

Social Media Use And Psychological Well-Being In Children And Adolescents: A Review Of Mental Health Outcomes And Socialisation Patterns

Emily Tjong

Young Innovators Research Program
Harvard College Project For Asian And International Relations
In Collaboration With Learn With Leaders

Abstract:

This paper examines the psychological effects on children who view social media influencers as role models and those who do not. The study explores the effects of influencer exposure on social comparison, unrealistic lifestyle expectations, and pressure to replicate idealised routines, and how these may influence children's self-esteem and mental health. However, children who do not associate with influencers may avoid competitive pressures and possibly lose chances to benefit from online social communication, diverse peer support, and outlets for self-expression that may reduce stress.

This study employs secondary research methods, analysing nationally representative survey data alongside a systematic scoping review to examine three psychological outcome categories: social comparison, lifestyle imitation, and effects on self-esteem. The study demonstrates how influencer culture can affect both mental health and behavioural development in young people.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Child Psychological Development, Social Comparison, Self-Esteem, Mental Health, Influencer Exposure.

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I. Introduction

The research investigates how children who see social media influencers as their role models display different psychological patterns from children who do not see these influencers as their role models. The developmental period from 9 to 18 years exposes children to influencer content, leading them to make social comparisons (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023), build unrealistic lifestyle expectations, and experience pressure to achieve idealized benchmarks, which may harm their self-esteem and identity development. Children who do not view influencers as role models experience lower comparison-based pressure than their peers (De Almeida et al., 2025), but they lack online peer support and self-expression opportunities.

Research Question: What are the psychological effects of children/teenagers viewing influencers as role models on social media compared to children who do not?

Hypothesis: This study hypothesizes that when children/teenagers view social media influencers as role models, they may experience psychological effects such as increased pressure to mimic the idealized "perfect" lifestyle, leading to unrealistic self-standards.

II. Literature Review

A growing body of research has examined the psychological effects of social media use on children and adolescents' mental health and development. Broadly, studies indicate that social media exposure is associated with both positive and negative outcomes, including changes in self-esteem, sleep patterns, productivity, and overall well-being (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). In particular, research highlights that constant comparison with others online can contribute to increased anxiety and reduced self-worth, especially during adolescence when identity formation is still developing.

Within this extensive context, research on social media influencers suggests that influencer content may intensify these effects due to its highly idealized and curated nature. Studies indicate that exposure to influencers can lead to unrealistic lifestyle expectations and increased pressure to achieve perceived "flawless" beauty standards, which would negatively affect self-esteem and mental health (Liu et al., 2024). However, some research also suggests that social media can provide benefits such as social connection, peer support, and

opportunities for self-expression, indicating that its impact is not entirely negative and may vary depending on how individuals engage with content (Faverio et al., 2025).

Supporting these findings, recent data from the Pew Research Center (Faverio et al., 2025) demonstrates that many teenagers believe social media negatively affects sleep and productivity; however, some reports display the positive effects on friendship and social connections. Additional research from MDPI (Liu et al., 2024) suggests that children's behaviours are influenced by multiple social and personal factors such as age, gender, parental influence, and social support. These findings indicate that psychological outcomes linked to social media and influencer exposure are not shaped solely by online content, but are also influenced by a child's broader social and developmental environment.

Furthermore, studies suggest that children who view influencers as role models experience a greater psychological pressure to initiate an idealised lifestyle, which results in increased anxiety, lower self-esteem, and unhealthy comparison behaviours. In contrast, children who do not view influencers as role models may experience less comparison-based pressure and reduced exposure to unrealistic standards. However, they may have low access to social connections and the supporting network that social media provides.

Despite these findings, most existing research focuses on general social media use rather than directly comparing children who view influencers as role models with those who do not. There is limited research exploring how influencer admiration specifically influences psychological outcomes such as social comparison, self-esteem, and behavioural development. This represents a significant gap in the literature, as influencer culture is playing an increasingly important role in shaping children's perceptions of identity and success. Therefore, this study builds on existing research by examining the psychological effects of viewing influencers as role models compared to not viewing them in this way.

III. Methodology

This study employed a secondary research design, analysing published quantitative survey data and peer-reviewed research to examine the psychological effects of influencer exposure on children and adolescents. A secondary approach was selected because primary research involving minors requires ethical approval, parental consent, and access to school or clinical populations, none of which were available within the scope of this study. Substantial published survey data already exists, providing an adequate basis for analysis.

Sources were identified through Google Scholar, PubMed, and institutional research repositories using combinations of the search terms social media influencers, adolescent mental health, social comparison, child development, and influencer marketing children. Sources were included if they were published between 2023 and 2025, reported on children or adolescents aged approximately 9 to 18, and addressed psychological, behavioural, or developmental outcomes associated with social media or influencer exposure. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and nationally representative survey data from established research organisations.

Two datasets were selected for detailed analysis. The first is nationally representative survey data from the Pew Research Center (Faverio et al., 2025), reporting US teenagers' own assessments of how social media affects their sleep, productivity, mental health, self-esteem, and friendships. The second is a systematic scoping review published in Healthcare (Liu et al., 2024), which identifies and quantifies the relative influence of demographic and social factors that moderate social media's effects on children's mental health.

These datasets were analysed descriptively and then interpreted thematically against three psychological outcome categories drawn from the literature: social comparison, lifestyle imitation, and effects on self-esteem. This approach allows quantitative survey findings to be situated within a developmental psychological framework.

IV. Results

An important scope qualification must be stated at the outset. The available published datasets report on children's social media use and its psychological effects in general terms; they do not disaggregate respondents according to whether they view influencers as role models. No nationally representative dataset currently makes this specific comparison. Consequently, the analysis below examines the psychological effects of social media and influencer exposure, and the demographic and social factors that moderate those effects, in order to establish what mechanisms would plausibly differentiate the two groups. The comparative dimension of the research question is therefore addressed inferentially rather than through direct measurement, and this absence is itself identified as a significant gap in the existing literature.

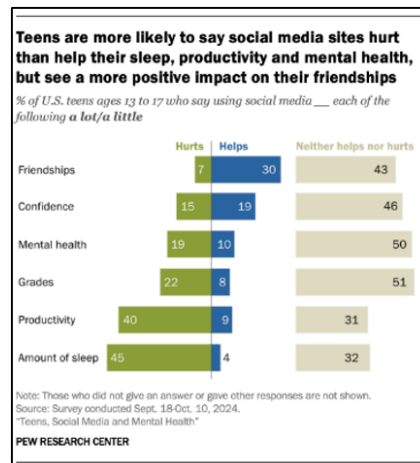


Figure 1: Teens are more likely to say social media sites hurt than help their sleep, productivity, and mental health. Source: Pew Research Center (Faverio et al., 2025)

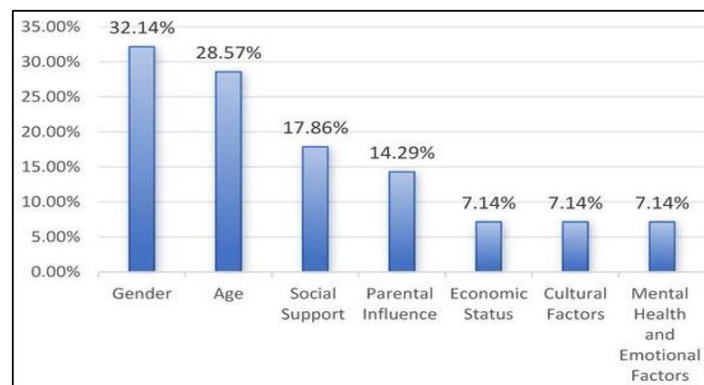


Figure 2: Percentages of factors/influencers
Source: MDPI (Liu et al., 2024).

Figure 1 shows the extent to which teenagers believe social media affects their personal relationships, self-esteem, psychological well-being, academic performance, productivity, and sleep. The Pew Research Center found that more teenagers reported negative than positive effects on sleep and productivity. The data also indicate that social media helps some teenagers maintain friendships, while a substantial proportion report that it harms their overall well-being.

Figure 2 indicates that multiple factors shape children's psychological and behavioural development, including gender, developmental age, social support, parental influence, economic circumstances, cultural background, and mental and emotional health. Gender (32.14%) and developmental age (28.57%) showed the strongest influence, followed by social support (17.86%) and parental influence (14.29%) (Liu et al., 2024). The study results depicted that both gender and age presented the strongest impact on results, while social support and parental guidance followed them in terms of effect size (Liu et al., 2024). The research findings demonstrate that various social and individual elements work together to shape how children grow in their psychological behaviour.

V. Discussion

The findings indicate that adolescents aged approximately 13 to 17 report both positive and negative effects from social media exposure, with the balance differing markedly by outcome. Friendship is the clearest positive case. As Figure 1 shows, a substantially higher proportion of teenagers report that social media helps rather than harms their friendships, with only a small minority reporting harm and a large proportion reporting no effect either way. The Pew Research Center notes that friendships were the only dimension of teenage life surveyed in which more teenagers reported benefit than harm (Faverio et al., 2025). A plausible mechanism is that social media allows adolescents to maintain contact and share creative output with existing peers, reinforcing rather than replacing offline relationships. This finding is important because it establishes that the psychological effects of social media are not uniformly negative, and that any account of influencer exposure must explain why some forms of online engagement appear protective while others appear harmful.

Sleep and productivity present the opposite pattern. As Figure 1 shows, approximately 45% of teenagers report that social media harms the amount of sleep they get, compared with around 4% who report a benefit and

32% who report no effect. The pattern for productivity is similar, with roughly 40% reporting harm against 9% reporting benefit (Faverio et al., 2025). These figures indicate that close to half of adolescents surveyed identify social media as actively detrimental to two functions central to both physical health and academic performance.

One mechanism frequently proposed to explain this pattern is doomscrolling, defined as the compulsive and prolonged consumption of negative or distressing online content despite its adverse emotional effects. Because platform feeds deliver content continuously and without a natural endpoint, adolescents may find it difficult to disengage voluntarily, particularly at night. Influencer content may compound this effect through a distinct mechanism: because such content is commercially motivated and typically presents an idealised lifestyle, prolonged exposure may generate consumption pressure and dissatisfaction alongside the direct effects of extended screen time. Sleep restriction of this kind has established downstream consequences for concentration, mood regulation, and academic functioning, which may partly explain why reported harms to productivity and mental health cluster together in the survey data.

When examining the psychological risks associated with children/teenagers adapting to social media influencers as role models, they are heavily mediated by internal demographic factors, specifically gender and age (Liu et al., 2024). This can be portrayed in Figure 2, as the data displays that gender is 32.14% and the developmental age is 28.57%. This represents the most significant variables that determine the child's vulnerability to online content when using social media. During the crucial developmental windows, younger adolescents frequently struggle to differentiate between an influencer's highly curated, commercialized persona and reality. The lack of cognitive maturity leaves them highly susceptible to identity diffusion. Furthermore, gender dynamics play a massive role in internalizing these negative effects. This can be when young girls at the age of 10-17 years tend to disproportionately engage in social comparison, which leads to an elevated rate of body dissatisfaction and physical/mental anxiety when trying to emulate the idealized or the perfect digital figure (Liu et al., 2024).

Consequently, the potentially positive psychological outcomes and emotional resilience of children navigating influencer culture are deeply reliant on external support systems. In Figure 2, the bar graph illustrates that social support is 17.86% and parental influence at 14.29% act as a vital structural buffer against cyberbullying. When parents actively engage in the critical media-literacy discussion, they help deconstruct the "curated illusion" of social media, transforming passive consumption into opportunities for co-created learning and independent agency (Liu et al., 2024). In addition, the resilient real-world social support network helps reinforce the children's intrinsic (essential) self-worth. By slowly grounding a minor's identity in tangible, offline relationships, these crucial factors help protect against toxic digital comparison and empower children/teenagers to safely watch positive influencer content for prosocial motivation and civic awareness (Liu et al., 2024). Ultimately, this figure demonstrates that the psychological impact of an influencer role model is not uniform, but rather a dynamic interaction between a child's individual demographic vulnerabilities and the strength of their offline protective network.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Most significantly, no available dataset directly compares children who view influencers as role models with those who do not. The comparison central to this study's research question is therefore inferred rather than measured, which limits the strength of any causal claim about influencer admiration specifically. Second, the Pew Research Center data are self-reported. Adolescents' own assessments of social media's effects may differ from objectively measured outcomes and are subject to recall bias. Third, the Pew data are drawn from a US sample, so findings may not generalise to adolescents in other cultural or regulatory contexts. Finally, the data are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Associations between social media exposure and psychological outcomes cannot establish causal direction, as adolescents already experiencing low mood or poor sleep may be more likely to engage heavily with social media.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined the psychological effects of children and adolescents viewing social media influencers as role models. The findings indicate that social media exposure produces markedly different effects across different domains of adolescent life: while a majority of teenagers report that social media benefits their friendships, close to half report that it harms their sleep and productivity, and a substantial proportion report negative effects on mental health and self-esteem.

The evidence provides partial support for the study's hypothesis. Influencer content is characterised by curated and idealised presentation, and the literature indicates that exposure to such content is associated with social comparison, unrealistic lifestyle expectations, and reduced self-esteem, particularly among younger adolescents and girls. However, the analysis also demonstrates that these effects are not uniform. Demographic factors, notably age and gender, together with social support and parental involvement, substantially moderate

psychological outcomes, indicating that vulnerability to influencer culture depends heavily on a child's wider developmental and social environment.

Two implications follow. First, interventions should target media literacy rather than screen time alone, since the capacity to recognise influencer content as commercially motivated and curated appears to be protective. Second, because parental involvement and offline social support emerged as meaningful buffers, strategies aimed at strengthening those relationships may be more effective than restricting access.

Future research should directly compare children who identify influencers as role models with those who do not, using validated measures of self-esteem and social comparison. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable in establishing whether influencer admiration precedes or follows changes in psychological well-being.

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