



SOCIAL NETWORKS, SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN ADOLESCENTS: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the emotional and social development of adolescents, with social networks serving as an essential means of constructing identity. This article presents a systematic review of the impact of social networks on the socioemotional development of adolescents, with particular attention to experiences of social isolation. The findings underscore the role of social networks in fostering a sense of belonging. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of promoting the positive use of social networks as a space for emotional growth.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the use of social media has increased markedly, enabling users to create profiles and connect with others online (Carr & Hayes, 2015). This technology has allowed individuals to document their lives and manage social relationships without missing any details of ongoing events, effectively eliminating the constraints of time and space (Kim et al., 2016).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, adolescents were unable to engage in their usual leisure activities with peers and had to adapt to new routines through digital media (Domokos et al., 2020). Consequently, their use of social media as a means of maintaining social interactions increased (Orben et al., 2020). This situation contributed to a rise in mental health issues among young people and adults, including anxiety, depression and stress (Lee, 2020). Within this context, the consequences of social media use have emerged as a controversial issue, highlighting both the associated risks and benefits, particularly for the adolescent population (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

1.1. *Risks and Benefits of Social Media Use*

Social media has become an integral part of contemporary life. Young digital natives have normalised interactions through digital media, often equating them with face-to-face encounters. While social media offers a wide range of benefits, it also presents significant risks that must be examined to understand its impact on the social, emotional and psychological development of adolescents.

The benefits associated with adolescents' use of social networks primarily relate to entertainment, information-seeking, maintaining connections with peers, and expanding social circles, including opportunities to share ideas and images (Barker, 2009). Some studies even indicate that social networks can reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Best et al., 2014), thereby positively influencing key aspects of adolescent development such as self-esteem, identity formation and a sense of belonging (Valkenburg et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, there are also risks linked to social media use. Adolescents may be subject to harsh judgments regarding their physical appearance, which can result in body dissatisfaction and cyberbullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Spending a substantial proportion of their lives online exposes them to these risks, which can also affect their social interactions outside the digital environment (Baker & White, 2010).

In this context, it is important to emphasise the impact of social media during early adolescence, a period in which body self-awareness develops and is closely linked to self-esteem (Salomon & Brown, 2019). Peer approval also plays a significant role at this stage, and social media use may contribute to reduced self-esteem and heightened anxiety (Brinthaup & Lipka, 2002). Adolescents engage with numerous digital resources through online interactions, continuously generating impressions and seeking social validation. Some studies indicate that, as a result of this need for approval, females may experience greater body dissatisfaction when using social media (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004).

Consequently, social media use in adolescence involves both risks and benefits. It is therefore essential that parents, guardians and educators collaborate to foster safe environments and promote the responsible use of technology, particularly social media.

1.2. *Social Isolation and Social Media*

Loneliness is a complex construct, encompassing subjective experiences of insufficient quality in social connections, which may lead to dissatisfaction with personal and social needs (Rokach, 2011). According to Qualter et al. (2015), 80% of adolescents experience loneliness at some point in their lives. This sense of loneliness may arise from adolescents' ongoing efforts to gain independence from their parents in order to form stronger bonds with their peer group (Laursen & Hartl, 2013).

During adolescence, changes occur not only in social behaviour but also in social goals (Van den Bos, 2013). Social connectivity is fundamental for socio-emotional development and has a significant impact on mental health (Orben et al., 2020). Opportunities to participate in social experiences facilitate the acquisition of new social skills and values at critical moments, such as during identity formation (Dahl et al., 2018). Adolescents are motivated to seek experiences with peers, and during periods of pandemic-related isolation, social media has become the primary means of engagement (Nelson et al., 2016). Consequently, social media can serve as an important source of support and well-being in situations of external social isolation (Pickett et al., 2005).

Online contexts provide social support, although they can also expose users to negative effects. Positive outcomes are often associated with meaningful social connections, whereas negative outcomes typically stem from social comparisons within these interactions, which can exacerbate feelings of social isolation (Clark et al., 2018). In digital environments, harmful interactions such as cyberbullying or groups promoting inappropriate behaviour can occur (Kowalski et al., 2019). Conversely, social media also hosts support groups for individuals experiencing depression or loneliness (Breuer & Barker, 2015). Research indicates that online social interactions can be as meaningful, stable and significant as those occurring offline (Ellison et al., 2007; Whitty, 2008). Participation in online support groups reduces feelings of isolation and provides opportunities for personal growth and the development of social skills (Prescott et al., 2020).

In summary, social networks play a crucial role in mitigating social isolation among adolescents, particularly in circumstances where face-to-face interactions are restricted, such as during the pandemic. The online environment thus offers a space for individuals to connect with others and share concerns, ideas and experiences.

2. Method

This section outlines the methodology employed in this study, detailing its objectives and the stages undertaken to conduct a systematic review of the literature.

2.1. Objective

The objective of this article is to conduct a systematic review of publications examining the impact of social media use on the socio-emotional development of adolescents, with particular emphasis on experiences of social isolation.

2.2. Procedure

The methodology employed in this study is based on the PRISMA protocol, taking into account the stages necessary for a rigorous systematic review of the literature. The procedures outlined in PRISMA ensure that the review is conducted systematically and with methodological rigour.

The following sections provide a detailed account of each stage.

2.3. Stage 1: Defining the Research Question and Objectives

The research question guiding this study is as follows: What are the main contributions of research articles concerning social media use, social isolation, and adolescent socio-emotional development?

Based on this question, the following objectives have been established:

General objective

- To systematically review publications addressing social media use, socio-emotional development, and social isolation in adolescents.

Specific objectives

- To define the characteristics of the selected research articles, in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria established for this study.
- To identify the main contributions of the selected articles with respect to the topic under investigation.
- To outline potential research directions emerging from the systematic review of this literature.

2.4. Stage 2: Databases and Eligibility Criteria

To achieve the objectives of this study, high-quality scientific databases were selected, including Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest and Dialnet.

The eligibility criteria applied were as follows:

Inclusion criteria:

- Articles published from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to the present (2020–2024).
- Empirical studies.
- Articles written in Spanish or English.

- Open access articles available in full text.

Exclusion criteria:

- Articles that do not primarily address social media use and socio-emotional development.
- Articles that do not focus on social isolation.
- Articles that do not focus on adolescence.

2.5. Stage 3: Search Strategy

At this stage, the terminology used as keywords for the literature search was defined in both Spanish and English. Boolean operators were employed to combine the search terms, specifically using 'AND' and 'OR'.

The keywords used in the search were: 'social isolation', 'adolescence', 'emotional development', 'social networks', 'aislamiento social', 'adolescencia', 'desarrollo emocional' and 'redes sociales'.

Using this search strategy, the search was conducted in December 2024, resulting in an initial yield of 4,700 publications.

2.6. Stage 4: Selection process

Starting from the 4,700 articles identified through the defined search strategy, the previously established inclusion criteria were applied, resulting in a total of 100 scientific articles.

Table 1 presents the results by database, based on the following criteria:

- Articles published from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to the present (2020–2024).
- Empirical studies.
- Articles written in Spanish or English.
- Open access articles available in full text.

Table 1. Results applying inclusion criteria

DATABASES	RESULTS
WOS	31
SCOPUS	18
PROQUEST	33
DIALNET	18

Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025

Subsequently, the total was analysed using the pre-established exclusion criteria, with duplicates removed, resulting in 11 documents on which this systematic review focuses.

Table 2 shows the results by database, based on the following criteria:

- Articles that do not primarily address the use of social media and socio-emotional development.
- Articles that do not focus on the study of social isolation.
- Articles that do not focus on adolescence.

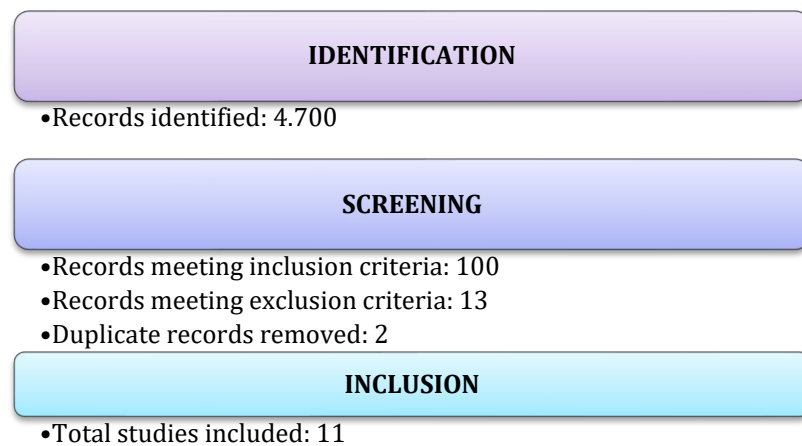
Table 2. Results applying exclusion criteria

DATABASES	RESULTS
WOS	10
SCOPUS	2 (duplicates in WOS)
PROQUEST	0
DIALNET	1

Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025

Figure 1 graphically represents the process of results obtained, following the flow chart shown.

Figure 1. Flow chart based on PRISMA



Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025

3. Results

Using the final sample of selected studies, that is, 11 articles, a detailed analysis of the scientific output is presented below, considering the variables guiding this study.

Table 3 displays the selected sample, examining aspects such as authorship, publication date, and the journal in which the articles appeared, in accordance with the coding system applied to the analysed works.

Table 3. Sample analysed by authorship, year and journal

CODE	AUTHORSHIP	YEAR	JOURNAL
A1	Cipolletta, S., Malighetti, C., Cenedese, C., & Spoto, A.	2020	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health
A2	Charmaraman, L., Richer, A., Liu, C., Lynch, A., & Moreno, M.	2021	Journal of Developmental and Behavioural Pediatrics
A3	Fumagalli, E., Dolmatzian, M., & Shrum, L.	2021	Frontiers in Psychology
A4	Magis-Weinberg, L., Gys, C., Berger, E., Domoff, S., & Dahl, R.	2021	Journal of Adolescent Research
A5	Locati, F., Milesi, A., Conte, F., Campbell, C., Fonagy, P., Ensink, K., and Parolin, L.	2022	Journal of Clinical Psychology
A6	Lawrence, D., Hunter, SC, Cunneen, R., Houghton, S., Zadow, C., Rosenberg, M., Madera, L., & Shilton, T.	2022	Journal of Child and Family Studies
A7	Towner, E., Tomova, L., Landensack, D., Chu, K., & Callaghan, B.	2022	Social Psychology
A8	Di Norcia, A., Mascaro, C., Bianchi, D., Szpunar, G., & Cannoni, E.	2023	Current Psychology
A9	Hemberg, J., Sundqvist, A., Korzhina, Y., Östman, L., Gylfe, S., Gädda, F., & Nyman-Kurkiala, P.	2023	International Journal of Adolescence and Youth
A10	Ciacchini, R., Orrú, G., Curcunia, E., Sabbatini, S., Scafuto, F., Lazzarelli, A., Miccoli, M., Gemignani, A., & Conversano, C.	2023	Children
A11	Tardivo, G., & Díaz, E.	2023	Journal of Political and Sociological Research

Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025

The results of the systematic review are presented in relation to the research objectives outlined.

With regard to the objective 'To define the characteristics of the selected research articles according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria defined for this study', it can be observed that, of the 11 articles selected, none share authorship or the journal of publication.

When considering the year of publication, the inclusion criterion relating to the time frame must be noted, namely the selection of articles from 2020 to 2024, corresponding to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis until the year in which this study was conducted. Among the selected articles, as shown in Table 3, there is variability in the year of publication. Specifically, 37% of the articles were published in 2023 (A8, A9, A10, A11), 27% in 2021 (A2, A3, A4) and 27% in 2022 (A5, A6, A7), with only 9% of studies published in 2020 (A1).

In terms of publication language (Table 4), 91% of the studies were written in English (10 articles), while 9% were written in Spanish (1 article).

Regarding the methodological approach, 82% of the articles employed a quantitative methodology (A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A10, A11), compared with 18% that employed a qualitative methodology (A1, A9).

Table 4. Sample analysed by methodology and language

CODE	METHODOLOGY	LANGUAGE
A1	Qualitative	English
A2	Quantitative	English
A3	Quantitative	English
A4	Quantitative	English
A5	Quantitative	English
A6	Quantitative	English
A7	Quantitative	English
A8	Quantitative	English
A9	Qualitative	English
A10	Quantitative	English
A11	Quantitative	Spanish

Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025.

With regard to the objective 'To establish the main contributions of the selected articles with respect to the subject under study', the results and conclusions of the selected documents have been analysed.

Adolescence represents a developmental stage in which peer relationships and the formation of social networks outside the family constitute fundamental aspects (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021). Although peer interactions are predominant during this stage, trust in parents remains crucial for self-regulation and the perception of stress, particularly in adverse personal or social circumstances where emotional support and regulation are required (Locati et al., 2022). One of the main concerns expressed by parents during their children's adolescence is the use of screens, specifically the time spent on social media and online games (Lawrence et al., 2022). This concern has contributed to an increase in family conflicts arising from excessive use of social media (Tardivo & Diaz, 2023).

Social media provides opportunities for self-expression, but it may also contribute to increased social isolation and reduced self-acceptance, as adolescents engage in a demanding search for continuous social recognition (Cipolletta et al., 2020). While the appropriate use of social media can support emotional well-being, it also entails heightened risks (Ciacchini et al., 2023). Among these risks, adolescents who are dissatisfied with their bodies tend to use social media excessively, which can exacerbate social anxiety and increase the likelihood of depressive symptoms (Charmaraman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, social media can serve to mitigate adolescent loneliness (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021).

In assessing the effects of physical isolation following COVID-19 lockdowns, excessive social media use is particularly notable. Such use is associated with feelings of loneliness and a heightened fear of missing out (FOMO), especially during adolescence (Fumagalli et al., 2021), highlighting the limitations of passive engagement with social media during periods of enforced isolation. During this crisis, adolescents experienced increased social isolation, which created a continuous need for support (Hemberg et al., 2023). In this context, social isolation has been linked to greater feelings of unhappiness and loneliness (Towner et al., 2022). Studies such as Di Norcia et al. (2023) illuminate the effects of the

pandemic on adolescents' psychological well-being, emphasising online contact with peers as a key protective factor during periods of social isolation.

Figure 2. Keywords

Source: Autor's elaboration, 2025

4. Conclusions

This study has conducted a systematic review of scientific publications examining social media use, socio-emotional development and social isolation in adolescents. The review demonstrates that this topic remains highly relevant within the existing literature.

Given the heterogeneity of the available studies, the review was refined using criteria related to publication date, specifically considering the period from 2020 to 2024, corresponding to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic up to the conclusion of this study. Additional inclusion criteria focused on the relevance of the topic addressed and the accessibility of the literature, with priority given to open-access articles.

The studies reviewed underscore the importance of viewing adolescence as a period in which self-acceptance, social desirability and social isolation may be influenced by excessive or inappropriate social media use (Cipolletta et al., 2020). In particular, young people in early adolescence may display heightened symptoms of depression or anxiety (Charmaraman et al., 2021). Conversely, social media use can facilitate the strengthening of relationships with peers beyond the online environment (Fumagalli et al., 2021). Positive online experiences have also been shown to mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021).

In conclusion, social media should not be regarded as either entirely harmless or entirely harmful. These studies encourage a balanced perspective, enabling a nuanced understanding of its impact on adolescents (Tardivo & Díaz, 2023). Families and educators play a crucial role in guiding adolescents towards responsible and healthy social media use. Through ongoing communication, they can provide adolescents with the tools to recognise the risks associated with social media and to develop a critical approach that supports their socio-emotional well-being.

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