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Original Article

Social Media Addiction among Youth: Emerging Social and Psychological Concerns

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become integral to the daily lives of adolescents and young adults, yet growing evidence points to a pattern of compulsive, dysregulated engagement commonly described as social media addiction or problematic social media use (PSMU). This paper synthesizes recent empirical findings on the prevalence, psychological correlates, and social consequences of such patterns among youth. Meta-analytic estimates place the prevalence of SNS-related addictive behaviors among school-going adolescents at approximately 25 percent, while population surveys report rates of problematic use ranging from roughly 5 to 15 percent depending on measurement and region. Psychological concerns include elevated risks of anxiety, depression, fear of missing out (FOMO), reduced self-esteem, sleep disruption, and, in high-risk trajectories, increased suicidal ideation and behavior. Social concerns encompass strained peer and family relationships, diminished face-to-face social skills, academic underperformance, and heightened exposure to cyberbullying and appearance-based comparison. The review underscores that addictive patterns of use, rather than mere time spent online, show the most consistent links to adverse outcomes. Implications for parents, educators, clinicians, and platform design are discussed, along with recommendations for prevention and early intervention.

Keywords: *social media addiction, problematic social media use, youth, adolescents, mental health, anxiety, depression, academic performance, FOMO*

Introduction

The rapid diffusion of smartphones and social networking platforms has transformed how young people form identities, maintain relationships, and spend leisure time. Nearly all adolescents report using at least one social media platform, and a substantial minority describe being online "almost constantly." While these technologies afford opportunities for connection, self-expression, and access to information, a parallel body of research has documented patterns of compulsive engagement that interfere with sleep, schooling, offline relationships, and emotional well-being. Although social media addiction is not yet a formal diagnosis in the DSM-5-TR or ICD-11, the construct of problematic or addictive social media use is widely employed in research. It is typically characterized by loss of control, preoccupation, tolerance, withdrawal-like discomfort when access is restricted, and continued use despite negative consequences. Young people are considered especially vulnerable because the neural systems supporting reward processing mature earlier than those supporting executive control, rendering adolescents more susceptible to the intermittent reinforcement schedules engineered into platform design. This paper examines emerging social and psychological concerns associated with social media addiction among youth. It draws on recent meta-analyses, longitudinal cohort studies, and population surveys to outline prevalence, key psychological mechanisms, and broader social repercussions. The goal is to provide an integrated overview that can inform prevention efforts and guide future research.

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Prevalence of Problematic Social Media Use

Estimates of prevalence vary widely according to measurement instruments, age groups, and geographic settings. A systematic review and meta-analysis of twenty studies encompassing more than 486,000 school-going adolescents reported a pooled prevalence of SNS-related addictive or problematic behaviors of 25 percent (95% CI: 14–36%), albeit with extreme heterogeneity driven by differing operational definitions. Other large-scale surveys yield lower figures. The WHO-collaborative Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study found that problematic social media use among 11- to 15-year-olds rose from 7 percent in 2018 to 11 percent in 2022 across dozens of European, Central Asian, and Canadian jurisdictions. Girls consistently reported higher rates than boys.

Longitudinal data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study in the United States identified distinct trajectories of addictive social media use. Nearly one-third of participants showed an increasing pattern beginning around age 11. Youths in high or increasing trajectories faced more than double the risk of suicidal behaviors and elevated internalizing and externalizing symptoms relative to those with low addictive use. German survey data covering 2019–2024 similarly documented a near-tripling of problematic use during the pandemic years, with rates remaining elevated among older adolescents in the post-pandemic period.

Taken together, these findings indicate that while severe, clinically significant addiction is relatively uncommon, a sizable minority of young people exhibit patterns of use that meet research criteria for problematic engagement and that carry measurable developmental costs.

Emerging Psychological Concerns

1 Anxiety, Depression, and Emotional Distress

The most consistently documented psychological correlates of problematic social media use are elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression. Meta-analyses report moderate positive correlations (approximately r = 0.30–0.39) between measures of social media addiction and psychological distress. Longitudinal evidence further suggests that high or increasing addictive trajectories predict subsequent internalizing problems rather than merely reflecting pre-existing vulnerability. Mechanisms implicated include upward social comparison, sleep displacement, exposure to cyber-victimization, and the chronic activation of FOMO.

FOMO itself shows a particularly strong association with addictive use (meta-analytic r ≈ 0.41). The apprehension that others are enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is excluded fuels continuous checking and difficulty disengaging. Nighttime use compounds the problem by disrupting sleep architecture, which in turn amplifies next-day emotional reactivity and cognitive fatigue.

2 Self-Esteem, Body Image, and Suicidality

Problematic engagement is also linked to lower self-esteem and greater body-image concerns, especially among adolescent girls who encounter idealized appearance content. Experimental detox studies lasting at least one week have demonstrated modest but statistically significant reductions in depressive and anxiety symptoms, perceived stress, FOMO, and body-image dissatisfaction among college-age participants, supporting a causal contribution of platform use to these outcomes.

Of particular concern are findings from the ABCD cohort linking high and increasing addictive social media trajectories to 2- to 3-fold elevated risks of suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors. While absolute rates remain low, the relative risk elevation underscores the clinical significance of monitoring addictive patterns rather than total screen time alone.

3 Cognitive and Attentional Effects

Beyond mood, compulsive platform use is associated with difficulties in sustained attention and impulse control. Short-form video formats and infinite-scroll interfaces deliver rapid, variable rewards that may condition users toward preference for high-stimulation, low-effort content. Educators and guidance counselors increasingly report reduced concentration, school avoidance, and withdrawal from offline social interaction among students with heavy engagement patterns.

Emerging Social Concerns

1 Relationships and Social Skills

Although social media can facilitate connection, addictive patterns often displace face-to-face interaction. Heavy users may experience a paradoxical increase in loneliness despite constant online contact. Peer relationships can become strained by comparison, jealousy, and conflict arising from online interactions. Family dynamics suffer when device use interferes with shared meals, conversations, and parental monitoring. Surveys of secondary-school guidance counselors have noted rising concerns about diminished social skills, increased withdrawal, and the normalization of misogynistic or aggressive online behaviors.

2 Academic Performance

Multiple studies document negative associations between problematic social media use and academic achievement. Mechanisms include time displacement from studying, procrastination, multitasking that reduces learning efficiency, and

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sleep loss that impairs next-day cognitive performance. Quasi-experimental evidence from Italy suggests that earlier initiation of social media use is linked to poorer subsequent trajectories in language and mathematics competence. Systematic reviews consistently find that addiction measures, more than simple duration of use, predict lower grades and greater academic distress.

3 Exposure to Harm and Risky Content

Addictive engagement increases cumulative exposure to cyberbullying, appearance-based harassment, and algorithmically amplified negative content. Young people who struggle to regulate their use may remain online longer in response to distressing experiences rather than logging off, creating a feedback loop that intensifies psychological harm. Adverse childhood experiences have also been identified as a risk factor for the later development of problematic social media use, suggesting that vulnerable youth may turn to platforms as a maladaptive coping strategy.

Discussion and Implications

The evidence reviewed here converges on several points. First, addictive or problematic patterns of social media use, rather than sheer quantity of time online, show the most robust associations with adverse psychological and social outcomes. Second, adolescent girls appear particularly vulnerable to internalizing symptoms and body-image concerns, while both genders experience academic and relational costs. Third, the developmental window of adolescence coincides with heightened reward sensitivity and still-maturing self-regulation, rendering young people especially responsive to platform design features that maximize engagement.

These findings carry practical implications. Parents and caregivers can prioritize device-free times and model balanced use. Schools may incorporate digital literacy curricula that address FOMO, social comparison, and the recognition of compulsive patterns. Clinicians should screen for problematic use when evaluating anxiety, depression, or sleep complaints in adolescents. At the platform level, design choices that reduce infinite scroll, limit late-night notifications, and provide meaningful usage insights could mitigate risk. Policy discussions around age-appropriate access and algorithmic transparency continue to evolve in response to accumulating evidence.

Limitations of the current literature include heavy reliance on self-report measures, substantial heterogeneity in definitions of addiction, and the difficulty of fully disentangling bidirectional relationships between mental health and platform use. Future research would benefit from more objective usage metrics, longer-term developmental follow-up, and rigorous evaluation of intervention efficacy.

Conclusion

Social media addiction among youth constitutes an emerging public health concern with measurable social and psychological costs. While most young people navigate platforms without severe impairment, a nontrivial minority develop patterns of compulsive use linked to anxiety, depression, FOMO, reduced self-esteem, sleep disruption, strained relationships, and poorer academic outcomes. High and increasing addictive trajectories are further associated with elevated risk of suicidal ideation and behavior. Addressing these concerns requires coordinated action across families, schools, clinical settings, and technology companies, grounded in the recognition that the quality and controllability of engagement matter more than raw screen time. Continued research, refined measurement, and evidence-based prevention strategies will be essential as digital environments continue to shape adolescent development.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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