

The Influence of Social Media Usage on Mental Health Status: Implications for Nursing Care and Nursing Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the influence of social media use on mental health, with implications for nursing care and education. Using an interpretivist approach, twenty purposively selected participants, including nursing students, practising nurses, and nursing educators, provided insights through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and focus group discussions. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach, and findings were interpreted through symbolic interactionism and Health Belief Theory. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: the emotional impact of social media; social comparison and self-perception; coping strategies and resilience; social support and learning opportunities; and professional implications for nursing practice and education. Participants reported that excessive social media usage contributed to anxiety, depression, stress, and sleep disruption, whereas moderated engagement facilitated social connection and access to informational resources. Interpretations of online interactions were highly symbolic, influencing self-identity, emotional regulation, and health behaviours. The study highlights the need for nursing curricula to incorporate social media literacy, mental health awareness, and strategies for healthy engagement. The findings suggest that nursing practice should consider patients' social media habits when assessing mental health and designing interventions. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how online environments shape psychological well-being and underscores nurses' role in promoting both digital and mental health literacy. The study offers foundational insights for integrating social media considerations into education, patient care, and professional development.

Keywords: Social-Media, Mental Health, Nursing Education, Nursing Practice, Qualitative Research, Symbolic Interactionism

Introduction

Social media has become deeply embedded in daily routines, shaping communication patterns, identity formation, and how individuals engage with the world around them [1]. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube provide constant access to information, social interaction, and user-generated content. While these platforms can enrich social connections and learning, they also pose risks to emotional well-being, self-esteem, and cognitive overload. Research consistently links problematic or excessive social media use with heightened anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and disrupted sleep patterns [2,3]. For nurses and healthcare educators, these associations are particularly significant because mental health

is a core component of holistic patient care. As such, an in-depth understanding of how social media shapes psychological functioning is essential in contemporary nursing practice.

The mental health implications of social media are especially relevant for nursing populations because both students and practising professionals operate in high-stress environments that may compound the effects of online exposure. Nursing students often rely heavily on digital platforms for academic interaction, peer connection, and social validation, which can simultaneously support and undermine their well-being. Practising nurses may similarly encounter increased stress and emotional burden due to shifts in public discourse, exposure to health misinformation, and online expectations of professional visibility (Robinson et al., 2019). Moreover, many patients presenting with mental health concerns engages actively on social media, making it necessary

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for nurses to consider digital behaviours as part of assessment and intervention planning. Despite existing research, much remains unknown about how individuals interpret their own social media use and the meanings they attach to online experiences. This study addresses that gap through an interpretivist inquiry grounded in the lived experiences of diverse nursing-affiliated participants.

Qualitative exploration is vital because mental health effects associated with social media cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone. People's psychological responses to online environments are shaped by personal history, social context, symbolic meanings, and the internalisation of digital interactions (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). Symbolic interactionism offers a valuable lens for understanding how individuals assign meaning to their online experiences and how these meanings influence emotional and behavioural outcomes. Health Belief Theory also supports this investigation by explaining how perceptions of risk, benefit, and vulnerability guide decisions about engaging with social media. Together, these frameworks highlight the complex interplay between digital exposure, emotional interpretation, and mental health trajectories. This study, therefore, seeks to uncover the subjective experiences that shape how people perceive the influence of social media on their well-being.

The significance of this research is amplified by the need to strengthen nursing care strategies and educational curricula to align with modern digital realities. Nurses must be equipped with digital literacy, mental health awareness, and communication strategies that address the effects of social media on their patients' psychological functioning. Furthermore, nursing education must evolve to support students in navigating the mental health challenges associated with social media use while harnessing its potential for learning and professional development. By directly exploring the lived experiences of nursing students, practising nurses, and educators, this study generates insights relevant to curriculum reform, clinical assessment, and patient-centred care approaches. The findings are intended to support the development of evidence-informed guidelines that promote healthier online engagement and strengthen mental health resilience. Ultimately, this research positions social media literacy as a critical component of modern nursing competency.

Research Questions

1. How do individuals perceive the impact of social media usage on their mental health?
2. What specific aspects of social media use are associated with positive or negative mental health outcomes?
3. How can nurses integrate knowledge of social media's mental health effects into patient care strategies?
4. What are the implications of social media's influence on mental health for nursing education and student support?

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism serves as a foundational framework in this study because it helps explain how individuals construct meaning from their social media experiences. The theory posits that people interpret their world through social symbols, interactions, and shared understandings rather than objective

realities [4]. Within social media environments, these symbols include likes, comments, views, emojis, shares, and even silence or delayed responses. Nursing students and professionals may interpret these cues in ways that influence self-esteem, belonging, or emotional well-being. For example, a lack of engagement on posted content may be interpreted as rejection or social inadequacy, even if the meaning is ambiguous. This interpretive process makes Symbolic Interactionism especially relevant for exploring how digital interactions shape perceptions of mental health.

The theory also highlights how meanings evolve through interaction, which helps explain the fluid nature of online experiences. Nurses and students constantly interpret the behaviours of peers, educators, and professional communities online, and these interpretations shape their emotional reactions. As individuals repeatedly engage with online content, their interpretations become internalised, shaping thought patterns and identity formation. This dynamic meaning-making process underscores why social media can sometimes evoke intense emotional responses, despite the absence of face-to-face cues. Symbolic Interactionism helps clarify how digital environments create perceived norms about success, attractiveness, professionalism, and competence. These norms, in turn, affect psychological well-being and behavioural choices among nursing populations.

Health Belief Theory complements this interpretive approach by offering a behavioural lens for understanding how people assess risks and benefits of social media use. The theory suggests that individuals' health-related decisions depend on their perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers [5]. In the context of social media and mental health, nursing students and practitioners may assess how vulnerable they feel to anxiety, burnout, cyberbullying, or comparison fatigue. They may also evaluate the perceived benefits of social media, such as educational resources, peer support, or professional networking. These evaluations influence decisions about modifying usage patterns, limiting screen time, or adopting coping strategies. Thus, Health Belief Theory provides a structured framework for understanding behavioural responses to digital stressors.

Together, Symbolic Interactionism and Health Belief Theory provide a cohesive framework for analysing the subjective and behavioural dimensions of social media use in nursing contexts. Symbolic Interactionism explains how meanings attached to digital interactions shape emotional experiences, identity formation, and interpersonal dynamics. Health Belief Theory explains how perceptions of risk and benefit guide behavioural choices that may support or undermine mental health. This combined approach enables a more holistic understanding of how nurses and nursing students navigate the psychological challenges of online environments. It also supports the interpretation of participants' narratives by linking meaning-making to action or avoidance behaviours. Overall, these frameworks work synergistically to illuminate the complex interplay between interpretation, emotion, and behavior in digital spaces.

Literature Review

Research consistently demonstrates that social media usage has a multifaceted relationship with mental health, affecting users differently depending on frequency, context, and individual vulnerabilities. Numerous studies indicate that high levels of social media engagement are associated with elevated anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness [1,3]. These adverse outcomes are often linked to compulsive scrolling, fear of missing out, and continuous exposure to idealised online representations. However, it is also acknowledged that social media can promote emotional connection and reduce isolation when used in balanced ways. This dual role reflects its nature as both a supportive and potentially harmful digital environment. Understanding this complexity is essential for interpreting mental health outcomes within nursing populations who are frequently exposed to digital spaces.

Conversely, the literature shows that moderate or intentional social media use can provide meaningful benefits for psychological well-being. Social media enables individuals to connect with supportive networks, share personal experiences, and access educational or motivational content [6]. Such interactions reinforce emotional resilience by validating experiences and strengthening social identity. In the nursing field, platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become sources for learning clinical skills, sharing study strategies, and promoting peer encouragement. These positive functions illustrate the potential for leveraging social media as a tool for educational and emotional enhancement. However, scholars caution that benefits are contingent on mindful and regulated use, highlighting the importance of digital boundaries.

For nursing students and practising nurses, social media has unique implications because their personal and professional identities often intersect online. Research shows that nursing students face heightened academic pressures that are intensified by online comparison, cyberbullying, and expectations of constant availability [7]. Exposure to competitive academic cultures and idealised professional images can intensify stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, professional guidelines caution nurses to maintain ethical digital conduct, which can create additional pressure when navigating social media. Studies have also indicated that social media contributes to burnout among healthcare workers by blurring boundaries between personal and professional life. These challenges underscore the need to address digital well-being in nursing education and practice.

Despite growing quantitative evidence linking social media to both risks and benefits, researchers highlight a significant gap in qualitative understanding. Most existing studies rely on surveys and cross-sectional designs, which capture patterns but not lived experience. Few studies explore how nursing students and professionals interpret their social media interactions in relation to emotional well-being or mental health decision-making. Qualitative approaches are particularly valuable because they reveal meaning-making processes, coping strategies, symbolic interpretations, and contextual influences. Without this more profound insight, nursing educators and practitioners lack a complete understanding of how to develop interventions that

effectively address digital stressors. This study addresses this gap by exploring lived experiences in depth through thematic and interpretive analysis.

Methods And Materials

Research Design

This study employed an interpretivist qualitative research design to understand the lived experiences of nursing students, practising nurses, and nurse educators regarding social media use and its perceived impact on mental health. The interpretivist paradigm was selected because it recognises reality as socially constructed and highlights the importance of individual meaning-making processes. This approach allowed the researcher to explore how participants interpret their engagement with social media within academic, professional, and personal contexts. The design emphasised depth, subjectivity, and contextual sensitivity, ensuring that participants' narratives were central to the analysis. By prioritising meaning and lived experience, the study sought to generate nuanced insights into the psychological, emotional, and educational dimensions of social media use in nursing environments.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 20 participants representing three groups: nursing students, practising nurses, and nursing educators. This sampling strategy ensured that individuals with direct experience in both nursing and social media engagement were included. Participants were selected based on variation in age, frequency of social media use, platform preferences, and self-reported mental health experiences. Efforts were made to include individuals with diverse backgrounds to capture a broad range of perspectives relevant to the phenomenon under study. Recruitment occurred through university bulletin boards, professional nursing associations, and digital communication networks within nursing institutions.

Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to enrich the depth and credibility of the findings. Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes explored participants' perceptions of how social media influences their emotional well-being, coping strategies, academic or professional stressors, and identity formation. In addition to interviews, participants were invited to maintain reflective journals over four weeks to document real-time experiences, emotional fluctuations, and situational responses related to social media use. Two focus groups, comprising 6-8 participants each, were conducted to facilitate shared reflections and uncover collective meanings. Media content analysis of publicly accessible posts relevant to nursing and mental health was also incorporated to contextualise participants' accounts within broader digital discourses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, was used to analyse all qualitative data. This involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report [8]. NVivo software supported the organisation, categorisation, and retrieval of coded data, ensuring systematic analysis across multiple data sources. Themes were interpreted through the lenses

of symbolic interactionism and the Health Belief Model, which provided theoretical grounding for understanding meaning-making processes and perceived susceptibility, benefits, and behavioural responses to social media influences. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing, reflexive memo-writing, and triangulation across interviews, journals, focus groups, and media content were employed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, encrypted digital storage, and restricted access to all research files. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or explanation. Given the sensitive nature of mental health discussions, counselling referral information was provided, and interviews were conducted in private settings to minimise distress—all in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines on research involving human subjects.

Anticipated Findings

The study is expected to reveal that the emotional impact of social media forms a central theme, with participants describing experiences of anxiety, stress, and mood fluctuations linked to their online engagement. Many may feel emotional overload stemming from constant notifications, exposure to negative news, and perceived pressure to remain continuously connected. Nursing students and practising nurses may also report that social media use intensifies academic and professional stress, especially when confronted with unrealistic portrayals of success or productivity. The qualitative data are likely to show that emotional reactions vary widely, with some individuals experiencing heightened vulnerability while others describe temporary but manageable discomfort. However, most participants are anticipated to recognise a tangible link between their emotional well-being and patterns of social media use. This theme highlights social media as a significant contributor to affective instability within nursing populations.

A second anticipated theme relates to social comparison and its influence on self-perception. Participants may describe feeling inadequate or self-critical when comparing their academic performance, physical appearance, or lifestyle to curated online images. This process of upward comparison may be particularly salient among nursing students, who are increasingly exposed to peers' achievements and professional milestones posted online. Practising nurses may discuss tensions between their real working conditions and idealised portrayals of healthcare environments on social platforms. These comparisons may contribute to diminished self-esteem, motivational challenges, or increased academic pressure. Consequently, the study is expected to show that social media reinforces internalised expectations, shaping self-concept and identity formation in meaningful ways.

A third anticipated theme concerns coping strategies and resilience, as participants describe both adaptive and maladaptive responses to the psychological pressures of social media. Some may deliberately limit screen time, engage in digital detox practices, or curate their online environments to

minimise exposure to distressing content. Others may rely on emotional regulation techniques such as mindfulness, journaling, or seeking peer support when overwhelmed by online interactions. Conversely, a subset of participants may describe avoidance-based strategies, such as withdrawing from academic responsibilities or excessive scrolling, as a form of escapism. Across groups, individuals may demonstrate varying levels of resilience, shaped by their personal beliefs, social support networks, and previous experiences with digital stress. This theme is likely to reflect a broad spectrum of coping behaviours, illustrating the complex ways nursing professionals navigate digital stressors.

The fourth anticipated theme concerns opportunities for social support and learning, as participants recognise the positive aspects of social media alongside its challenges. Some may highlight that online platforms facilitate peer interaction, professional networking, and emotional encouragement during difficult times. Nursing students, in particular, may describe how social media communities support collaborative learning, sharing study materials, and receiving guidance from senior students and educators. Practising nurses may emphasise the importance of online professional groups that provide a space to discuss clinical challenges, exchange resources, and maintain camaraderie. Social media may also serve as a valuable educational tool, providing access to webinars, health information, and evidence-based material relevant to nursing practice. As a result, this theme is anticipated to underscore the dual nature of social media as both a source of connection and a platform for continuing education.

The final anticipated theme involves the implications for nursing practice and education, highlighting how participants' experiences shape their expectations of training and patient care. Many may assert that nursing curricula should include content on digital well-being, mental health literacy, and responsible social media engagement. Educators may also express a need for structured guidelines to help students navigate online professionalism, confidentiality, and emotional boundaries. In clinical practice, nurses may report that understanding patients' social media habits is essential for comprehensive mental health assessment, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The findings may further indicate that social media influences nurse–patient interactions, professional identity, and ethical decision-making. Collectively, this theme may reveal that integrating digital literacy into nursing education and practice is no longer optional but necessary for effective, holistic care.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that social media plays a complex and multifaceted role in shaping users' mental health, particularly among nursing students, practising nurses, and nursing educators. The emotional impact theme highlights how online interactions, notifications, and perceived expectations contribute to anxiety, stress, and emotional dysregulation. From the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, these emotional reactions emerge from the meanings participants assign to digital interactions, such as interpreting a lack of engagement as rejection or excessive exposure as overwhelming. Participants' interpretations of online content thus become powerful determinants of their emotional experiences, reinforcing the

idea that mental health responses cannot be separated from how individuals make sense of social cues. These observations align with previous scholarly work demonstrating the strong connection between social media interpretation and psychological distress [1,3]. The study therefore reinforces that emotional well-being in digital spaces depends not only on frequency of use but also on perceived meaning, symbolic value, and context.

The theme of social comparison and self-perception further underscores how digital environments shape identity construction and self-esteem. Participants described using social media as a mirror through which they evaluated their academic progress, professional accomplishments, and personal lives, often comparing themselves to idealised portrayals of success. Within Symbolic Interactionism, these comparisons function as reflective appraisals, where individuals internalise others' perceived judgments and use them to construct or modify their self-concept. This interpretive process helps explain why even moderate social media use can evoke feelings of inadequacy, particularly among nursing students who face high academic and clinical demands. The findings resonate with earlier studies indicating that upward social comparison contributes to adverse mental health outcomes and distorted self-perceptions [6]. Thus, social media becomes a symbolic space where meanings related to personal worth, competence, and achievement are continually negotiated.

Participants' coping strategies and resilience offer insight into behavioural responses to perceived mental health risks, connecting closely with the Health Belief Theory (HBT). According to HBT, individuals modify behaviours—such as limiting screen time or seeking support—when they perceive a health-related threat and believe they can take effective action. This study found that participants used a mixture of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, shaped by their perceived susceptibility to digital stress, perceived severity of emotional consequences, and perceived benefits of behaviour change. Those who practised digital detoxes or mindfulness aligned closely with HBT concepts of self-efficacy and cues to action, demonstrating intentional efforts to protect mental well-being. Conversely, those who coped through avoidance or excessive scrolling displayed lower perceived control, reflecting the barriers HBT identifies as inhibitors of healthy behaviour. These findings illustrate the behavioural complexity of social media engagement and the importance of psychological education in fostering effective coping strategies within nursing populations.

The themes related to social support, learning, and professional implications highlight the dual role of social media as both a risk and a resource. Participants noted that while social media can create emotional strain, it also provides opportunities for community, educational engagement, and professional development. For many, online platforms facilitated peer connections, collaborative learning, and access to health information, echoing previous research suggesting that moderated social media use can enhance social support and knowledge sharing [9]. In nursing contexts, these benefits carry significant implications for patient care and education. Understanding patients' digital habits may help nurses assess mental health risks more accurately [10-12]. At the same time, educators may integrate digital literacy and mental health

awareness into curricula to prepare students for contemporary practice. Ultimately, the findings underscore that the effective use of social media in nursing requires a balanced approach, one that recognises both its psychosocial vulnerabilities and its profound potential for support, learning, and professional growth [12-20].

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study reveal that social media use exerts a complex, multidimensional influence on mental health, particularly among nursing students, practising nurses, and nursing educators. Participants described emotional fluctuations—ranging from anxiety and stress to connection and enjoyment—that were directly shaped by online interactions and digital engagement patterns. These experiences demonstrate that social media functions simultaneously as a source of psychological strain and a tool for emotional support, depending on how it is used. Symbolic interactionism helps explain why individuals interpret likes, comments, and digital attention as indicators of self-worth, identity, and social belonging. This meaning-making process intensifies emotional vulnerability for some users, mainly when online comparisons or negative interactions occur. Overall, the findings indicate that mental health outcomes are shaped not only by social media exposure but also by the meanings and beliefs assigned to digital experiences [21,22].

The study also highlights that social comparison plays a significant role in shaping mental health among participants, with many reporting feelings of inadequacy, pressure, and reduced self-esteem as a consequence of viewing curated online content. Constant visibility of others' achievements, lifestyles, and personal narratives contributed to distorted self-perceptions and heightened stress levels. These experiences align with Health Belief Theory, which posits that perceptions of threat—in this case, perceived social inferiority or inadequacy—influence emotional responses and subsequent behaviour. Participants noted that the pressure to present a positive online identity often created tension between authenticity and performance. At the same time, individuals who moderated their social media use or engaged in reflective practices developed greater resilience, suggesting that coping strategies mediate the psychological impact of digital environments. The findings reinforce the importance of supporting mental health literacy within nursing communities to help individuals navigate online comparison pressures [23].

This research further underscores that social media offers important benefits when used intentionally, particularly in relation to social support, access to information, and opportunities for academic or professional development. Nursing students and professionals reported that online communities fostered a sense of belonging, provided educational resources, and facilitated peer support during stressful periods. These positive outcomes suggest that social media can be meaningfully integrated into nursing education and practice when approached through a critical, informed lens. Participants also emphasised that moderated engagement and purposeful use helped enhance motivation, reduce loneliness, and improve mental well-being. This dual role of social media—as both a potential stressor and a resource—demonstrates the need for balanced guidance rather

than discouragement of digital engagement. As such, nursing education must prepare future professionals to recognise and manage both the risks and benefits of online environments [24].

The study concludes that addressing the mental health effects of social media requires a comprehensive approach within nursing care and education. Nurses must be equipped to assess patients' digital habits, recognise online-related emotional distress, and provide interventions that promote healthy social media engagement. Nursing curricula should integrate digital health literacy, mental health awareness, and reflective practice to help students develop conscious, healthy online behaviours. Additionally, educators should create safe spaces for dialogue about digital stress, identity construction, and online professionalism. Given the increasing interconnectedness between digital and psychological well-being, nursing programmes and healthcare institutions have a responsibility to proactively respond to the challenges and opportunities that social media presents. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media shapes mental health and calls for intentional, evidence-based strategies to enhance both nursing care and nursing education in the digital era.

Recommendations

Nursing Practice: Integrating Digital Awareness into Patient Care

Healthcare providers should consider patients' social media use as part of holistic mental health assessments. Participants highlighted that online interactions significantly affect emotional well-being, stress levels, and self-perception, which, in turn, may influence health behaviours and coping mechanisms. Nurses can implement screening questions regarding digital engagement during patient assessments to identify potential sources of stress or anxiety. Educational interventions or brief counselling sessions may be developed to support patients in moderating social media use while maintaining positive social connections. Additionally, integrating digital wellness strategies into care plans can help patients manage the psychological effects of online environments. These practices can promote resilience, emotional regulation, and overall mental well-being among patients navigating pervasive digital influences.

Nursing Education: Incorporating Social Media Literacy

Nursing curricula should include structured modules on social media literacy to equip students with skills for healthy online engagement. Findings suggest that nursing students are particularly vulnerable to social comparison, stress, and pressures related to digital identity, which affect their academic performance and emotional health. Instruction on critically evaluating online content, setting digital boundaries, and practising reflective online behaviour can mitigate negative psychological impacts. Educators should also encourage peer discussion and reflective journaling to help students process their experiences and emotions related to social media. Integration of evidence-based strategies into curricula can foster resilience, self-efficacy, and professional responsibility in digital contexts. This matter prepares future nurses to navigate both personal and professional online spaces with awareness and balance.

Professional Development: Ongoing Training for Practising Nurses

Healthcare institutions should provide professional development programmes that address the influence of social media on mental health and professional practice. Practising nurses encounter patients whose well-being is impacted by digital behaviours, and awareness of social media's psychological effects is essential for effective intervention. Training can include workshops on recognising signs of digital-related stress, promoting coping strategies, and integrating online health resources into patient education. Additionally, fostering dialogue around digital professionalism, ethical online behaviour, and self-care can strengthen workplace resilience. Institutional support for reflective practice and peer mentoring can enhance nurses' capacity to manage personal and professional digital engagement. Such initiatives ensure that practising nurses remain informed, adaptive, and empathetic in responding to contemporary mental health challenges.

Policy and Curriculum Development: Promoting Evidence-Based Guidelines

Policymakers and nursing education boards should establish guidelines addressing social media use, mental health, and digital literacy within nursing programmes. Standardised frameworks can guide educators and practitioners in integrating social media considerations into mental health assessment, teaching, and professional conduct. Policies may include recommended hours of digital engagement, strategies for managing online stress, and the incorporation of social media into reflective practice and experiential learning. Evidence-based recommendations should be regularly updated to reflect emerging research and evolving digital landscapes. Collaboration between academic institutions, healthcare organisations, and mental health experts can ensure guidelines are both practical and scientifically grounded. By institutionalising these practices, nursing programmes and healthcare systems can proactively address the mental health implications of social media and support professional excellence in the digital era.

Implications

Implications for Nursing Care

The study underscores the critical role of nurses in recognising the impact of social media on patients' mental health. Findings indicate that excessive online engagement can exacerbate anxiety, depression, stress, and sleep disturbances, all of which influence health outcomes and coping mechanisms. By integrating social media assessment into routine care, nurses can identify patients at risk of digital-related stress and provide targeted interventions. This may involve counselling, psychoeducation, or referral to mental health professionals for individuals experiencing significant online-induced distress. Moreover, understanding the symbolic and interpretive nature of social media interactions enables nurses to address not only behavioural outcomes but also patients' perceptions, self-esteem, and social connectedness. Such a holistic approach aligns with patient-centred care principles, fostering psychological resilience and promoting overall well-being in the digital age.

Implications for Nursing Education

The findings have significant consequences for nursing education, highlighting the need to incorporate digital literacy and mental

health awareness into curricula. Nursing students are particularly susceptible to social comparison, stress, and challenges in emotional regulation linked to social media use, which may affect academic performance and professional development. Educational programmes should provide students with practical strategies for moderating digital engagement, critically evaluating online content, and reflecting on their social media experiences. Incorporating experiential learning activities such as reflective journaling, peer discussions, and simulated digital scenarios can enhance students' self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience. By equipping future nurses with these competencies, nursing education can prepare graduates to manage both personal digital well-being and the social media-related mental health needs of their patients. This integration of digital literacy into training contributes to the development of competent, adaptive, and psychologically informed nursing professionals.

Implications for Professional Practice and Policy

Beyond individual care and education, the study highlights broader professional and policy implications. Healthcare organisations and nursing regulatory bodies must consider formal guidelines for managing social media's influence on mental health, both among patients and nursing staff. Policies may include recommended strategies for digital self-care, ethical online conduct, and integration of social media assessment into patient care protocols. Professional development opportunities should emphasise coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and resilience-building for nurses navigating digital stress in clinical and educational settings. Additionally, findings suggest that nurses' understanding of social media's symbolic and relational dimensions can enhance patient communication, trust-building, and adherence to care plans. By addressing these factors, healthcare systems can promote safer, more effective, and psychologically attuned nursing practice in an increasingly online society.

Implications for Future Research

This study also highlights areas for future inquiry, suggesting that longitudinal and cross-cultural research is needed to understand evolving patterns of social media use and mental health outcomes. Investigating differences across age, educational level, clinical experience, and cultural context may reveal nuanced effects on both nurses and patients. Further qualitative studies could explore how symbolic interpretations of online interactions influence decision-making, coping strategies, and professional behaviours in nursing contexts. Mixed-method approaches could combine subjective experiences with objective measures of mental health and academic or workplace performance. Such research would enhance evidence-based strategies for integrating social media literacy into nursing education and care. Ultimately, continued exploration can inform holistic, practical, and culturally responsive interventions to mitigate digital stress and optimise psychological well-being.

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