

Social Media Shadows: Unveiling the Hidden Struggles of African American Youth on Facebook

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Abstract: While Facebook has become a central element of digital culture, its impact on the mental health of African American youth remains underexplored, particularly in relation to intersecting marginalized identities. Despite extensive research on social media and youth well-being, there is a significant gap in understanding how Facebook contributes to mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, especially for African American adolescents who experience systemic racism and discrimination both offline and online. This paper addresses these shortcomings by examining the intersection of race, socio-economic status, and the pervasive influence of social media on African American youth. Utilizing the Ecological Systems Model and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), this study critically analyzes existing literature to uncover how Facebook exacerbates mental health struggles through online discrimination, cyberbullying, and harmful social comparison. Furthermore, the research highlights the underrepresentation of African American LGBTQ+ youth in current studies, emphasizing the need for intersectional approaches. Findings reveal that while Facebook offers opportunities for connection and identity exploration, it also intensifies mental health challenges due to frequent exposure to online racism and social exclusion. This study concludes by advocating for targeted interventions, including digital literacy programs, supportive online communities, and improved content moderation, to mitigate the negative mental health impacts on African American youth in the digital age.

Keywords: Facebook, African American, Anxiety, Intersectionality, Online Discrimination.

1. Introduction

Digital culture, shaped by the internet, digital media, and virtual environments, has revolutionized communication and identity formation globally [1]. Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has evolved into a powerful tool for social networking, enabling users to share personal information, connect with others, and form online communities [2]. For African American youth, aged 12-18 years old, Facebook serves both social connection and a potential source of stress. Despite Facebook's minimum age requirement of 13, many younger users—around 7.5 million—are active [3]. African American youth, who spend an average of 11:10 hours per day on digital platforms, face both opportunities for cultural expression and risks from exposure to discrimination and harmful online behaviors [3]. The mental health of African American youth is already shaped by systemic racism, economic disinvestment, and limited access to quality mental health care [4].

Rising depression and suicidal behavior among African American youth are driven by chronic exposure to racism. Between 2005 and 2015, adolescent depression rates increased from 8.7% to 12.7%, driven by structural barriers [5]. Systemic issues like racial segregation and economic disinvestment have worsened the mental health of African American youth, further impeding their access to mental health care due to cultural stigma, distrust in healthcare systems, and historical exploitation [4, 6, 7]. Additionally, by 2015, 71% of teens used platforms like Facebook to build connections, but the internet often mirrors offline biases, facilitating anonymous, harmful behavior [8, 9]. African American youth frequently experience online racial slurs and hostility, exacerbating depression and anxiety [10, 11]. A study by Oshin et al. found that 20% of Black youth experienced online harassment due to their race, with 63% encountering racism on social media, significantly increasing the risk of suicidal thoughts [12].

Despite the existing research on the negative mental health impacts of social media on African American youth, gaps remain. Specifically, the experiences of subgroups like LGBTQ+ individuals and the application of theoretical frameworks, remain underexplored. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), rooted in Vygotsky's work and developed by Engeström, has been widely applied in education but has not been fully utilized to examine how digital platforms like Facebook contribute to the mental health struggles of African American youth [13, 14, 15]. In addition, the Ecological Systems Model highlights how Facebook's exposure to racial discrimination and cyberbullying affects African American youth [9, 16]. When combined with intersectionality, the model reveals how Facebook amplifies the broader "matrix of domination" [17].

This research addresses a significant gap by examining the impact of Facebook on the mental health of African American youth, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities. With rising depression and suicide rates among Black youth due to racial discrimination and other systemic barriers, understanding the digital dimension of these issues is crucial. The study explores how Facebook's environment, characterized by pervasive social comparison and online discrimination, affects anxiety and depression. By highlighting these unique stressors, the research aims to inform targeted mental health interventions and culturally responsive support systems tailored to the needs of this vulnerable population.

2. Discussion on Facebook's Impact on the Mental Health of African American Youth

Facebook, as a dominant digital platform, profoundly shapes the mental health of African American youth by perpetuating a dual environment of connection and discrimination. On the positive side, these interactions are linked to better friendship quality and greater intimacy during adolescence [8]. Social media's constant connectivity allows teens to stay in touch, share experiences, and offer emotional support, strengthening their sense of belonging. This is especially crucial during adolescence when navigating complex social dynamics and establishing identity within peer groups. However, for African American teens, who often face unique challenges in social and educational environments, the benefits of social media are accompanied by significant risks. Passive Facebook use, where individuals scroll through content without actively engaging, has been particularly linked to negative mental health outcomes [18]. Unlike active use, which involves interactions like commenting, messaging, or posting, passive use encourages users to consume vast amounts of information about others without direct participation. This type of engagement fosters social comparison by exposing users to carefully curated, often overly flattering portrayals of others' lives. Verduyn et al. found that passive Facebook use over time predicts increases in envy, resulting in declines in subjective well-being [18].

The platform's emphasis on visual and narrative curation encourages adolescents to present idealized versions of themselves, often influenced by mainstream beauty and lifestyle standards that rarely reflect the diversity of African American experiences. For minority youth, this pressure to

conform to unrealistic ideals contributes to a pervasive sense of inadequacy. The exposure to idealized body images on these platforms is a known predictor of heightened body consciousness and body shame, affecting both male and female adolescents [8]. Studies indicate that adolescents who frequently view attractive profiles on Facebook lowers body satisfaction, triggering maladaptive behaviors like disordered eating and depressive symptoms [8]. The data indicate that rising depression rates and severe mental health challenges among African American youth are driven largely by systemic barriers, racial discrimination, and online harassment, contributing to heightened risks of suicide. These findings suggest that both systemic and interpersonal racism significantly exacerbate mental health issues. For minority adolescents, the pressure is even greater, as they navigate digital spaces that often marginalize or misrepresent their cultural identities. Moreover, Facebook can exacerbate social anxiety, particularly through online ostracism - the feeling of being excluded or rejected online. Research shows that 13–14-year-olds are particularly sensitive to peer acceptance and are also vulnerable to the severe effects of online social rejection [8]. The platform's design, which prioritizes engagement and visibility, can make feelings of exclusion particularly acute. For African American youth, who may already feel marginalized offline, the additional layer of online rejection can significantly exacerbate anxiety and depressive symptoms. The pressure to present their ideal selves online exacerbates these feelings, especially for minority ethnic adolescents. This exacerbates the tension between the desire to belong and the fear of being ignored or ostracized online [8].

To critically examine these impacts, employing the Ecological Systems Model and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) offers a nuanced perspective on how Facebook influences the mental health of African American youth. The Ecological Systems Model positions Facebook within the ecosystem, highlighting its role in shaping everyday experiences through pervasive racial discrimination and social comparison. The platform's algorithm-driven nature often elevates harmful content while also creating opportunities for social connection. This duality disrupts the microsystem—encompassing family and peer relationships—by allowing negative online encounters to permeate offline life, intensifying anxiety and depression. While supportive home environments can mitigate some of these effects, many African American youth lack such protective factors, making them particularly susceptible to the psychological toll of adverse online interactions.

CHAT frames Facebook as an 'activity system' in which African American youth (subjects) engage with the platform (object), mediated by digital tools, community interactions, societal rules, and the division of labor within the digital space. This perspective highlights the contradictions that African American youth face: Facebook is a platform for both empowerment and harm. On one hand, it provides spaces for community support and identity affirmation; on the other, it exposes these youth to cyberbullying, stereotyping, and discrimination. The tensions between these elements often exacerbate mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, as youth struggle to reconcile the dual realities of affirmation and rejection. This understanding informs the development of culturally sensitive mental health care approaches that directly tackle often overlooked drivers of mental health disparities.

Facebook also mirrors broader societal biases, perpetuating a "matrix of domination" where African American youth encounter the compounded effects of race, socio-economic status, and gender identity within digital interactions [17]. The platform's structural dynamics do not just reflect existing inequalities—they actively shape and reinforce them, influencing how African American youth perceive themselves and their place in society. The pressure to fit into dominant cultural narratives and the frequent encounters with racial hostility online can erode self-esteem, increase social withdrawal, and contribute to a pervasive sense of disconnection.

3. Implications for Mental Health Interventions

The findings underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions for African American youth, especially those impacted by the use of Facebook. Parents, as primary support systems, can play a crucial role by fostering open dialogues about online experiences, teaching youth how to manage racial discrimination and social comparison on platforms like Facebook. Research suggests that parental support can significantly buffer the negative effects of online racial hostility and improve youth mental health outcomes [19]. Educators also need to incorporate digital literacy programs that teach students how to critically engage with social media, helping them avoid the detrimental effects of passive use, which has been linked to increased feelings of envy and depression [18].

Policymakers must play a more active role by enforcing stricter regulations on platforms like Facebook. These regulations could include requiring social media companies to implement content moderation policies to reduce exposure to harmful content, such as racial discrimination or cyberbullying, which has been linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety among African American youth [20]. It is crucial for mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, social workers, and researchers focused on adolescent health, racial equity, and digital behavior to be aware of these results to create more inclusive and effective support systems. This understanding informs the development of culturally sensitive mental health care approaches that directly tackle often overlooked drivers of mental health disparities. Additionally, policymakers can mandate transparency regarding Facebook's algorithms, ensuring that they do not inadvertently promote harmful content through passive exposure [18]. By addressing these issues through comprehensive policies, policymakers can create a safer digital environment that prioritizes the mental well-being of African American youth.

4. Analysis of Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on the impact of Facebook on the mental health of African American youth, a significant gap remains in understanding the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within this demographic. The intersectionality framework, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a critical lens for examining how multiple marginalized identities—such as race, gender, and sexual orientation—intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and mental health challenges [21]. However, current literature often treats African American male/female youth as a monolithic group, failing to account for the distinct experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, African American female adolescents often face compounded forms of online discrimination, including racial and gender-based harassment, which differ significantly from the experiences of their male counterparts [9].

A key limitation in current research is the lack of specific studies on how African American LGBTQ+ youth experience discrimination. While existing studies often examine racial discrimination or homophobia in digital spaces separately, few explore how these forms of discrimination intersect. This is critical because African American LGBTQ+ youth face multiple layers of marginalization through the intersection of racism and homophobia [22], leading to unique stressors that worsen mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. For example, racism within the LGBTQ+ community, combined with homophobia within their racial communities, can leave these youths feeling isolated from both groups [22]. Research that only focuses on one aspect of their identity fails to capture this double burden. Therefore, addressing these intersecting identities is essential to developing effective mental health interventions tailored to the unique needs of African American LGBTQ+ youth. Without this, interventions risk being incomplete and ineffective.

Another limitation is the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ African American voices in qualitative research. Research has found that online platforms such as forums and chat groups are important

resources for LGBTQI+ youth, providing a means of accessing information and connecting with others despite their limited support in the physical environment [23]. However, few studies have examined how the Facebook environment, a central part of digital culture, specifically impacts African American LGBTQ+ youth, who experience both racism and homophobia. This dual discrimination leads to distinct mental health challenges.

To fill this gap, qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups are essential. These methods would allow researchers to capture the personal narratives of African American LGBTQ+ youth, shedding light on how they cope with online racism, homophobia, and identity expression on Facebook. For example, questions could be explored like: "In what ways do you feel supported or isolated by the Facebook community?" and "How do you manage your identity as an African American LGBTQ+ youth online?". Such questions would allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how this subgroup experiences the intersection of their race, gender identity, and sexual orientation on digital platforms. Also, the result of the studies would help assess how Facebook's design features, algorithms, and community guidelines either support or exacerbate their mental health.

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by African American youth, driven by systemic barriers, racial discrimination, and the impact of digital culture, particularly on platforms like Facebook. The findings emphasize the dual role of Facebook as both a space for connection and a source of racial hostility, social comparison, and exclusion, all of which contribute to increased anxiety and depression among these youths. Limitations of this study include a lack of specific focus on African American LGBTQ+ individuals, whose intersecting identities expose them to unique and compounded stressors not fully addressed in current research.

Future research should aim to bridge this gap by exploring the distinct experiences of African American LGBTQ+ youth, particularly in digital spaces where they face dual discrimination from both racial and sexual orientation-based biases. Qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, are crucial for capturing these nuanced experiences and informing more inclusive mental health interventions. Additionally, future studies should investigate the specific mechanisms through which Facebook's algorithms and community dynamics influence mental health outcomes, providing evidence to guide policy changes aimed at reducing exposure to harmful content. This comprehensive approach is necessary to develop targeted strategies that support the mental well-being of African American youth in the digital age.

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