

Article

Digital Literature and social media as Contemporary Literary Spaces: Impact on Connection, Well-Being, and Society

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Abstract: Digital literature and social media have completely changed how texts are composed, read and understood and how relationships are formed, lived and participated in, as well as how identities are constructed. Social media is not just a space filled with Communications, but a space where people can make digital literary texts, with narratives, poems, personal stories, memes and multimodal texts circulating around the world. This paper reviews pertinent recent research and empirical studies on the effects of these digital literary environments on social interaction, mental health, youth development, political discussions, and social inequality. Opportunities and challenges are assessed in the review. Digital literary practices promote creativity, collaborative storytelling, self-expression, cultural engagement, and social support, on one hand. On the other hand, they have been linked to well-documented problems like social comparison, compulsive use, misinformation, algorithmic amplification, and exposure to harmful content, especially by adolescents. The paper also discusses the connection between digital literature, polarization, and the digital divide, suggesting that access inequalities to digital textual culture contribute to inequalities in society and education. The paper synthesizes various interdisciplinary perspectives from media studies, digital humanities, communication and psychology, to find that digital literature, and social media in general, is not automatically good or bad. Their social impact is grounded in patterns of creating, interpreting, technological design and engaging with a user. Digital literacy, ethical governance of platform production processes, and ongoing cross-disciplinary research into new forms of AI-supported and participatory digital literature are important points emphasized in the study.

Keywords: digital humanities; social media; participatory culture; literacy; well-being; social capital

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1. Introduction

Literature never existed outside of the technologies that transport it. History of texts and textual circulation has always been linked to the material circumstances under which texts could be written, who can write them, and how they are received. The internet, and, more recently, social media websites, are the most recent and far-reaching change of this type. Interpersonal communication is no longer the only activity taking place on platforms like Wattpad, TikTok, Instagram, Archive of Our Own (AO3), Twine, or X (formerly Twitter); they are becoming publishers, distributors, and interpreters of literature (Hossain 2025). Poems are written and performed in 15-second videos; novels are published in serial chapters to millions of readers; memes are densely allusive, compressed texts that circulate in communities that don't exist around bookstores or classrooms around the world; and communities of readers and writers gather around hashtags instead of bookstores or classrooms. Dera (2024) refers to this development as the rise of "BookTok" as a new literary institution that is slowly challenging the reviewing and publishing gatekeepers in determining what is read, sold, and culturally valued.

This paper examines the literature from the perspectives of several disciplines and presents an interdisciplinary review of the literature on digital literature and the social media as current literary spaces. It utilizes media studies, digital humanities, communication research and psychology to explore the ways in which these environments impact social connection, mental health and well-being, youth development, political discourse, and social inequalities. This central argument here is that digital literary spaces are neither good nor bad in themselves, but rather that the social implications of these spaces will depend on three: the design of the platforms where they are placed, the practices and literacies of the users that inhabit them, and the broader structural conditions—

economic, educational, and political in which access to digital textual culture is distributed. The rest of the paper is organised thematically. In section 2, digital literature is placed theoretically as a literary space of its own. Section 3 looks at participatory culture and genre innovation. Social interaction and social capital, psychological well-being, youth identity development, political polarization and misinformation, and the digital divide are discussed in the empirical literature in sections 4-8. Section 9 deals with the new role of artificial intelligence in literary production, while Section 10 explores digital literacy and platform governance as policy solutions. Finally, the paper suggests the integrative framework for understanding the digital literature and social media as spaces of literature with an impact which is not predetermined.

2. Digital Literature as a modern space of literature

Digital theorists have contended that electronic text and networked text are not merely electronically printed versions of existing texts but represent a new type of writing. Aarseth's (1997) concept of "ergodic literature" literature that demands some effort from the reader to navigate predicted much of the interaction and branching we can find on tools like Twine and interactive Instagram stories. Building on this idea, Hayles (2012) posited that today's digital media create "technogenesis", a phenomenon in which the mind and the artwork evolve alongside technology that creates and consumes them. This co-evolution is amplified by the algorithmic feed, character limits, the comment thread, and the short-form video found on social media, and they are not neutral vessels for literary content but active participants in its form, pacing, and reception (Dera 2024).

Empirical work on specific platforms illustrates how these formal constraints generate new literary genres and reading practices. In their work, Dezuanni et al. (2022) demonstrate that young readers using #bookstagram and #booktok engage in practices of "mediation" (esthetically composed pictures of books, emotional reactions on video and para-social relationships with authors and readers alike) that combine literary criticism and video self-presentation. Similarly, to BookTok, the study by Hyatt (2024) shows that the platform has widened the definition of who reads and reads about books who may not consider themselves to be books people and has created new divisions between "high" and "low" literature, which are frequently based on genres, genders, and ages. In the sociological sense, these are literary institutions: they make literature visible; they create literary "canons" based on algorithmically amplified content and virality of hashtags, and they establish new parameters of literary value beyond formal complexity, based on the "emotional appeal" and the "sharability" of the content.

This transformation exists not only in the anglophone or western context. Afrophone literary production has been studied and recorded in the use of Facebook and other social media to disseminate poetry and popular fiction, in ways that avoid the limitations of the print publishing infrastructure often lacking, or limited in availability, in many African contexts, and in the innovation of new, digital-oral hybrid poetic forms. The recognition of the visual and performative as vital to literary meaning-making in the current day is similarly reinforced in the Gulf's TikTok poetry, which has been adapted for the platform; what is most notable is how these are not just tools for wrapping text, but integral to the processes of art-making itself. As a whole, this body of scholarship suggests digital literature and social media are not a fringe or afterthought of "real" literature, but a new and important, global literature space of its own.

It is especially important to highlight the global spread of these dynamics because a lot of the early research in digital literature was performed with a bias toward anglophone, North American and European contexts. Recent studies of Afrophone literary production highlight how writers have been able to build readerships for poetry and popular fiction written in their native languages using Facebook, WhatsApp groups and other widely used platforms to bypass the expense and geographic distribution of print publishing systems, historically unavailable to these types of writing. Comparative literary scholarship about digital space in general places these developments in the context of a longer tradition of literary experimentation with spatial and non-linear form, from cyberpunk works of Gibson's early days to Moulthrop's hypertext novel, *Victory Garden*, that continues the experimentation begun over decades of writers' work with networked and non-linear text forms to describe contemporary experience. The key difference is scale: while hypertext fiction from the 1990s was enjoyed by small, technically focused communities, today, platform-based digital literature is shared by millions of people and is having a profound impact on how literature is read and received its economics and sociology.

3. Participatory Culture, Digital Storytelling, and Genre Innovation

One of the key characteristics of digital literary spaces is what Jenkins (2006) called "participatory culture"; a cultural environment that has low barriers to entry into the creation of content, high encouragement to create and share content, and informal mentoring relationships between all participants. This participatory logic is seen in fan fiction archives, collaborative world building wikis, and meme culture, where authorship isn't limited to any particular credentialed author but is spread throughout a community. Recent scholarship has been extended to incorporate the increasing presence of Artificial Intelligence in fan communities, adding to Jenkins's model. Jenkins's model has been expanded to include the role of Artificial Intelligence in fan communities. However, as AI tools produce fan art, AI tools create writing tools, and synthetic media is a growing feature of fan creations, participatory culture needs to be rethought as "human-community-machine" interaction, according to Li and Pang (2024).

Digital storytelling is also an increasingly powerful medium for community-based and civic literary production, extended from entertainment settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hou (2025) examined a participatory storytelling initiative on Facebook which allowed community to share their own narratives those that were hopeful and linked to resilient social relationships that created a sense of agency, connectedness, and a type of social capital that has been described as "virtual social capital", that is, trust and reciprocity built through repeated interactions with others rather than face-to-face interactions. Similarly, Vanner, Singh and Alexander (2025) report on the use of virtual digital storytelling in transnational participatory research, as a multimodal digital story was produced by youth activists from Africa and Asia, and enabled them to create cross-cultural solidarity with each other, even if they had not met before. The cases here suggest that digital storytelling is an aesthetic and a civic practice, a literary expression that cannot be divorced from practices of community formation, collective sense-making.

The space of genre innovation is another feature of this literature. Poems on TikTok, “microfiction,” and “lyric-told” narrative compress lyric and narrative into a single unit of image-text; the meme combines narrative, irony, and culture into a single unit of image-text; and interactive and branching narratives merge reading and play. This upsurge of new genres has not been a degradation of literary density and complexity as some cultural commentators have feared; in most cases, it's actually lowered the barrier to creative engagement and created new aesthetic conventions that are specific to networked, algorithmically mediated circulation (Dera 2024; Dezuanni et al. 2022).

3.1 Memes, Multimodal Texts, and the Expansion of Literary Form

Perhaps one of the most unique genre innovations of the social media era is the meme: a unit of complex, densely allusive image, text and cultural reference that is circulated by iterative copying, remixing and re-contextualization. While memes are not, generally speaking, included in the traditional definition of ‘literature’, they share several features with epigram, parody and satire (compression, irony, intertextual allusion, and dependence on a common community of interpretation for completion). Digital humanities scholarship increasingly is also considering memes and other multimodal social media texts as worthy of literary and rhetorical investigation, because their brevity does not mean they are less sophisticated, but instead that they have their own set of formal constraints like the sonnet or the epigram that are comparable and unique. This extension of the definition of a literary text has implications for literacy instruction as well; if students already have sophisticated skills to interpret irony, allusion, and audience design in memes, digital literacy and literature programs can draw on those skills and extend them to the study of print literature, rather than seeing them as separate from or competitive with printed literature.

4. The social aspects of learning, online communities, and social capital

Digital literary spaces are social spaces as well, and there is a considerable amount of literature that discusses whether or not they are creating social capital. To the online communities, Anniciai et al. (2025) add that the three types of social capital – structural, relational and cognitive (network ties, trust, and shared narratives, respectively) can be developed through continued knowledge exchange within digital communities, which can lead to a more human-centered form of technologically mediated social organization: Society 5.0. This literature also challenges a purely deficit-oriented view of online sociality, the idea that the online space is a space of only fleeting social resources. Also, this literature refutes a mere deficit-oriented understanding of online sociality, the conception of the online space as space of fleeting social resources. Meanwhile, both the desire to share information and to tell stories on social media are influenced by a myriad of psychological and platform-based factors. Motivations span from prosocial to self-presentational; from welfare for others to expectations of reciprocity; and platform architecture – algorithmic visibility, notification design – significantly influences sharing behavior, both prosocial and, on the contrary, a contributing factor to the unchecked dissemination of misinformation – are found in the systematic review of information-sharing behavior on social media conducted in the period 2020-2024 by Cai, Kamarudin, and Nujaimi (2025). As a means of community building and as a means of harm, social sharing is a common theme in the literature on digital literary spaces, and is discussed in greater detail in Sections 6 and 7 below.

5. Digital Literacy Spaces and psychological well-being

There has been extensive research and much controversy on the link between social media use and psychological well-being. The findings from the dozens of systematic reviews and meta-analyses that were collated in umbrella reviews point to a complex, moderating relationship between the two, depending on the kind of use, type of content and susceptibility of the individual (Tølbøll et al. 2026). Results from some of the umbrella reviews included in this review suggest that use of social media is not associated with life satisfaction or subjective well-being, whereas other reviews report significant associations with depression, anxiety and disrupted sleep, specifically for adolescents who use social media passively (e.g., scrolling through feeds) and compare themselves to those above them in the social hierarchy (e.g., those with a larger “like” count). (Tølbøll et al. 2026). This overall trend of mixed and context-specific effects is confirmed by platform-specific research. Conte et al. (2025) carried out a systematic review of TikTok's effect on adolescent mental health, which revealed connections among heavy use and signs of anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction, as well as evidence that TikTok plays a protective role for some adolescents, by offering peer support communities and normalizing help-seeking in relation to mental health issues. The scoping review of reviews by Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku, and Greenshaw (2025) also finds most of the included studies to be associated with negative outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, but notes that definitions of “use” vary across different studies, making it difficult to claim a causal relationship. Burgess (2025) restricts this attention to the last ten years, since this is when there has been a significant increase in adolescent depression, anxiety and ideation about suicide, and posits that this trend is likely related to four mechanisms: fear of missing out, cybervictimisation, social contagion effects on self-harm content, and reduced perceived social support among heavy users.

There is parallel literature that explores motivational psychology of compulsive engagement. The fear of missing out (FoMO) construct originated in Przybylski et al. (2013) who conceived it as coming from unmet psychological needs for relatedness and competence, and has been the key element in explaining the continued use of experiences despite their detrimental effects on well-being. The three-wave longitudinal study conducted by Groenestein et al. (2025) shows a partially reciprocal relationship between FoMO and subsequent social media usage, where the former predicts the subsequent usage of the latter, which subsequently predicts FoMO, in line with Self-Determination Theory which explains that unfulfilled psychological needs lead to compensatory but ultimately unsatisfactory behaviors (Ryan and Deci 2000). An additional layer of this phenomenon is algorithmic design – a system of optimization for engagement that tends to surface emotionally resonant and socially comparative content, exactly because that is what reliably gets clicks, thus forming a feedback loop between platform incentives and users' psychological sensitivities. It is important however that this literature does not tell a straightforward story of the damage done by technology. There are multiple reviews that record positive or even therapeutic effects of digital literary and social spaces, especially for marginalised adolescents, such as youth who claim to have found affirming community and identity in the online space that they are not able to find in their offline surroundings. The common thread in this research is the notion that, despite the negative psychological effects of social

media use, they are contingent upon the type of engagement, whether active or passive, whether selecting content positively or negatively, and whether the content is manipulated by the user or not (Tølbøll et al. 2026; Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku, and Greenshaw 2025).

6. Sexuality and the Socialization of the Adolescent Self

A key age in which social feedback, identity experimentation and peer comparison are important this is the developmental period of interest in research on digital literary spaces. Adolescent low-stakes opportunities to express themselves creatively and in their own voice on platforms can help reinforce healthy identity development by providing opportunities to experiment with voice, narrative self-presentation, and cultural belonging (Vanner, Singh, and Alexander 2025). Literary and narrative psychology have long linked identities to the structured opportunities for adolescents to rehearse and polish their sense of self through a variety of means, such as writing and sharing personal narratives, engaging with fan groups, and co-authoring collaborative fiction. Meanwhile, the platforms that enable this type of experimentation also provide users with carefully curated and idealized versions of self that other peers and influencers present to them, thereby amplifying social comparisons. Comparisons are one of the strongest of the predictors of compulsive engagement and its negative consequences loneliness and lowered life satisfaction, according to research on FoMO and social comparison. These dynamics are particularly concerning for adolescents because they are still learning how to regulate themselves, and when implementing a platform-level protection for younger users is absent, it further increases the risk (Burgess 2025). Parent, teacher, and platform designers will have to work hard to ensure that the positive developmental and creative aspects of participatory digital literary engagement do not become lost in the comparison-oriented and compulsive-use routes that seem to be signalled most frequently with negative consequences.

Loneliness has become a significant construct connecting digital literary and social involvement to youth well-being. Loneliness is conceptualized as the discrepancy between the desired and actual social relationships and is related, in recent research, to depression, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and poor social competence in adolescents. The connection between online engagement and feelings of loneliness, however, is not causal in one direction: online creative and narrative communities are often used specifically to alleviate feelings of loneliness; connecting with others in online spaces can be found in shared fandoms, or in ongoing writing projects, but these spaces, when used passively, rarely meet actual relational needs. Such pressures on image curation and fear of negative social assessment seem to exacerbate this, especially in platforms that lack policies for child protection and have high visibility rewards for idealized self-presentation.

7. Political Discourse, Polarization and Misinformation

Digital forms of literature and narration are not apolitical; personal stories, meme videos and short-form video are now key instruments of political persuasion, mobilization and polarization. There has been a good amount of literature on the role of algorithmic curation in the creation of “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles”, but there are significant conceptual and empirical differences. A systematic review of 129 studies of echo chambers reveals that the evidence for their existence is stronger in studies that rely on network-based methods and computational approaches, while studies based on survey data and self-reported media diet more commonly find that users receive a wider variety of opinions and viewpoints than the echo-chamber hypothesis suggests. This indicates that the phenomenon is real, but more contextually and platform-specifically than popular discourse suggests. Experimental and modeling studies provide more specific mechanisms. Using simulations, De Arruda et al. (2024) demonstrate that features such as “trusted” or “high-quality” users can exacerbate polarization and speed up the formation of echo chambers even if the users themselves do not have strong preferences toward polarization. Even though some platforms have been created to maximize engagement, future studies that abstracted these platforms and removed all of the algorithmic components still showed some measure of polarization, indicating that platform design can exacerbate or mitigate some of the factors that lead to polarization, but cannot completely eradicate them as they are inherent in human nature. The results of these studies raise concerns about the effect of algorithms on polarization and suggest that certain architectural features, such as verification systems, engagement-driven ranking, and the visibility of inflammatory content, have measurable impacts on polarization.

Stories have their own unique place in this terrain, because indeed stories are more memorable, more emotionally compelling, and more easily shared than abstract argument both for legitimate political mobilization and for misinformation. Cai, Kamarudin, and Nujaimi (2025) identify a suite of affective and identity-confirming motivations that influence information-sharing behavior on social media, a factor that contributes to the fact that narrative misinformation seems to be able to outcompete corrective factual information in terms of attention and circulation. To counter this, some jurisdictions have adopted formal platform governance structures. The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) places transparency and risk-management requirements on very large online platforms concerning disinformation and comparative analysis of national content-moderation regimes in Germany, France, Brazil, Singapore and more shows significant differences in how disinformation is defined and enforced, with only a minority of legal provisions specifically referring to AI-generated content (Santos, Cazzamatta and Napolitano 2025). While citizens in most countries in the survey are not satisfied with the self-regulation of platforms, they also prefer that platform rather than governments should be primarily responsible for tackling false information (Reuters Institute 2025).

8. Digital Divide and Social Inequality

Digital literary spaces are not always available and unequal access perpetuates patterns of social and educational inequity. Current digital divide research is a clear differentiation between the first level digital divide which is about access to devices and connectivity; the second level digital divide which is about digital skills and usage; and the third level digital divide which is about actual outcomes of differential digital engagement, such as educational, economic, and cultural. In a sample of school-age children in the United States, Pierce and Cleary (2024) determine that over a quarter of the sample did not have access to the Internet at home or in school; access was highly influenced by socio-economic status, parents' education, and geographic location, and that these differences had a measurable impact on how educational technology is used or not used throughout a child's school years. Wang's

(2024) analysis also finds that the digital divide is not simply a short-term learning opportunity inequity but is actually a mechanism which serves to reinforce the inter-generational solidification of social and economic class. Such dynamics are particularly strong in higher education in the Global South. From a social justice lens, Assefa et al. (2025) argue that the digital divide in the HE system of developing countries can be seen as an expression of pre-existing structural inequalities and inequalities in higher education, because those who do not have functional access to the Internet or devices are systematically excluded from participatory digital learning environments, including digital collaborative writing and storytelling that are increasingly part of modern pedagogical practices. Digital literature and social media are not just places of technology use; they are sites of cultural capital accumulation, influencing who is allowed to engage in the literary conversation, who has stories that spread, and who has works that are rewarded. It helps to define what is in and what is out of the growing body of digital literature and culture.

Policy interventions to address the digital divide have become more nuanced, taking into account that connectivity is not enough. Gaps in access to digital devices must be accompanied by investment in teacher training, curriculum redesign and ongoing technical support, as prior research has consistently shown that providing hardware without pedagogical and skills infrastructure leads to small improvements in overall digital participation. International frameworks like UNISEF's digital literacy efforts and national policy frameworks like the OECD's tracking of digital divides in education have highlighted this point. Even as basic access to the Internet has become almost commonplace in the nation, the gap between first and second, third and fourth, and first and third levels of digital inequality is clear, reflecting the real-world inequalities in both the skills needed to access and use digital tools and the pedagogical and cultural outcomes of such use, which have not been removed but rather reinforced by this technology. In digital literary culture, the formal connectivity statistics are a gross underestimate of the actual facts and figures of exclusion from participatory literary spaces because meaningful participation in certain practices, like collaborative fiction writing, platform-based literary criticism, or transnational digital storytelling, is not only contingent on access, but also on sustained skill, time, and confidence, which are currently unevenly distributed among the technically connected.

9. AI-Assisted and Participatory Digital Literature: Emerging Frontiers

The spread of generative AI into creative writing marks the latest evolution of digital literary landscape. The utopian and dystopian views of AI authorship are complicated by empirical research on writers' practices. Rather, creative writers in Guo et al.'s (2025) qualitative study report that they tend to use AI tools selectively when writing is stalled, to brainstorm ideas, or for alternative phrasings and that they will not fully outsource the human part of their writing process, which they experience as the truly human aspect of their writing. Hwang et al. (2025) also discover that writers engaging with LLMs do not simply view the finished product as a completely automatic writing by AI, but rather negotiate the question of authenticity and attribution, characterizing their writing process in terms of a ratio of contribution between the human and the AI actor. There is conflicting experimental evidence about the creative ability of LLMs. Several generative language models have been shown to produce better results than human participants on standardized divergent thinking tasks, a result that is frequently used to argue that the models are truly creative (Hubert et al., 2024). Others are less optimistic: while claims of fluency are not enough to demonstrate a significant stylistic difference between the two, O'Sullivan (2025) has found evidence of systematic, measurable differences in the stylistic signatures of texts written by humans and those that are AI-generated. Philosophical objections take things further still, saying that the large language models are incapable of ever having an author's voice because they don't have an "author" who can speak on the model's behalf, regardless of how sophisticated the models become.

This tension also manifests in participatory fan and community cultures, where the creation of fan-generated art, synthetic voice performances, and collaborative fiction through artificial intelligence are changing the nature of human-community-machine participatory dynamics, as Li and Pang (2024) explain. Some publishing companies have reacted more positively, with Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing starting to require AI-generated authors to disclose and include a cap on their books' word count. Others, including Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, have introduced disclosure requirements and word limits for AI-generated books, though it remains challenging to verify that AI tools are actually being used to create books. Looking at the whole literature, the impression that prevails is one of active negotiation, not of a fully agreed landscape of literary creativity. AI is not taking the place of human creativity in literature; it is becoming part of it, subsumed by emerging and conflicting norms of collaboration, attribution and authenticity that are part of the digital literary landscape.

10. Towards Digital Literacy and Platform Governance for Ethics

Due to the conditional and context-dependent character of the social effects of digital literary spaces, many recent works have converged on two key instruments that can be used to influence these effects in a positive direction: digital literacy education and the governance of platforms. Cho et al.'s (2022) conceptual framework for social media literacy calls for a different kind of literacy model from that traditionally used for mass media, because social media is defined by algorithmic curation, peer to peer content production, and blurring of the distinction between content producers and audiences. They propose a model that foregrounds critical analysis of both the message content and the logics of the platforms within which it circulates. The argument outlined by Liu et al. (2025) for digital literacy assessment similarly points to the need for this education to encompass all of these areas of digital literacy, as well as the capacity to think critically about AI-generated information and the understanding of automated information curation systems. Empirical studies of the use of digital literacy in practice support the argument for the inclusion of digital literacy in education systems. In the mixed methods study of Chinese university students, Jian, Zou, and Mahadi (2025) find that "digital literacy is a mediating factor between the use of social media and career competence, while peer interaction and self-efficacy are important contributing factors", yet emphasize that, despite a growing body of research with Asian contexts, there remains a "regional imbalance" in the literature, with many contexts still coming from North America and Europe in comparison to Asian and other Global South settings. As for the governance, there is considerable variation in comparative legal scholarship on content moderation regimes and a growing direction in its understanding towards increasing platform accountability and accountability for systemic risks, as captured in the European Union's Digital Services Act, which requires transparency reporting and system risk

assessment for very large online platforms by the platforms (Santos, Cazzamatta, and Napolitano 2025). However, public opinion research shows ongoing ambivalence - while respondents are generally keen on platform self-regulation over government regulation, they are also unhappy with platforms' performance on misinformation, underscoring the need for effective governance frameworks to be based on a balance of platform accountability alongside regulatory pressure, rather than either approach alone (Reuters Institute 2025).

11. Discussion: Towards an Integrative Framework

The literature discussed in this section tells a non-linear story of the social impact of digital literature and social media. It instead advocates a conditional-effects framework – one that assumes that outcomes depend on the interaction of three variables. First, the design of the platforms, including algorithmic ranking logics, verification and visibility systems, and content moderation architecture, shapes what is amplified and what is suppressed, and this has measurable downstream impacts on polarization, the circulation of misinformation, and psychological well-being (de Arruda et al. 2024; Groenestein et al. 2025). Second, user practices and literacies influence the type of engagement that is active, reflective and creative, or passive, comparative and compulsive; digital and media literacy interventions seem to have an impact on changing the balance toward more healthy practices of engagement (Cho et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2025). Thirdly, there is a structural access condition that economic, educational, and geographic, determine who can access to digital literary culture or not, even though the most well-designed platform, and the most digitally literate individual user, cannot overcome the exclusion rooted in the persistent digital divide (Pierce and Cleary 2024; Assefa et al. 2025). The conceptual framework has implications for the three major stakeholder groups involved in this literature. For platform designers, it implies that algorithmic designs that promote engagement are not a natural outcome of digital literary spaces, but a particular and adjustable algorithm with clear social implications, such as the well-being of adolescents and the polarization of societies. For educators and policymakers, it implies that digital literacy education should be taken just as seriously as traditional literacy education; it must be woven into the primary, secondary, and tertiary education systems; and it needs to be continually updated to incorporate new technologies like generative AI. For researchers, it indicates that going beyond binary social media portrayals as either positive or negative should be complemented by specifying the pop-up conditions (platform, population, and practice) under which certain effects are likely to be present, as can be seen in the umbrella-review literature on adolescent mental health (Tølbøll et al. 2026).

12. Study limitations and future research

Like all narrative reviews, the conclusions of this review are subject to limitations that should be considered when making use of the findings. Much of the empirical evidence used in the underlying studies of well-being and social media is correlational rather than experimental, which makes determining the direction of the relationship between variables difficult (e.g., whether a greater amount of passive scrolling causes loneliness or whether loneliness is associated with increased passive scrolling). However, the evidence base is still geographically uneven, with digital literary cultures from the West and those based in the English language, and East Asia, well represented, while those from South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America are under-represented, to a large extent, given the global scale of platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and the rich and mostly under-documented literary practices coming from them in Bangla, Persian, Arabic, Yoruba and more. More longitudinal and experimental research designs would be helpful in determining causal mechanisms; a higher degree of methodological uniformity among the studies in the operationalization of constructs like "social media use" and "digital literacy" would benefit future research; more comparative research into non-Western digital literary spaces, such as scholarship rooted in South Asian and broader Persianate languages and literatures, which is underrepresented in the English-language scholarship reviewed here, would be helpful. A sustained, interdisciplinary focus on the fast-changing nature of generative AI's use in literary production is likely to be an even greater priority in the near future – especially when compared to the rate of development of peer-reviewed research.

13. Conclusion

Digital literature, social media are not peripheral subsets of print culture, but places that offer significant possibilities for the creation, dissemination, and analysis of narrative, poetry, and multimodal storytelling, at a global scale. The review has revealed that these spaces create authentic literature innovation and valuable forms of community, creativity, and social capital, as well as significant social comparison, compulsive usage, misinformation and algorithmically intensified polarisation risks for their users, especially for adolescents. Even access to those spaces is uneven, so the digital divide can be understood not only as a technological and economic divide, but also as a literary and cultural one. The new developments in generative artificial intelligence (AI) also bring in the additional twists of questions about the nature of authorship, the authenticity of works, and the nature of creative collaboration that literary scholarship has only just begun to theorize sufficiently. The main argument presented here is that digital literature and social media are not necessarily good or bad but conditional phenomena, whose social effects are co-created by the architecture of the platforms, user literacy and access to the structures. The conclusion has an obvious implication for future research and practice. Scholars, educators, and policy makers should not worry about social media being good or bad for literature, society, or mental health; rather, they should be concerned with design choices that can affect how these media positively or negatively impact such issues and with literacy interventions and governance structures that can move these effects toward more equitable, creative, and psychologically healthy outcomes. To do that ongoing task, continuous interdisciplinary work, much of the kind that this review has tried to bring together from media studies, digital humanities, communication research and psychology, will be necessary.

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