Naveen Shodh Sansar (An International Refereed / Peer Review Multidisciplinary Research Journal)
RNI No.- MPHIN/2013/60638, ISSN 2320-8767, E- ISSN 2394-3793, Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF)- 8.054,
January to March 2026, E-Journal, Vol. I, Issue LIII (53), ISO 9001:2015 - E2024049304 (QMS)

# Social Media Ethics: Investigating the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and the Ethics and Integrity of Data Collection

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**Abstract** - Social media platforms have become integral to modern life, shaping how individuals communicate, form relationships, and access information. While these technologies offer substantial benefits—including enhanced connectivity, social support, and informational exchange—numerous studies link social media use with negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, addiction, and emotional distress. Simultaneously, ethical concerns arise surrounding how researchers collect, analyze, and interpret social media data, particularly regarding privacy and informed consent. This paper examines the dual dimensions of social media's impact on mental health and the ethical considerations pivotal to responsible research and data use. The discussion synthesizes empirical findings, highlights ethical challenges in data collection and algorithmic inference, and proposes best practices to uphold integrity and minimize harm.

**Introduction -** Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit collectively host billions of users worldwide. These platforms have transformed social interaction, health communication, and digital culture. Nevertheless, the psychological effects of frequent social media engagement have drawn growing academic and public concern.

Research shows that social media use has complex and often contradictory effects on mental health. It can foster social support and connection while also exacerbating stress, self-comparison, and compulsive behaviours. Concurrently, the **ethics of social media research**—specifically relating to data collection, privacy, consent, and algorithmic interpretation—remains a contentious and evolving field.

This paper seeks to:

1. **Explore the impacts of social media on mental health** (positive and negative).
2. **Examine ethical issues in social media data collection and research integrity**.
3. **Suggest ethical frameworks and guidelines** to support responsible research and platform governance.

**Literature Review**

**Impact of Social Media on Mental Health**

**Positive Effects:** Social media can strengthen social connections, especially among geographically distant family and friends, while facilitating peer support and community building. A systematic review notes that social platforms may enhance *health literacy and self-management*, enabling individuals with chronic conditions or mental health challenges to share experiences and support one another. Qualitative research with university students highlights that social media can decrease anxiety through positive experiences, escapism, and social connectivity.

**Negative Effects:** A growing body of evidence suggests that excessive social media use can correlate with poor mental health. Cross-sectional studies indicate associations between high social media engagement and increased stress, anxiety, depression, social comparison, procrastination, and fear of missing out (FOMO).

Recent longitudinal research tracking adolescents reveals that *addictive patterns of screen use*—including social media—predict increases in suicidal ideation and emotional difficulties, emphasizing compulsive but not mere screen time as critical.

Media investigations further reveal that algorithmic recommendation systems can drive users into "rabbit holes" of mental health content, which may mislead or reinforce unhealthy perceptions.

**Ethical Issues in Social Media Data Collection**

**Privacy and Informed Consent:** Social media research often relies on user-generated data that was not collected for research purposes. Challenges persist in obtaining *informed consent*, especially when researchers mine publicly available posts without direct user permission. Studies show that privacy concerns and clear consent

mechanisms remain insufficiently addressed in many research designs.

**Algorithmic Bias and Psychological Profiling:** AI-driven psychometric inference using social media behaviour raises ethical questions around transparency and bias. Without clear consent or algorithmic transparency, users may be profiled in ways that influence access to services or stigmatize individuals.

**Reporting and Ethical Oversight:** Scoping reviews of social media research show that many studies fail to report ethical approvals and consent processes adequately. Only a minority include comprehensive discussions of ethical considerations in publications.

**Methodology (Hypothetical / Suggested Framework):** To fully investigate how social media impacts mental health and what ethical issues arise in data collection:

**Research Design:** A mixed-methods approach can be applied, combining quantitative surveys to assess mental health outcomes and qualitative interviews to gather subjective experiences. Additionally, ethical analysis can be conducted by systematically assessing consent processes and privacy practices in social media research.

**Data Collection:**

1. **Survey Instruments:**Validated measures such as the *Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)* for depression and the *General Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7)* scale.
2. **Social Media Metrics:** Self-reported use patterns (time per day, platform type), plus optional usage logs.
3. **Ethics Toolkit:**A checklist to evaluate consent, data minimization, anonymization, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight.

**Participants:** Participants would include adolescents, university students, and adult social media users sampled across age, gender, and socioeconomic status to ensure diversity.

**Results and Discussion**

**Effects on Mental Health:** The hypothetical results could reveal:

| Variable | Positive Association | Negative Association |
|---|---|---|
| Social Support | Increased sense of belonging | – |
| Emotional Expression | Outlet for sharing feelings | – |
| Self-esteem | – | Lower self-esteem via comparison |
| Anxiety | – | Higher anxiety levels |
| Depression | – | Increased depressive symptoms |
| Compulsive Use | – | Greater risk of addictive behaviour |

*Table 1: Summary of Associations Between Social Media Use and Mental Health Outcomes.*

These trends align with existing literature demonstrating dual effects of social media: *social connection vs. psychological distress*.

**Ethical Analysis of Data Practices**

**Consent and Transparency:** A significant number of studies utilizing social media data did not secure explicit informed consent from users. This raises questions of autonomy and respect for persons, underscoring the need for transparent consent frameworks.

**Privacy Risks:** Public data is often treated as ethically fair game, but many users misunderstand platform privacy settings, leading to inadvertent data exposure. Researchers must balance data utility with privacy rights.

**Algorithmic Bias:** Machine learning models trained predominantly on English language data risk excluding insights from non-English speaking populations, limiting equity and potentially perpetuating bias.

**Ethical Frameworks and Best Practices:** To ensure research integrity and ethical responsibility:

**Enhanced Informed Consent Processes:** Researchers should use *tiered consent* and clear communication outlining how data will be used, protected, and shared. User education and opt-in mechanisms must be prioritized over implicit consent assumptions.

**Privacy Safeguards:** Data anonymization, minimal data collection policies, and secure storage techniques should be standard. Compliance with regulations like the **GDPR and CCPA** offers structural protections, but researchers must implement them in practice and adapt to emerging local laws.

**Ethical Review and Reporting:** Academic publications should consistently report on ethical approvals, consent processes, and data security measures. Institutional Review Boards must consider unique challenges in digital research environments.

**Algorithmic Transparency:** Developers and researchers must disclose how algorithms infer psychological states from online behaviour and address bias through diverse datasets and fairness audits.

**Conclusion:** Social media's impact on mental health is complex and multifaceted, with both supportive and harmful potential. While it can foster community and reduce isolation, it also presents risks related to anxiety, self-comparison, addiction, and misinformation. Concurrently, the ethics and integrity of data collection pose significant challenges—particularly regarding privacy, consent, and algorithmic transparency.

Future research should emphasize ethical research design, prioritize user rights, and ensure that the benefits of social media research do not come at the expense of individual wellbeing or autonomy. By integrating robust ethical frameworks and interdisciplinary oversight, social media can be studied and utilized in ways that respect human dignity while advancing scientific understanding.

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