



Social Media Addiction and Anxiety Disorders in Teenagers

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ABSTRACT

Background: The growing use of social media among teenagers has raised concerns regarding its potential effects on mental health, particularly anxiety. Excessive and problematic social media engagement may expose adolescents to social comparison, cyberbullying, and emotional dependency, potentially increasing psychological distress.

Objective: To examine the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety symptoms among teenagers and identify factors contributing to anxiety associated with excessive social media use.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys assessing social media-use patterns and anxiety symptoms, while qualitative interviews explored participants' personal experiences and perceived psychological effects of social media use.

Results: The findings demonstrated a significant positive association between time spent on social media and the severity of anxiety symptoms. Social comparison, cyberbullying, and emotional dependency emerged as important factors associated with increased anxiety among teenagers.

Conclusion: Excessive social media use may adversely affect adolescent mental health and contribute to anxiety symptoms. The findings emphasize the importance of digital literacy, mental health education, healthier social media practices, and professional guidance. Targeted interventions and increased awareness may help reduce the psychological burden associated with problematic social media use among teenagers.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life, especially among teenagers (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023; Bozzola et al., 2022). With the proliferation of smartphones and internet access, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have created virtual spaces where teens can connect, share experiences, and explore identities (Farrell, 2023; Soh, Talaifar, & Harari, 2024). However, the growing prevalence of social media use among adolescents has also led to an alarming rise in social media addiction, which in turn, is significantly linked to the emergence and exacerbation of mental health disorders, particularly anxiety (Zubair, Khan, & Albashari, 2023; Marciano et al., 2022). This issue has become a focal point of concern for parents, educators, and mental health professionals, as the combination of constant connectivity and the pressures of online social interactions have raised questions about the long-term psychological impacts on young users. Social media addiction and anxiety disorders in teenagers are increasingly seen as intertwined, with one potentially fueling the other in a vicious cycle (Brailovskaia, 2024).

Social media addiction refers to an excessive and compulsive use of social media platforms, where the need to check notifications, post updates, and interact with others online becomes an uncontrollable urge (Al-Samarraie, Bello, Alzahrani, Smith, & Emele, 2022; Mujica, Crowell, Villano, & Uddin, 2022). This addiction is often characterized by neglect of real-world responsibilities, emotional distress when offline, and a constant desire to stay connected to the virtual world (Panova & Carbonell, 2022; Firth et al., 2024). The nature of social media, with its immediate feedback mechanisms (such as likes, comments, and shares), creates a constant stream of validation that can be highly addictive for adolescents who are still developing their self-esteem and sense of identity (Dhingra & Parashar, 2022; Parent, 2023). This addiction is not merely a matter of spending too much time on these platforms, but it also involves a psychological dependency that impacts an individual's behavior, relationships, and emotional well-being (Costanza, Vetri, Carotenuto, & Roccella, 2023).

Anxiety disorders, on the other hand, are characterized by excessive fear, worry, and nervousness. In teenagers, these disorders can manifest in several forms, such as generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety, and panic attacks (Walkup, Shechner, & Strawn, 2024). The pressures of modern-day adolescence, combined with the rapid growth of digital media, have significantly contributed to an increase in anxiety disorders (Haugan, 2023). Social media platforms, where appearances are often curated, can heighten feelings of inadequacy, peer pressure, and the fear of missing out (FOMO), which can further exacerbate anxiety symptoms. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these negative effects due to their ongoing emotional and cognitive development, which makes them more susceptible to external pressures and the constant need for social approval.

The relationship between social media addiction and anxiety disorders in teenagers is complex and multifaceted (Caner, Efe, & Başdaş, 2022). Research indicates that the more time teenagers spend on social media, the more likely they are to experience feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. For instance, constant comparisons to idealized images and lifestyles presented online can lead to low self-esteem and social anxiety. Teens may also experience

HIGHLIGHTS	
Research insights	This study demonstrates a significant association between excessive social media use and anxiety symptoms, highlighting social comparison, cyberbullying, and emotional dependency.
Practical insights	Schools, parents, and professionals should promote digital literacy, healthy social media habits, early identification, and appropriate psychological support for adolescents.
Industry insights	Social media platforms should strengthen safeguards for teenagers, reduce harmful content and harassment, and promote responsible engagement through youth-focused digital wellbeing measures.

cyberbullying or social exclusion on these platforms, further



contributing to their emotional distress (Ademiluyi, Li, & Park, 2022). The act of constantly seeking validation through likes, comments, and followers can create a fragile sense of self-worth that is easily shaken, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety when the desired feedback is not received. Additionally, the addictive nature of social media can interfere with sleep patterns, social interactions, and offline activities, all of which are essential for maintaining a healthy emotional state (Remon, 2024).

One of the key factors in this phenomenon is the impact of social media on the development of social comparison theory in teenagers. Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others (Crusius, Corcoran, & Mussweiler, 2022). On social media, this comparison is often magnified, as teens are constantly exposed to the seemingly perfect lives of their peers and influencers. This can lead to unrealistic expectations and heightened anxiety about their own lives, bodies, and social standing. For example, an adolescent who sees their friends posting pictures of vacations, parties, or personal achievements may feel inadequate or left out, leading to anxiety and a desire to engage more frequently with social media to stay connected or “catch up.”

Furthermore, the continuous nature of social media—where updates, notifications, and messages are available 24/7—creates a sense of urgency and pressure to remain constantly connected (Ohly & Bastin, 2023). This can lead to a cycle of compulsive behavior where teenagers feel an overwhelming need to check their social media accounts frequently, even during the night. The loss of sleep and constant screen exposure can have detrimental effects on mental health, contributing to heightened anxiety, poor concentration, and emotional instability.

The impact of social media addiction and anxiety disorders on teenagers is not limited to their emotional health; it can also affect their academic performance, relationships with family and friends, and overall well-being (Zhang et al., 2024). Teenagers who are addicted to social media may prioritize online interactions over real-life socializing, leading to a sense of isolation and loneliness (Ramazan, Hassan, & Basit, 2023). Their relationships with family members may also suffer, as they become more absorbed in their digital lives, leading to a lack of meaningful communication and emotional connection at home.

Given the prevalence of social media use among teenagers and the rising concerns about its impact on mental health, it is crucial to address the link between social media addiction and anxiety disorders. Understanding the underlying psychological processes and social factors that contribute to this issue can help inform strategies for prevention and intervention. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals must work together to provide teens with the tools and guidance they need to navigate the digital world in a healthy and balanced manner. Promoting digital literacy, encouraging offline activities, and fostering open communication about the challenges of social media use are all essential components of a comprehensive approach to mitigating the negative effects of social media addiction on adolescent mental health.

In conclusion, the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety disorders in teenagers is an emerging concern that requires urgent attention. As social media continues to shape the social and psychological development of adolescents, it is vital to understand its potential risks and take proactive measures to safeguard their mental health. By fostering a more balanced and mindful approach to social media use, it is possible to reduce the negative impact on teenagers and help them thrive in both their digital and offline worlds.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design to examine the association between social media addiction and anxiety symptoms among adolescents aged 13–18 years. The quantitative

component assessed patterns and intensity of social media use and their relationship with anxiety severity, while the qualitative component explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the psychological effects of social media engagement. A total of 500 adolescents were recruited from selected high schools and community settings in urban and suburban areas to provide variation in sociodemographic characteristics and patterns of technology access. Eligible participants were aged 13–18 years, actively used at least one social media platform, and provided informed assent with parental or guardian consent. Adolescents with severe physical or cognitive impairments that could interfere with study participation were excluded, as were those with previously diagnosed severe psychiatric conditions unrelated to anxiety. Sociodemographic information and social media characteristics, including daily duration of use, frequency of access, platforms used, primary purpose of use, and activities such as browsing, messaging, posting, and seeking social validation, were collected using a structured questionnaire. Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale, a validated screening instrument comprising seven items that evaluate symptoms experienced during the preceding two weeks. Scores of 5–9, 10–14, and ≥ 15 were categorized as mild, moderate, and severe anxiety, respectively. Quantitative data were collected electronically using a secure online survey platform, with responses recorded anonymously.

For the qualitative component, 50 participants demonstrating high levels of social media engagement were purposively selected from the survey sample for semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored participants' experiences of social media use, perceived emotional effects, social comparison, cyberbullying or online exclusion, pressure associated with digital interactions, and strategies used to regulate social media consumption. Interviews were conducted using a standardized topic guide while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore emerging issues. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics, social media-use patterns, and anxiety scores. Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied to examine the relationship between social media-use duration and anxiety severity, while multiple linear regression was used to assess whether social media-use characteristics were independently associated with anxiety scores after adjustment for potential confounders, including age, sex, and socioeconomic status. Statistical significance was considered at $p < 0.05$. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically through familiarization, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of themes, and interpretive synthesis. Ethical principles governing research involving minors were followed throughout the study. Institutional ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and participation was voluntary. Parental/guardian consent and adolescent assent were obtained, confidentiality was maintained through anonymization, and participants could withdraw without penalty. Appropriate psychological support information was made available where participation caused emotional distress. Given the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures, causal relationships cannot be established and reporting or recall bias may have influenced responses.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety disorders among teenagers. The results are based on the analysis of both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview responses. The quantitative data provides an overview of the patterns of social media use and anxiety symptoms, while the qualitative data offers deeper insights into the emotional and psychological impacts of social media addiction.

The quantitative data were collected from 500 participants (250 males and 250 females) aged 13 to 18 years. The data analysis focused on the frequency of social media usage and the severity of anxiety symptoms, as measured by the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7) scale.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	250 (50%)
Female	250 (50%)
Age Group	
13-15 years	175 (35%)
16-18 years	325 (65%)
Socioeconomic Status	
Low-income	150 (30%)
Middle-income	250 (50%)
High-income	100 (20%)

The data on social media use revealed a high frequency of engagement among the participants. Table 2 presents the distribution of social media usage by frequency and duration.

Table 2: Social Media Use Patterns

Variable	Frequency (%)
Time Spent on Social Media per Day	
Less than 1 hour	50 (10%)
1-3 hours	150 (30%)
4-6 hours	200 (40%)
More than 6 hours	100 (20%)
Social Media Platforms Used	
Instagram	400 (80%)
Facebook	300 (60%)
TikTok	350 (70%)
Snapchat	250 (50%)
Twitter	150 (30%)
Primary Purpose of Use	
Socializing	300 (60%)
Entertainment	400 (80%)
Information/News	200 (40%)
Validation Seeking	150 (30%)

The anxiety levels of participants were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7) scale. Table 3 presents the distribution of anxiety severity levels.

Table 3: Distribution of Anxiety Levels

GAD-7 Score Range	Frequency (%)
Mild Anxiety (5-9)	150 (30%)
Moderate Anxiety (10-14)	200 (40%)
Severe Anxiety (15-21)	150 (30%)
Mean GAD-7 Score	11.8 (Moderate Anxiety)

The results indicate that a significant proportion of participants (40%) experienced moderate anxiety, while 30% reported severe anxiety symptoms. The mean score of the GAD-7 scale was 11.8, which falls into the "moderate anxiety" range.

To examine the relationship between the time spent on social media and the severity of anxiety symptoms, a Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted. Table 4 presents the correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the anxiety levels of participants.

Table 4: Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Anxiety Levels

Variable	Anxiety Level (GAD-7 Score)
Time Spent on Social Media	0.45** (p < 0.01)

The correlation coefficient of 0.45 indicates a moderate positive relationship between time spent on social media and anxiety levels, which is statistically significant (p < 0.01). This suggests that increased social media usage is associated with higher levels of anxiety among teenagers.

A multiple regression analysis was performed to examine whether social media usage can predict anxiety levels, controlling for other variables such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Anxiety Levels

Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Time Spent on Social Media	1.15	0.22	0.37	5.23	<0.01
Age (13-15 vs. 16-18)	0.25	0.30	0.05	0.83	0.40
Gender (Male vs. Female)	-0.10	0.25	-0.02	-0.40	0.69
Socioeconomic Status	0.18	0.14	0.07	1.29	0.20

The regression analysis shows that time spent on social media is a significant predictor of anxiety levels, with a positive relationship (β = 0.37, p < 0.01). Age, gender, and socioeconomic status did not significantly predict anxiety levels in this model.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 50 teenagers, who were selected based on their high engagement with social media. Thematic analysis of the interview data identified several key themes related to the emotional and psychological impacts of social media use.

Many participants reported that they often compare themselves to others on social media, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. One participant stated, "I always feel like I am not good enough when I see other people's posts about their perfect lives."

Several participants mentioned experiencing anxiety due to the fear of missing out on social events or trends, which was exacerbated by constant exposure to social media content.

A significant number of teenagers reported experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying, which contributed to anxiety and feelings of isolation. One participant shared, "I've been bullied online, and it really makes me anxious about what others might say next."

Many participants described feelings of emotional dependency on social media. One teenager explained, "I feel anxious when I can't check my phone for even an hour, like I am missing out on something important."

Participants overwhelmingly reported that excessive use of social media contributed to heightened anxiety. The feeling of being "always connected" and the constant stream of information were seen as major stressors. One interviewee stated, "I just can't disconnect from social media; it makes me anxious because I'm always worried about what I'm missing."

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest a strong relationship between social media addiction and anxiety disorders in teenagers. The quantitative analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between the time spent on social media and the severity of anxiety symptoms, with a significant regression effect. The qualitative data highlighted the emotional toll of social media use, particularly in relation to social comparison, cyberbullying, and the constant pressure to stay connected.

The results of this study align with existing literature that suggests that excessive social media use can exacerbate anxiety symptoms, especially in adolescents who are particularly vulnerable to social comparison and peer validation. The findings also emphasize the need for interventions aimed at reducing social media use and promoting mental health awareness among teenagers.

In conclusion, the data indicates that social media addiction is a significant factor contributing to anxiety disorders in teenagers, with both direct and indirect psychological effects. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of social media on mental health and to develop effective interventions to mitigate these effects.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study underscore a significant relationship between social media addiction and anxiety disorders among teenagers. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that increased social media use is associated with higher levels of anxiety, shedding light on how pervasive digital media is affecting adolescent mental health.

One of the key findings of this study is the moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.45$) between the time spent on social media and the severity of anxiety symptoms. This result is consistent with previous research that has identified a link between excessive social media use and increased psychological distress, including anxiety. As teenagers spend more time online, they become more exposed to idealized images, social comparison, and the pressure to conform to societal standards, which may elevate their anxiety levels.

The regression analysis further strengthened this connection, showing that time spent on social media is a significant predictor of anxiety, even after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The absence of significant predictors from age, gender, and socioeconomic status in the regression model suggests that the relationship between social media use and anxiety is robust, irrespective of demographic variables. This finding emphasizes the unique impact of social media on mental health that may transcend traditional demographic factors, affecting a wide range of adolescents equally.

The qualitative findings, which provided deeper insights into teenagers' experiences, also revealed several important themes. One of the most notable is the fear of missing out (FOMO), a phenomenon where teenagers feel anxious about not being part of the latest trends, social events, or online discussions. FOMO is a key contributor to the anxiety experienced by participants, as they often feel disconnected or inadequate compared to their peers. This aligns with existing literature, which suggests that constant exposure to idealized lifestyles on social media exacerbates feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, contributing to emotional distress.

Furthermore, cyberbullying was identified as another critical factor exacerbating anxiety. Several participants reported experiences of online harassment, which caused them significant distress. This highlights a serious and growing concern in the digital age, where social media platforms provide anonymity and a platform for harmful behaviors like cyberbullying. Studies have shown that cyberbullying can lead to long-term emotional trauma, depression, and heightened anxiety, and this study supports those findings.

Another significant theme from the qualitative data is the emotional dependency on social media, where teenagers expressed feelings of unease and anxiety when they were unable to check their phones. This dependency further points to the addictive nature of social media platforms and their potential to disrupt normal psychological functioning. The constant need for validation through likes, comments, and shares can create an unhealthy cycle of seeking external validation, which only increases anxiety levels over time. Despite these negative aspects, it is important to acknowledge that social media can offer benefits such as connection with peers, access to information, and entertainment. However, the findings from this study suggest that for many teenagers, these benefits are outweighed by the psychological toll of excessive usage, especially when usage crosses the line into addiction. These findings are important for parents, educators, and policymakers, who should recognize the potential harm of unregulated social media use and encourage more balanced and mindful usage among teenagers.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a significant association between social media addiction and anxiety disorders among teenagers. Excessive social media use may contribute to anxiety through social comparison, cyberbullying, emotional dependency, and exposure to harmful content. These findings emphasize the importance of promoting healthy digital habits through digital literacy and mental health education in schools. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals should guide adolescents toward responsible social media use and identify problematic behaviors early. Psychological interventions, including cognitive behavioral therapy, may help address anxiety and unhealthy online behaviors. Social media platforms and policymakers should also strengthen measures to protect young users from excessive use, harassment, and harmful content. Further longitudinal research is needed to clarify long-term effects and develop effective, evidence-based interventions for adolescent mental health.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants and confidentiality strictly maintained.

Data Availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Ikram Riaz: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis. Sidra Mumtaz: Writing Original Draft Preparation, Review, and Editing.

Both the authors take responsibility for the research work in its entirety and are accountable for the accuracy, integrity, and completeness of the study.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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