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Impacts of Social Media Use and Information Environments on the Mental Health of Junior High School Students

Miao Liu

School of Health Industry, Changchun University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Changchun, China
amy_liumiao@icloud.com

Abstract:

In recent years, the mental health of junior high school students has drawn widespread public attention. Yet many discussions remain general and do not clearly connect everyday digital life with concrete risks and supports. Recent domestic surveys indicate that Chinese junior-high students spend about 2.5 hours per day on social media on average, and that short-video platforms are used by more than four-fifths of students; platform mix and regulation differ from Western contexts, so findings cannot be directly transferred, and time-limit-only controls have shown limited effects. This article reviews how social media use and today's digital information environment relate to common mental-health problems in early adolescence. It summarizes current concerns reported by schools and families, then analyzes three main pathways—sleep disruption, social evaluation and comparison, and online risks such as cyberbullying—through which digital patterns can affect students' emotional well-being. Focusing on grades 7–9 in urban and rural schools in eastern, central and western China, and drawing on recent international research together with domestic examples, it proposes multi-level responses at family, school and platform levels to help junior-high students develop healthier digital habits and a stronger, more stable sense of self.

Keywords: Junior High School Students; Social Media Use; Digital Information Environment; Mental Healt

1. Introduction

In early adolescence, young people move rapidly through biological, cognitive, and social transitions. They start to form a more stable sense of self, rely more on peer approval, and manage communication technologies with less adult supervision. Meanwhile, schools and families in many countries have reported increased concerns about anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances, peer conflicts, and vulnerable help-seeking behaviors among students aged approximately 11 to 14 [1–3]. These developmental

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tasks now take place in a digital environment, where social media, short video platforms, messaging applications, and algorithm-driven feeds are part of daily life and can be accessed during nighttime and class hours [4,5]. Because of this overlap, it becomes necessary to describe what kinds of mental-health difficulties are appearing in middle school; to clarify how patterns of social media use and information exposure may contribute to them; and to turn current research into practical guidance that educators, caregivers, and policymakers can actually apply. The discussion below, therefore, first outlines the problems that are being observed, then examines the main explanatory pathways, and finally proposes actions at family, school, and societal levels.

To make these links concrete, the paper distinguishes different usage scenarios (such as short-video browsing, messaging, gaming and information searching) and information types, and focuses on junior-high students (grades 7–9) in urban and rural schools across eastern, central and western China, using a synthesis of international literature combined with domestic case analysis.

2. Mental Health Problems in Early Adolescence

This section describes the kinds of emotional and behavioral difficulties that are most often reported for middle school students and explains why this age period makes these problems more consequential than in childhood.

2.1 Definitions, Common Presentations, and Clinical Relevance

Mental-health problems in early adolescence usually refer to patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that cause distress or interfere with daily functioning in school, at home, or with peers. Among middle school students, anxiety can appear as persistent worry about academic performance, peer acceptance, or online reputation; somatic complaints such as headaches or stomachaches; and avoidance of new or evaluative situations [1,3]. Depressive symptoms are often shown not only as sadness but also as irritability, loss of interest in hobbies, changes in sleep or appetite, and negative self-evaluation—"not good enough" is a frequent theme for this age group [6,7]. Attention and behavior difficulties may surface in classrooms as restlessness, impulsive reactions to peers, or conflicts with teachers.

Compared with younger children, early adolescents are more aware of social status and more sensitive to exclusion, which can intensify emotional reactions. At the same time, they begin to navigate academic tracking, entrance exams, and transition decisions that have long-term consequences. Because of these pressures, even moderate emotional problems can lead to declined grades, school refusal, or risky behavior if they are not recognized and addressed. Large-scale surveys suggest that the prevalence of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and self-harm has increased among adolescents over the past decade, although trends vary by country and subgroup [2,3,8].

Under the current digital environment, new patterns also appear: algorithm-driven popularity metrics can heighten social-comparison anxiety, late-night short-video browsing delays sleep onset, and compulsive checking reflects emerging digital dependence. Domestic surveys suggest that roughly one-third of students showing signs of such dependence also report frequent anxiety or low mood, indicating that digital factors contribute a meaningful share of day-to-day emotional problems in this group.

2.2 Significance of Problems at This Stage

Difficulties emerging in the middle school years matter for several developmental reasons. First, this period lays down habits for emotion regulation, coping, and help-seeking; strategies learned here can either support later resilience or make adolescents more vulnerable in high school when academic and social demands increase [3,8]. Second, mental health is tightly connected to academic and social engagement. Students who are tired, anxious, or preoccupied with online conflicts learn less efficiently, miss more school, and withdraw from challenging tasks. Third, peer processes intensify in these years and move across offline and online spaces; experiences such as exclusion from group chats, rumor-spreading, or public comparison of likes and followers can be interpreted as serious social threats. Finally, help-seeking is still fragile. Many students hesitate to tell adults about online harassment or nighttime device use because they fear blame or loss of access to their phones. For these reasons, even moderate symptoms can lead to broader difficulties if they are not buffered by adult support and school climate [2,3,8].

2.3 Current Concerns from Schools and Families

Reports from educators and caregivers in recent years show several recurring patterns. Many students go to bed late because of device use, fear of missing out (FOMO), and irregular routines; insufficient sleep then amplifies irritability, attentional problems, and anxiety the next day [1,9]. A second pattern is heightened social comparison, particularly around appearance and popularity, because likes, streaks, and follower counts are visible and easily

compared. This tends to be especially sensitive for girls in early adolescence, but is not limited to them [10]. A third pattern is the spillover of online conflicts into school: name-calling, non-consensual sharing of images, exclusion from group chats, and cyberbullying can continue 24/7 and reach wider audiences than in-person incidents [11]. At the same time, schools also notice positive uses of digital media: students joining interest-based groups, student clubs organizing through messaging apps, and creative projects that increase belonging and competence [10]. These mixed realities make it necessary to move beyond simple screen-time debates and instead look closely at content, context, timing, and supports.

3. Social Media Use and the Digital Information Environment

The previous section described "what" problems are being seen. This section analyzes "why", linking typical design and use patterns to early-adolescent vulnerabilities. For junior-high students, immature executive functions, strong sensitivity to status and peer evaluation, and rapidly shifting friendship networks interact with platform features such as late-night feeds and notifications, public metrics and idealized images, and always-on group chats, helping explain why similar amounts of screen time can be neutral for some students but stressful for others, especially in the domestic platform ecology.

3.1 Patterns and Contexts of Use

Surveys in the United States and other countries show that most early adolescents use at least one social media or messaging platform, even when the formal age limit is 13 [4,5]. Use is mobile-first, brief, and frequent. Rather than long sessions, students intersperse "micro-sessions" across the day—between classes, during commutes, and especially at night—combined with a longer period of scrolling in the evening. Activities include chatting with classmates, watching short-form videos, following influencers, participating in fandom or gaming communities, and browsing algorithmic recommendations [4,10]. Communication often shifts between private messaging and public or semi-public spaces, and many students maintain multiple accounts to manage different audiences.

Time pattern matters because late-evening engagement is strongly linked to delayed sleep and to heightened emotional reactivity the next day [1]. More important than total minutes online is what students do, with whom, and under what supports. Active, social, and creative uses—messaging close friends, collaborating on projects, posting original content, or joining moderated interest groups—are often associated with neutral or positive mood, especially when interactions are supportive [10]. Passive consumption—endless personalized feeds, watching others without interaction, exposure to idealized images—shows stronger links to negative affect and social comparison. Design features such as auto-play, infinite scroll, variable rewards, and public metrics require considerable self-regulation; these features make it harder for young people, whose executive functions are still developing, to disengage [8].

3.2 Pathways Linking Digital Use to Mental Health

Research from large-scale surveys and experience-sampling studies generally finds small average associations between social media use and mental-health outcomes once demographic and offline risks are controlled [10]. However, several more specific pathways show clearer links for middle school students.

A first pathway is sleep. Nighttime device use delays bedtime, fragments sleep through notifications, and exposes students to emotionally arousing content right before bed; inadequate sleep then raises next-day mood problems and reduces coping resources [1]. A second pathway is social evaluation and comparison. Visible popularity metrics and highly edited images can lower body satisfaction and self-esteem, particularly for students who are already sensitive about appearance or peer status [10]. A third pathway is exposure to negative online interactions—exclusion, harassment, rumor-spreading, or direct cyberbullying—which is repeatedly associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and school avoidance; such associations are stronger when adult monitoring is low or when school responses are slow [11].

Individual differences moderate all three pathways. Students with pre-existing emotional difficulties, girls in early adolescence, youth from marginalized groups, and students who spend many hours unsupervised online tend to show stronger associations between problematic patterns of use and mental-health outcomes [3,8,10]. At the same time, supportive relationships and offline connections can buffer risk: adolescents who feel close to parents, teachers, and at least one friend generally report better well-being even when they spend substantial time online [8].

3.3 Online Risks and Misunderstood Benefits

Public debate often highlights risks and proposes blanket restrictions, but adolescents themselves report a more complex picture. Alongside harms, digital media provide closeness with friends, opportunities to practice creativity, information about hobbies, identity exploration in

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supportive spaces, and help during stress [7,10]. For shy or marginalized students, asynchronous messaging or moderated groups may feel safer than face-to-face interaction and can build social skills over time. Recognizing these benefits does not deny risks; rather, it indicates that the most effective strategy is targeted and layered: reduce high-risk patterns (late-night use, unmoderated group chats, algorithmic rabbit holes), while protecting and scaffolding positive uses. This distinction is important because it prevents adults from sending mixed messages and helps schools focus on realistic, developmentally appropriate expectations.

Survey data from several regions also suggest that about six in ten junior-high students discover hobbies, academic tips or peer support through digital media. Benefits and risks vary across groups and platforms—for example, girls more often report positive support from moderated social interactions, while boys report higher exposure to online conflicts—and features of mainstream domestic platforms such as WeChat Moments and Douyin's recommendation feeds shape both opportunities and vulnerabilities, so evaluations need to be made within these concrete usage scenarios.

4. Multi-Level Responses

Because the mechanisms described above operate across home, school, and platform design, responses also need to be multi-level. This section describes what can be done and keeps the focus on actions rather than on further explanations.

4.1 Family-Level Actions

Family routines can lower several of the highest-risk patterns—especially deep-night scrolling, emotionally driven short-video consumption, and reluctance to report online harassment. A stable evening schedule is a useful starting point. When dinner, homework, washing up, and bedtime follow roughly the same order on school days, device use becomes easier to move to earlier hours. Bedrooms can remain screen-free after a set time, while charging stations stay in shared spaces; this makes late-night online interactions less likely and reduces exposure to arousing content right before sleep [1,3]. A clear home standard helps implementation—for school nights, many families find it workable to keep electronic devices out of bedrooms after about 21:30 and aim for lights-out before 22:00, using simple family contracts and regular discussion to reduce resistance.

Joint media use strengthens monitoring in a non-confrontational way. Caregivers can occasionally sit with the student to look at the platforms that are currently popular in that age group, ask which functions feel stressful, and invite the student to demonstrate how problems are reported or blocked. This stabilizes that online issues such as group-chat exclusion or image-based bullying can be brought to adults without losing all access. When online harm actually occurs—for example, a classmate spreads edited pictures in a group—families can help the student take screenshots, record the time and platform, report within the app, and then decide whether the school should be informed. Documenting the event reduces feelings of helplessness and shows that the problem is being handled [11].

Replacing one activity with another is important because early adolescents rarely succeed with "do less" instructions alone. When a family decides to reduce an application that generates compulsive scrolling, a concrete alternative needs to appear in the same time slot: sports, existing hobbies, music practice, art, cooking, or simple relaxation routines. Older siblings or cousins can model such alternatives, which is sometimes more persuasive than adult instructions. Information hygiene can be practiced together: before forwarding a dramatic video about a classmate or a social issue, two independent sources can be checked, and the emotional tone of the message can be discussed. This teaches the student to slow down, evaluate, and avoid participating in rumor cycles.

Finally, families should recognize warning signs that call for professional help: persistent changes in sleep and appetite, withdrawal from friends, repeated exposure to cyberbullying, or self-deprecating statements after time online. In these cases, online safety steps (blocking, reporting, changing privacy settings) should be combined with appointments with school counselors or mental-health providers. Family-level efforts work best when guidance, co-use, and replacement activities are emphasized more than punishment [7,8].

4.2 School-Level Actions

Schools are the places where online problems become visible in classrooms, so school policies need to translate general ideas about digital well-being into daily procedures. One practical approach is to embed short digital-citizenship mini-lessons into subjects that students already take—language arts, social studies or homeroom. A feasible design is about eight 10–15 minute sessions per semester, covering information screening, online etiquette, rumor-busting and how to support peers who are cyberbullied, with simple pre/post checklists and classroom observations to track change, and with clear rules for classroom device use and age-appropriate campus-network filters. Each mini-lesson can focus on one narrow skill:

recognizing manipulative design features, responding to online exclusion, evaluating sources before sharing, or supporting peers who have been cyberbullied. Repetition throughout the semester is preferable to a single assembly, as early adolescents learn better from frequent, small exposures.

Schools should also maintain close communication with families to ensure consistent expectations regarding online behavior and to promptly identify and address any related incidents, without sharing unnecessary details about individual students.

4.3 Societal and Platform-Level Measures

Several actions need to occur beyond individual families and schools. Platforms that are widely used by young teens can, in addition to defaulting to stricter privacy settings and limiting harmful recommendations, set transparent triggers for "take a break" prompts—for instance, after roughly 45 minutes of continuous scrolling—and publish clear labels for sensitive content categories. Joint inspections by education authorities and platforms, together with public digital-literacy courses for under-resourced regions, can improve accountability and help narrow regional gaps. Governments and research agencies can require anonymized data access for independent researchers so that the effects of specific design choices on youth mental health can be evaluated more transparently [8,10]. Public education campaigns can focus on digital literacy, emotional health, and bystander behavior in online spaces, reaching caregivers who do not receive school communications.

Expanding equitable access to safe online learning and moderated communities supports students who currently rely on commercial platforms for all social interaction. Finally, legal protections against online harassment, non-consensual image sharing, and doxxing need to be clear and accessible to adolescents, so that serious cases do not depend only on school discipline. These social measures make it easier for families and schools to uphold health standards.

5. Conclusion

Middle school is a sensitive and consequential period for mental health: students are forming identities, navigating friendships and facing rising academic expectations while communicating in blended online–offline spaces. Average links between total screen time and poor mental health are modest, but specific patterns—late-night use that disrupts sleep, intensified social comparison via public metrics and images, and cyberbullying or other online conflicts—consistently harm particular groups. The most useful responses are therefore targeted and layered: schools and families should first address these high-risk patterns and then strengthen coaching and replacement activities, while platforms adopt rest prompts and clearer labeling; one possible technical path is a light-weight "digital-use health" app for junior-high students, integrated into campus mental-health guidelines. This review combines international evidence with domestic cases but does not separately analyze left-behind children or students in special education, so future work should track interventions over time and examine how approaches need to adapt across eastern, central and western regions.

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