

The Role of Social Support in the Relationship between Problematic Social Media Use and Psychological Well-Being in Young People: A Systematic Review

Peran Dukungan Sosial dalam Hubungan antara *Problematic Social Media Use* dan Kesejahteraan Psikologis pada Generasi Muda: Sebuah Kajian Sistematis

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Abstract:

The high prevalence of social media usage in young people go hand in hand with various problems caused, one of which is the problematic social media use (PSMU). This study aims to explore the role of social support in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being in young people. The method used is systematic literature review using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines by tracing previous studies related to the research topic. Article searches were conducted through the databases of Pubmed, Sciencedirect, Taylor & Francis, and PsycNet databases with attention to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The results show that social support has a dual role as a mediator as well as a moderator in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. PSMU was found to cause emotional impacts, including depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, as well as social impacts, including social isolation, and loneliness. These findings highlight the need for interventions that strengthen social support and for further research involving young people in Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has transformed the ways individuals interact, obtain information, and build relationships. These changes are particularly evident among young people consisting of adolescents and emerging adults, who are in a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, heightened needs for social connectedness, and significant academic and emotional transitions (Santrock, 2011). The use of social media has become integral part of young people's daily lives. This is reflected in a study by Alkatiri & Aprianty (2024), which reported that 87% of emerging adults use social media with moderate to high intensity. In addition, Thursina (2023) found that 80% of adolescents access social media daily to share their everyday activities. However, at the same time, young people are also represented as the most vulnerable group to problematic social media use (PSMU). This is consistent with findings by Idriansari & Suhada (2025), which showed that 90.9% of adolescents scored within the alert level of social media use, indicating a substantial risk of social media addiction.

Problematic social media use refers to excessive and uncontrolled use of social media that results in negative consequences for users' functioning and well-being (Arness & Ollis, 2023). Various researches have demonstrated that PSMU is closely associated with the psychological well-being of adolescents and emerging adults. Studies indicate that PSMU is linked with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Gong et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Lopes et al., 2022; Shensa et al., 2017; Tsilosani et al., 2023), as well as lower levels of self-esteem (Le Blanc-Brillon et al., 2025; Subiyakto et al., 2024). Several psychological mechanisms may explain these relationships, including fear of missing out (FoMO) (Gao et al., 2023), social comparison (Le Blanc-Brillon et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2023), and factors such as social support, self-esteem, and cyberbullying (Zhang et al., 2023).

These findings underscore the significant relevance of PSMU on the psychological well-being of young people.

Social support is believed to be one of the protective factors that contribute to the psychological well-being of adolescents and emerging adults (Akbari et al., 2023). Social support is a multidimensional concept referring to the belief that individuals are valued, cared for, and loved by others within their social networks (Ruiz et al., 2013). Support from peers, family, and academic environment can help individuals cope with stress, both general stress (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015) or academic stress (Permata & Laili, 2025), as well as depression (Grey et al., 2020) and social anxiety (Saputri et al., 2025). However, social media use has been found to reduce individuals' access to or perception of social support from their surroundings (Blahošová et al., 2025). Consequently, psychological well-being may be negatively affected by the decline of social support. Therefore, social support is considered relevant as a mediator in explaining the impact of PSMU on psychological well-being. A study by Zhang et al. (2023) supports this by demonstrating that the relationship between social media use and students' psychological and subjective well-being is mediated by social support.

As a moderator, social support has the potential to modify the strength or direction of the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. The stress-buffering perspective emphasizes that social support can protect individuals from the negative effects of psychological stressors (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In this context, high levels of social support may weaken the negative impact of PSMU (a psychological stressor) by serving as an interpersonal resource that enables individuals to cope with its effects more adaptively. Conversely, when social support is low, individuals are at greater risk of experiencing declines in psychological well-being (Yeh et al., 2025). Thus, social support may function to either strengthening or weakening the psychological impact of PSMU.

A growing body of research has identified the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, studies examining how social support plays a role within this relationship remain limited and fragmented. Differences in research design, measurement approaches, and variation in sample characteristics make existing findings difficult to compare. Some studies have also solely focused on the direct relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being without testing the role of social support. Moreover, systematic reviews that specifically map the role of social support in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being are not yet available in the literature. A comprehensive understanding of this topic is essential to support the development of relevant and targeted interventions for young people. Summarizing existing findings and identifying both consistent and divergent patterns may also provide a foundation for future empirical research recommendations.

Based on the foregoing overview, this study aims to explore the role of social support in the relationship of problematic social media use and psychological well-being among young people through a systematic review of previous studies. The research questions in this review are as follows:

1. How does social support mediate the relationship between problematic social media use and psychological well-being?
2. How does social support moderate the relationship between problematic social media use and psychological well-being?
3. What are the specific psychological outcomes associated with problematic social media use?

2. Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review method to explore the role of social support in the relationship between problematic social media use and psychological well-being among young people. The review was conducted using the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) guidelines, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Several databases were used for the literature search, including Pubmed, Sciencedirect, Taylor & Francis, and PsycNet. The keywords applied in the search process were ("problematic social media use" OR "social media addiction") AND "social support" AND ("psychological well-being" OR "mental health") AND ("college student" OR "university student"). For the Pubmed database,

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keywords related to psychological well-being, such as “psychological well-being” or “mental health” were not included. This decision was made to maximize search sensitivity and prevent the exclusion of studies that did not explicitly use the terms in their title or abstract but still measured related construct, such as depression or anxiety symptoms. This approach was based on preliminary searches indicating that studies on PSMU and social support consistently reported at least one mental health outcome. Accordingly, the keywords used for Pubmed were: ((problematic social media use) OR (social media addiction)) AND (social support) AND ((college) OR (university)).

The sample in this study includes articles published within the past 10 years that examined the role of social support in the relationship between problematic social media use and psychological well-being among adolescents and emerging adults. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in detail in Table 1.

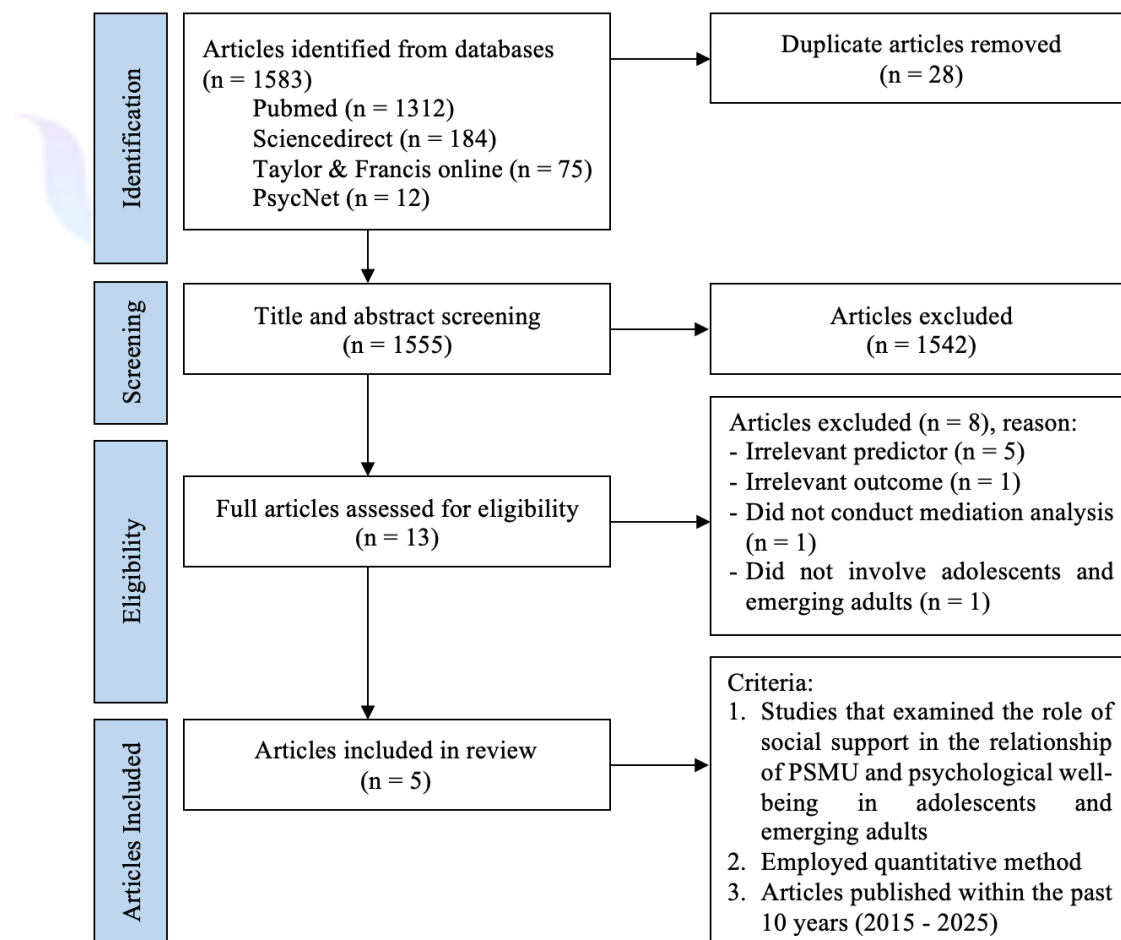


Figure 1. Literature Search Flowchart

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Studies that examined the role of social support in the relationship of PSMU and psychological well-being	1. Studies that did not test or include social support in the relationship of PSMU and psychological well-being
2. Studies that involved adolescents and emerging adults	2. Studies that did not involve adolescents and emerging adults
3. Studies that employed quantitative method	3. Studies that purely employed qualitative method
4. Articles published within the past 10 years (2015 - 2025) in reputable journals	4. Articles published before 2015 or published in non-reputable journals

3. Results

1. Articles Characteristics

Based on the literature search, a total of 5 articles were identified that examined the role of social support in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being among young people. A summary of the study characteristics is presented in Table 2. All five studies were cross-sectional and published between 2021 and 2025. Although the study by Chen et al., (2022) did not specify the participants' ages, it can be assumed that the majority of participants across the studies were in their early twenties. Meanwhile, the study by Mougharbel et al. (2023) was the only study that specifically targeted adolescents aged 11-20.

The five studies measured PSMU or social media addiction using different instruments, including the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Yeh et al., 2025), the Social Media Addiction Scale (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021), the Facebook Addiction Scale (FAS) (Chen et al., 2022), and the Social Media Disorder (SMD) Scale (Hu et al., 2024). Social support was commonly measured using perceived social support scales (Chen et al., 2022; Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Yeh et al., 2025), while Hu et al., (2024) specifically measured social network size and density. In contrast, study by Mougharbel et al., (2023), which utilized secondary data, reported that all data were collected using modified scales or instruments developed by a survey institution.

2. The Mediating Role of Social Support

Three of the five studies reported that social support significantly mediated the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being, particularly depressive symptoms. Meshi & Ellithorpe (2021) found that real-life social support mediated the relationship between PSMU and depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Similarly, Chen et al., (2022) found that social support served as one of the mediators linking PSMU and depressive symptoms. Hu et al., (2024) identified that the relationship between PSMU and depressive symptoms was mediated by social network density. These findings indicated that one of the ways PSMU interferes with mental health is by eroding individuals' social support resources.

However, Meshi & Ellithorpe (2021) also suggest that social support received from social media did not function as a mediator in the relationship between PSMU and depression. This means that not all form of social support, particularly those obtained via social media, serve as mechanisms in the context of PSMU. In addition, social network size was likewise not found to mediate this association (Hu et al., 2024). Hu et al., (2024), suspected that the insufficient measurement of social network size may have influenced the significance of this association.

3. The Moderating Role of Social Support

Evidence for the moderating role of social support is more limited and demonstrates inconsistent findings. A study by Yeh et al. (2025) reported that social support, particularly support from parents and significant others, significantly moderated the association between social media addiction and anxiety symptoms. In contrast, Mougharbel et al., (2023) found that parental support did not function as moderator in the relationship between heavy social media use psychological distress. These conflicting findings suggest that the effectiveness of social support may be influenced by individual characteristics, sources of support, and the conditions of social media use itself. These differences may also be influenced by how social support is measured. Mougharbel et al., (2023) noted that the parental support variable used in their study was too simple, as the data assessed only the extent to which adolescent discussed their problems with their parents. As a result, the data may not adequately represent overall parental support received by adolescents, and this variable was considered insufficiently sensitive to detect the moderating role of parental support.

4. Psychological Outcomes of PSMU

The five studies revealed several psychological outcomes associated with PSMU. Depressive symptoms were reported in three studies (Chen et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2024; Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021), anxiety symptoms were also reported in three studies (Chen et al., 2022; Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Yeh et al., 2025), and psychological distress was reported in one study (Mougharbel et al., 2023). Social impacts were also identified, such as the effects of PSMU on loneliness and social isolation reported by Meshi & Ellithorpe (2021) and Chen et al., (2022). These findings indicate that PSMU is closely associated to both internalizing problems (e.g., mood-related symptoms) and externalizing difficulties (e.g., social relational problems).

Table 2. Data Extraction

Author (Year)	Country (Sample)	Age (years)	Design	Measured Variables	Instrument/ Measurement	Social Support Role	Key Findings on the Role of Social Support
Yeh et al. (2025)	Taiwan (1324 participants)	Mean 24.3	Cross-sectional	Health-related behaviors, social media addiction, social support, and anxiety	Healthy Eating Score (HES-5), International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ); Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS); Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS); and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)	Moderation	Social support, particularly support from parents and significant others served as moderator in the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety symptoms.
Meshi & Ellithorpe (2021)	USA (403 participants)	Mean 20.25	Cross-sectional	PSMU, real-life social support, social support in social media, depression, anxiety, and social isolation	Social Media Addiction Scale; Scale of Perceived Social Support; short form of the PROMIS depression, anxiety, and social isolation scale	Mediation	Social support in real-life mediated the relationship between PSMU and depression, anxiety, and social isolation, whereas social support in social media did not function as a mediator.
Chen et al., (2022)	China (21.000 college students; observational study)	Not reported	Cross-sectional	Depressive symptoms, social media addiction (Facebook), social support, loneliness, and social network violence	Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), Facebook Addiction Scale (FAS), Perceived Social Support Scale, UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8), and Internet Violence Scale	Mediation	Social support, social network violence, and anxiety mediated the relationship between PSMU and depressive symptoms.
Mougharbel et al., (2023)	Canada (6.833 partisipan)	11-20	Cross-sectional	Social media use, psychological distress, as well as sex, age, and parental support as moderators	Instrument for social media use, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-6), instruments for sex, age, and parental support.	Moderation	Age moderated the relationship between social media use and psychological distress, while sex and parental support did not function as a moderator.
Hu et al., (2024)	USA (113 college students)	Mean 20.2	Cross-sectional	PSMU, social network size and density, and depressive symptoms	Social Media Disorder (SMD) Scale, modified Hampston's R5D Method, and short form of the PROMIS Depression Scale	Mediation	Social network density mediated the relationship between PSMU and depressive symptoms, whereas social network size did not function as a mediator.

4. Discussion

The findings in this study describe the interaction between problematic social media use (PSMU), social support, and psychological well-being. Overall, the studies reviewed consistently show that PSMU is associated with negative psychological outcomes, including increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. These findings are in line with prior research suggesting that PSMU may increase individuals' exposure to cyberbullying and negative interaction (Lee et al., 2023), Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) (Gao et al., 2023), social comparison (Yang et al., 2023), and addictive behaviors related to withdrawal symptoms (such as discomfort and irritability when access to social media is disrupted) (Tsilosani et al., 2023), which in turn negatively affect mental health. In addition, PSMU is often linked to its use as a form of maladaptive coping when individuals face stressful situations or as a tool to regulate their mood (Wegmann et al., 2023).

Regarding the role of social support, the findings indicate that social support may function as a mechanism, as well as a contextual factor in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. Its role as a mediator appears to be more consistent, with three studies illustrating that reduced social support partially explains why PSMU may lead to poorer psychological outcomes. These results support the idea that PSMU can diminish the frequency of face-to-face interaction, thereby reducing individuals' perception of available support (Kim, 2017). Such diminished perception of support might explain the association between PSMU and mental health disorders (Blahošová et al., 2025). This emphasizes the importance of maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships as a protective factor within the digital environment.

The form of social support is also reflected in social network density, which was found to mediate the relationship between PSMU and depressive symptoms. This suggests that PSMU may weaken the closeness of individuals' social relationships, thereby reducing the function of social networks in reducing stress, which in turn, increasing the risk of depression (Hu et al., 2024). Social media use tends to expand and diversify individuals' social networks, making it less likely for online contacts to build close and meaningful relationships (Al-Jbouri et al., 2024). Whereas, previous study has shown that social network density may reflect the extent to which a social network is supportive and serves as a buffer against stressful events (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015). Thus, it can be said that social media users with lower social network density may be more vulnerable to experiencing mental disorders.

However, one study found that social support in social media did not serve as a mediator in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. Thus, it is believed that social support received in real-life may provide a stronger sense of support compared to that obtained via social media. This aligns with a longitudinal study by Trepte et al., (2015), which suggested that real-life social support was associated with greater overall well-being, whereas social support provided through social media did not influence well-being. Meshi & Ellithorpe (2021) also noted that the typical interactions on social media (e.g., simple reaction, such as "likes" or brief comments) are limited and insufficient to provide the kind of social support needed to protect individuals from mental health problems.

The moderating role of social support shows mixed findings. One study reported that social support, particularly support from parents and significant others, may buffer the negative impact of PSMU on anxiety. In contrast, another study found no moderation effect of parental support on the relationship between heavy social media use and psychological distress. These inconsistencies may occur due to differences in measurement approaches, sample characteristics (e.g., cultural context or individual differences), or the type and source of support being tested (Mougharbel et al., 2023; Sajid et al., 2024). For example, parental support measured using simplified scale may not be sensitive enough to capture the overall aspects of support received by young people. A similar measurement issue was also found in mediation analysis. One study reported that the insignificant mediating role of social network size was likely influenced by the way the support variable assessed, as it relied on instruments that were not sufficiently comprehensive (Hu et al., 2024). This aligns with Stefana et al. (2024), who suggest that an instrument should include items that adequately represent all dimensions of the construct to avoid construct underrepresentation.

This review also highlights that the psychological impact of PSMU is not limited to internal symptoms but also includes social impacts such as increased social isolation and loneliness. Excessive

social media use may reduce face-to-face interactions and simultaneously reduce the depth and quality of interactions with family and friends (Lin et al., 2021). Individuals experiencing PSMU are also likely to unintentionally replace real-life social interactions with virtual connections, which may increase the risk of social isolation (Meshi et al., 2020). Consequently, individuals who use social media excessively tend to feel lonelier (Gong et al., 2021). Hence, this implies that PSMU may affect individuals' well-being through both emotional and social mechanisms.

Although the studies included in this review offer valuable insights, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the number of studies included in this review was relatively small, with only five studies identified, of which three studies tested the mediating role of social support and two studies tested its moderating role. This limitation reduces the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn. Second, the reviewed studies predominantly employed cross-sectional design, which may limit the ability to determine causal relationships. Third, most studies involved young people within specific cultural context, primarily populations in North America. This limits the generalizability of the findings to different cultural settings or demographic groups.

The findings of this review offer several practical implications for researchers, educators, and mental health practitioners. Interventions aimed at enhancing psychological well-being of young people need to consider their digital behaviors as well as their social environments. Strengthening peer and family relationships, providing supportive school or campus environment, and promoting balanced social media use are expected to reduce psychological risks associated with PSMU. Digital literacy enhancement programs and accessible mental health services also provide essential support for young people who are heavily engaged in digital world.

The variability in findings regarding moderating role of social support highlights the need for more rigorous and comprehensive research designs. Further studies should employ standardized measurement tools, examine both online and offline social support, and consider longitudinal approaches to clarify the causal pathways among variables. Exploring cultural contexts and individual differences is also important for understanding when and under what conditions social support functions as a protective factor. In addition, research focusing on young people in Indonesia is warranted, given potential cultural differences and distinct digital habits compared to other countries.

5. Conclusions

Based on the results of this systematic literature review, the present study emphasizes the importance of social support in understanding how PSMU affect the psychological well-being of young people. More specifically, the review indicates that social support plays a dual role as a mediator and moderator in the relationship between PSMU and psychological well-being. PSMU was found to cause emotional impacts, including depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, as well as social impacts, including social isolation and loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening social support as a strategy to mitigate the negative effects of PSMU. In addition, more rigorous and comprehensive research is needed to deepen the understanding of how social support shapes young people's experiences with social media use.

6. CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Thifal Maida Wilhelmina: Conceptualization, literature search, data analysis, writing, review.
Pihasniwati: Methodology development, advisor, supervision, validation, review & editing, final commentary.

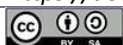
7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, whether financial or personal, that may influence the study reported in this paper.

8. Declaration of Generative AI and Assistive Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors used Rayyan to facilitate the literature screening process. AI assistance, such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, was utilized in the writing process to brainstorm and obtain feedback regarding conceptualization, manuscript editing, and grammar checking. This paper had been reviewed by the authors, and we take full responsibility for the accuracy and originality of this work.

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10. Ethical Approval

This article is a systematic literature review that does not involve human participants or primary data collection; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

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