its explanations. In all areas of well-being, identity construction, and marketing, the research shows that social media is not always harmful nor is it always beneficial. Instead, the impact depends on how users engage with the platform, their individual identities, and the social setting of their interactions (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

In the field of mental health, passive use, social comparison, cyberbullying and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) are all linked to negative outcomes, while active social connection and digital literacy are linked to positive outcomes (Kowalski et al., 2014; Verduyn et al., 2020). Social media heightens the extent of impression management processes in identity research, as it diminishes the barriers of the audience and adds to the pressure of impression management. Of the strategies that are considered central in marketing research, many studies continue to focus disproportionately on engagement metrics rather than measures of actual consumer behaviour, while marketing strategies specifically suited to each platform and the credibility of each of the influencers themselves is also identified as a central consideration (De Veirman et al., 2017; Voorveld et al., 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The main constraints include cross-sectional study design, inconsistent measurement methods, a lack of attention to platform specificity, and the disciplinary fragmentation (Ngai et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). The Longitudinal and experimental studies, cross-cultural studies, platform specific analyses, and further research into algorithmic mechanisms should be emphasized in future studies. The CAP framework provides a potential way of structuring priorities and progressing the science to greater integrated understanding.

The research and the collection of data must also evolve in keeping with the changes in the social media platforms in terms of their functionality and impact. The new “conditional” view that has come to the surface is a significant step forward but also points to significant uncertainties. Future research will be most effective if it views context, activity and platform in an integrated, coordinated way as a single problem, rather than as separate ones.

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