



The Floating Duck Syndrome: The Gap Between Appearance and Reality on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive use of social media in the "digital age" has a complex and ambivalent relationship with mental health. This review explores the psychological mechanisms underlying the benefits and risks of social media, focusing on active versus passive use and their distinct impacts on well-being. Passive use, characterized by content consumption without interaction, is strongly associated with negative effects, including social comparison, envy, and decreased psychological well-being. The "floating duck syndrome," a metaphor for the gap between idealized online portrayals and real-life struggles, highlights how curated images intensify feelings of inadequacy and frustration, particularly among vulnerable groups such as young women. Negative outcomes linked to this phenomenon include body dissatisfaction, distorted self-image, and increased anxiety. In contrast, active use marked by meaningful engagement and genuine connections, can foster optimism, inspiration, and social support, promoting overall well-being.

The review emphasizes the role of effort-reward imbalance in amplifying user dissatisfaction, as individuals invest heavily in crafting idealized online personas, only to face unmet expectations. However, evidence also suggests that positive social comparisons and authentic interactions on social media can inspire constructive life changes and reinforce personal identity. This duality underscores the need for strategies to mitigate the negative impacts while leveraging the potential benefits of social media. Future research should focus on promoting mindful and balanced platform use to enhance mental health outcomes.

Background: The rise of social media has profoundly impacted individuals' mental health, especially among vulnerable populations. Passive social media use, characterized by consuming idealized content without engagement, is associated with detrimental effects on emotional well-being, including social comparison, envy, and frustration. The "floating duck syndrome," a metaphor for the disparity between curated online personas and real-life struggles, further exacerbates these issues, contributing to body dissatisfaction, distorted self-image, and anxiety.

Method: This narrative review examines the dual effects of social media use on mental health, focusing on the psychological mechanisms underpinning its risks and benefits. Through a review of literature on active versus passive social media use, social comparison, and the "floating duck syndrome," the study explores how user behavior and platform dynamics influence well-being.



Results: The review highlights that passive social media use correlates with lower psychological well-being due to heightened social comparison and unrealistic standards of perfection. Vulnerable groups, such as young women, are particularly susceptible to negative effects, including dissatisfaction with appearance and increased anxiety. Conversely, active and mindful social media use fosters genuine connections, social support, and personal growth, mitigating some of the platform's adverse impacts. The concept of effort-reward imbalance also emerges as a critical factor, linking unmet expectations to frustration and psychological distress.

Conclusion: Social media use presents a dual-edged phenomenon: while passive use heightens mental health risks, active engagement can promote well-being. Future research should focus on strategies to encourage balanced and conscious platform use, addressing the psychological vulnerabilities associated with social media dynamics.

Keywords: Adolescence, Duck syndrome, Internet addiction.

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Introduction

The 21st century is often labeled the "digital age," marked by a significant transformation in how people access and share information. With the advent of the internet, individuals can receive real-time news, stay updated on global events, access diverse multimedia content, and connect with friends and family worldwide (Marques, 2016). At the core of this digital revolution is the rise of social media, a collection of platforms, including social networks, which today form an integral part of the online ecosystem. While the internet provides many benefits, such as rapid connectivity and access to unlimited resources, it also poses risks and potential negative consequences for users (Velkoska, 2024). The widespread popularity of social networks is a phenomenon attracting growing attention, especially given the increasing amount of time individuals spend online (Nielsen, 2010). The internet offers a broad spectrum of activities with various goals; however, some of these activities may have addictive elements, increasing the risk of developing dependent behaviors. The ease of access and immersive nature of online platforms seem to contribute to more pervasive usage, raising questions about the implications for users' mental health and well-being (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Although active social network use can promote subjective well-being, potentially negative dynamics are also associated with this behavior. Many researchers have highlighted online social comparison as a key factor contributing to the negative effects linked to social media use (Verduyn, 2020). Social networks offer a wide range of activities, and research suggests that their impact varies significantly based on how the technology is utilized. A crucial distinction exists between active and passive use (Verduyn, 2015). Active use includes activities that facilitate direct interactions with others, such as private messages or general posts. In contrast, passive use involves observing others' online activities without engaging in direct exchanges. While active use generally involves creating and sharing content, passive use focuses on content consumption, like scrolling feeds or viewing others' profiles. Verduyn's study (2021) found that passive use of social networks was associated with a gradual decline in emotional well-being over time, whereas active use had no significant impact on overall well-being. Specifically, passive social media use correlated with poorer mental health, especially when it led to feelings of envy or inferiority rather than fostering a sense of social connection.



Objective of the Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to explore the complex and ambivalent relationship between social media usage and mental health, with a specific focus on the psychological mechanisms underlying its potential risks and benefits. The review investigates how passive and active use of social media can differently influence well-being, highlighting the role of social comparison and the pressures of adhering to unrealistic standards of perfection. Central to this analysis is the concept of the "floating duck syndrome," which illustrates the discrepancy between the idealized image presented online and the hidden struggles individuals face in their daily lives. By examining empirical evidence, this review seeks to elucidate how passive consumption of curated and idealized content on social media can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and isolation.

Consequences of Floating Duck Syndrome

These effects may be related to the so-called "floating duck syndrome," a concept discussed in the context of social media. The syndrome refers to the discrepancy between the image of perfection people present online and the real-life difficulties they may face (Rosenthal et al., 2019). Just as a duck appears to glide effortlessly on the water while paddling frantically below the surface, social media users may seem composed and successful while concealing personal struggles. This discrepancy can intensify social comparison, leading observers to feel envy or inadequacy, especially during passive social network use (Chou & Edge, 2012). This comparison with curated and seemingly perfect images may amplify declines in emotional well-being, as studies indicate that passive social media use correlates with deteriorating mental health over time (Verduyn et al., 2021). Such psychological processes contribute to an online experience that, rather than strengthening social connection, may harm well-being and increase feelings of inferiority (Vogel et al., 2014). Modern life constantly compels us to choose how to allocate our time and energy across various aspects, such as education, work, family, and leisure activities. How we divide our time among these areas, the number of tasks we perform, and the rewards we gain deeply affect our physical and mental well-being (Akçay, 2024). The study by Nordentoft (2020) indicates that a prolonged imbalance between effort expended and benefits received—whether material or social—can lead to negative consequences for mental and physical health. A key factor in this imbalance is task overload, pushing individuals to overextend themselves without achieving desired results.



This phenomenon, documented in work and academic settings, often correlates with adverse outcomes, including anxiety and depression (Wege et al., 2017; Adam, 2021; Porru et al., 2021). In this light, the negative effects associated with the so-called "duck syndrome" arise not from emotional processes, but from the fact that, when faced with distorted information, individuals perceive as optimal decisions that, based on subjective beliefs, are not truly optimal in an objective sense. This distortion of information leads people to develop unrealistic expectations about the reward they expect in return for their efforts. However, these expectations go unmet in reality, creating an imbalance between the effort invested and the actual reward received. This misalignment between individuals' beliefs about what they deserve and what they obtain can result in feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, with potential negative implications for psychological well-being and workplace dynamics (Akçay, 2024).

Methods

The main purpose of this narrative review is to map the research on the impact of social media on floating duck syndrome, and how it should be managed. Several studies were identified, including publications in peer-reviewed journals and qualitative information on the impact of social media in floating duck syndrome. Studies published in languages other than English and those irrelevant to the selected topic have been excluded. PubMed, and Google Scholar, databases were searched from 2010 to 2024, using the following key terms: "floating duck syndrome" AND "social media". Exclusion criteria included were as follows: comments, commentaries, opinions, letters to editors, interviews, specific editorials, conference abstracts or posters. Resources with these characteristics were not included in this review.

The Impact of Social Media

Duck syndrome is a concept that illustrates the gap between the ideal image portrayed on social media and people's real daily lives. This metaphor refers to how a duck may appear calm on the surface while paddling frantically below. Similarly, social media users often display a "perfect" and stress-free life, hiding their daily struggles. Numerous studies have shown that social comparison frequently occurs in online contexts, where users compare themselves with others' idealized representations. Chou and Edge (2012) found that this type of comparison can lead to feelings of inadequacy and



envy, as individuals tend to compare their own flaws with others' showcased strengths, fueling a sense of inferiority. Additionally, Verduyn et al. (2021) highlighted that passive social media use is associated with lower psychological well-being. People who view content without actively interacting often feel isolated, especially when confronted with other users' images. In this context, viewing 'perfect' content can make other people's lives seem more satisfying than one's own, thus amplifying the floating duck syndrome. Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles on social media may push individuals to develop unattainable standards of perfection. Research indicates that this exposure may lead to negative social comparisons, where people feel inadequate compared to curated images of others, resulting in frustration and disillusionment. For example, images of seemingly perfect lives and idealized bodies can negatively impact self-efficacy and self-esteem, worsening emotional well-being, especially among young people (Kim, 2023). Moreover, research suggests that the impact of duck syndrome may vary across demographic contexts. Fardouly et al., (2015) showed that young women are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison on social media, as often unattainable beauty images can influence their self-esteem and contribute to body image problems. Consequently, time spent on social media has been linked to increased dissatisfaction with physical appearance and may contribute to the onset of dysmorphic concerns, intensifying recurrent, obsessive thoughts related to body perception. Idealized and often edited images on these platforms can accentuate negative self-comparisons, creating a distorted self-image and increasing levels of anxiety and body dissatisfaction (Laughter et al., 2023). Instead of focusing solely on the negative effects of social media, it is useful to consider studies that show how the active use of these platforms can also promote social connections and foster well-being (Roeder, 2020). Park and Baek (2018), for example, found that social comparisons, when done in a positive way, can improve mood, generating feelings of optimism and inspiration. This suggests that not all social comparisons on social media are harmful: instead, some can motivate users to undertake constructive changes in their own lives, inspired by models or experiences shared by other users. An article by Naslund et al. (2020) also discusses the benefits of social media interactions, emphasizing that active use of these platforms can improve social support and personal identity.

The authors argue that, while risks are associated with social media use, there are also opportunities to promote well-being, especially when interactions are genuine and meaningful. However, it is crucial to note that the risk of negative experiences persists, particularly when



interactions lack authenticity. Individuals may still feel vulnerable to frustration and dissatisfaction if their expectations remain unmet due to the idealized images that often circulate online.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this narrative highlights how social media use, in the modern "digital era," represents a complex and ambivalent phenomenon profoundly affecting users' mental health. Social media provides a platform for connection and experience-sharing, yet also entails potential risks related to social comparison and the pressure for often unrealistic standards of perfection. In particular, passive use, which involves viewing others' content without active interaction, has been associated with a reduction in psychological well-being as it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration through comparisons with idealized and filtered representations of others' lives. A recurring theme in the literature is "duck syndrome," a metaphor representing the gap between the idealized image many users portray online and their actual daily struggles. This gap, amplified by social media mechanisms, appears to contribute to a perceptual distortion that leads many individuals to develop unattainable standards of beauty and success, fueling personal dissatisfaction and anxiety. Curated images and content, while often shared as a means of self-expression, ultimately trigger negative social comparison processes, amplifying feelings of inferiority and isolation.

Conversely, it is essential to recognize that an active and mindful approach to social media use can yield significant benefits. Literature suggests that positive, authentic interactions can enhance social support and strengthen one's sense of belonging and personal identity. Recent studies indeed show that, when used to maintain social connections and exchange real experiences, social media can promote well-being and even motivate positive life changes. Lastly, the effort-reward imbalance concept applied to social media directly connects to the frustration and dissatisfaction many users experience.

This imbalance occurs when individuals invest time and energy in creating a self-image that may not align with reality, hoping to receive approval and recognition. However, the unmet expectations can generate disappointment and dissatisfaction, amplifying psychological distress. A key challenge for future research on social media and mental health will be identifying strategies for more conscious and balanced use of these platforms.



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