

Digital Environments and Mental Health in Young People: Challenges and Opportunities


Deadline to receive manuscripts: **30 / 06 / 2025**

Monograph publication date: **01 / 01 / 2026 (DOXA n.º 42)**

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Description and core topics

Digital platforms, such as social media and instant messaging services, have transformed the way we interact, facilitating the sharing, discussion, and exchange of content among users through their devices. These platforms have become a fundamental part of the lives of children, adolescents, and young people, providing them with spaces to construct their identity as well as to connect with peers and wider audiences (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This interaction between socialization and digital environments is global, with more than 80% of European youth using the internet daily to engage with social media (Eurostat, 2022).

The impact of social media use on mental health and well-being is particularly evident among adolescents and young people. Adolescence is a period marked by biological, psychological, and social changes, including the development of behaviors aimed at emotional self-regulation, impulse control, and the construction of a personal identity (Zacarés et al., 2009). At the same time, the importance of social context and peer acceptance becomes more pronounced, leading adolescents to be increasingly concerned about how they are perceived by their peers and the broader community. This concern is amplified by constant exposure to picture-perfect content on social media, directly influencing their identity formation process (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

These developmental changes make adolescence particularly vulnerable to risks associated with digital presence, including mental health disorders. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 (14%) globally suffers from a mental disorder (WHO, 2022). One of the most alarming examples of the rise in children and adolescent mental health issues and their link to social media is the phenomenon of self-harm. The Spanish Pediatric Association (2022) and the ANAR Foundation (2020 and 2023) have highlighted a significant increase in self-harm among children and adolescent, particularly following measures implemented to curb COVID-19. It is estimated that 18% of individuals self-harm before the age of 18 (Spanish Pediatric Association, 2022). Following the return to school after the lockdown in 2020, self-harm among children and adolescents increased by 246.2% compared to the previous year (ANAR, 2020 and 2023). Adolescents often begin self-harming at very young ages, around 11 years old, with the behavior being most common between 14 and 17 years old (American Psychiatric Association, 2023).

We invite submissions that employ a variety of methodologies, including large-scale surveys, social media content analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, longitudinal studies, comparative analyses, and mixed methods designs. Studies that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer a comprehensive view of the phenomenon are particularly encouraged. Authors are also welcome to explore novel methodologies that can deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health.

Keywords

Adolescence and mental health; emotional health; digital risks for young people; regulation and self-regulation of social networks; self-harm risk behaviors; body image in social media; anorexia; bulimia; challenges; gender inequality in mental health.

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