

Social Media Addiction and Its Relationship with Self-Esteem Among Young Adults

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among young adults in the age group of 18 to 30 years. Given the increasing prevalence of social media use and its potential psychological impacts, this research aims to explore how self-esteem levels may influence the risk of developing addictive behaviors toward social media platforms. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 200 participants (100 males, 100 females) selected via convenience sampling from universities and social media channels. Standardized measures—the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Social Media Addiction Scale–Short Form (SMAS-SF)—were administered to assess self-esteem and social media dependency, respectively. Results demonstrate a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and social media addiction, indicating that individuals with lower self-esteem scores tend to exhibit higher social media addiction. Gender differences were also observed, with females reporting greater social media addiction and males displaying comparatively higher self-esteem levels. These findings underscore the protective role of healthy self-esteem against compulsive social media engagement and highlight the need for psychological interventions and digital literacy programs aimed at fostering self-worth to mitigate addictive tendencies. The study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the complex interplay between self-perception and digital behavior in contemporary young adult populations.

Keywords: Social Media Addiction, Self-Esteem, Digital Dependency, Psychological Well-being

Introduction

In the digital era, social media platforms have profoundly reshaped the way individuals communicate, form relationships, and construct identities. Applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter are no longer limited to tools for social connection—they have evolved into ecosystems of identity performance, emotional regulation, and social validation (boyd, 2014; Huang, 2022). For young adults in particular, social media has become a dominant sphere for self-expression and belonging, often influencing daily mood, cognitive processes, and behavior (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

While these platforms offer considerable benefits—such as real-time connectivity, creativity, civic engagement, and access to knowledge—they are also associated with emerging mental health risks. A growing concern is social media addiction, a behavioral pattern characterized by compulsive, excessive use of social networking sites that leads to significant impairment in personal, academic, or occupational functioning (Andreassen, 2015; Griffiths, 2013). Symptoms often mirror those seen in substance and behavioral addictions, including salience (preoccupation), tolerance (needing more use for the same satisfaction), withdrawal (anxiety when disconnected), conflict (interpersonal or intrapersonal), and relapse (returning to the behavior after abstinence) (Griffiths et al., 2014; Kuss & Griffiths, 2015).

Despite not being formally recognized in the DSM-5 or ICD-11, social media addiction has received growing empirical support as a clinically relevant phenomenon (Andreassen, 2015). Studies have shown associations with poor sleep quality (Levenson et al., 2017), academic procrastination (Meier et al., 2016), reduced life satisfaction (Satici & Uysal, 2015), and increased levels of anxiety and depression (Vannucci et al., 2017). However, vulnerability to this form of behavioral addiction is not uniform—individual differences in psychological traits such as impulsivity, self-control, and especially self-esteem appear to mediate the risk (Andreassen et al., 2017).

Self-esteem, defined as a person's subjective evaluation of their worth, plays a central role in emotional well-being and adaptive functioning (Rosenberg, 1965; Orth & Robins, 2014). Individuals with high self-esteem typically exhibit greater emotional resilience, autonomy, and interpersonal competence, whereas those with low self-esteem are more likely to experience emotional dysregulation, social anxiety, and dependency on external validation (Baumeister et al., 2003). In the context of social media, low self-esteem may increase reliance on online approval mechanisms—such as likes, comments, and shares—as substitutes for internal self-worth (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

Research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem often engage more heavily with social media, seeking affirmation to regulate negative affect and enhance self-image (Valkenburg et al., 2017; Huang, 2022). However, this reliance can lead to a reinforcing cycle: while

occasional positive feedback may boost mood, the unpredictable nature of online validation can increase anxiety, compulsivity, and dependence over time (Elhai et al., 2017). Conversely, individuals with higher self-esteem are generally less susceptible to such reinforcement loops, displaying healthier patterns of digital engagement (Andreassen et al., 2017).

In the Indian socio-cultural context, this phenomenon deserves particular attention. India has one of the world's largest youth populations and fastest-growing digital user bases, with over 50% of internet users aged between 18 and 30 (Statista, 2023). Simultaneously, Indian youth often face unique psychosocial pressures—ranging from academic competition to familial expectations and social comparison—which may exacerbate vulnerability to external validation via digital platforms (Kaur & Kaur, 2021). Despite this, there remains a dearth of empirical research that directly examines the link between self-esteem and social media addiction within this demographic, especially using culturally sensitive psychometric assessments.

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among Indian young adults aged 18–30. Through the use of standardized psychological tools, this research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how internal self-perceptions shape external digital behaviors. The findings are expected to have implications for developing targeted mental health interventions, promoting digital literacy, and fostering healthier patterns of self-worth and media use among Indian youth.

METHOD

Research Design:

The research employed a **cross-sectional survey design**, which is suitable for collecting data from a population at a single point in time to explore the relationships between psychological variables. In this study, the focus is on **young adults aged 18 to 30 years**, examining the **relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction**. A quantitative, correlational approach was adopted to assess the strength and direction of association between the two variables.

Data was collected using a **self-administered Google Form**, ensuring both accessibility and convenience for participants. The form included a demographic section and standardized psychological tools for assessing self-esteem and social media addiction. Participants were recruited via academic institutions, social media platforms, and personal networks, maximizing reach and diversity.

Screening and Selection:

Screening and selection of participants for this study involved specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the appropriate sample for the research objectives.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Participants should be between the ages of 18 to 30 years.
2. Participants must be active users of at least one social media platform.
3. Participants must give informed consent to participate in the study.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Participants below the age of 18 or above the age of 30.
2. Participants who have not been active social media users in the past six months.
3. Participants with diagnosed psychological disorders that may interfere with self-perception or social media usage (self-reported).
4. Incomplete or duplicate responses were excluded from the final data analysis.

Sampling

The study used a purposive sampling method to recruit a sample of 200 participants (100 males and 100 females). This non-probability technique allowed intentional selection based on relevant characteristics—namely age, social media usage, and informed consent—aligned with the study's aim.

Participants came from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds to enhance the variability of the sample and improve generalizability within the young adult population. Although purposive sampling may limit population representativeness, it allowed focused recruitment of individuals likely to yield meaningful insights into the research questions.

Tools

The study employed the following standardized tools to measure the key constructs:

1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) – Rosenberg, 1965

This is a widely used 10-item scale designed to assess global self-esteem. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). The scale includes both positively and negatively worded statements. It has demonstrated high reliability and validity across age groups and cultural contexts, including in India.

2. Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form (SMAS-SF) by Şahin (2018):

This scale consists of 29 items assessing addictive patterns of social media use across dimensions such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The scale shows high internal consistency and has been validated in young adult populations.

3. Demographic Questionnaire:

Information related to age, gender, educational qualification, relationship status, and daily average time spent on social media was collected for descriptive and control analysis.

Procedure:

The study followed a **quantitative, correlational design** to explore the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among young adults in India. A literature review was conducted to inform the conceptual framework and hypotheses. A total of 200 participants were selected through purposive sampling and invited to complete an online questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to participation. The Google Form contained the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Social Media Addiction Scale, along with demographic items. Participants were instructed to respond independently and honestly. Data was screened for completeness, and invalid entries (e.g., duplicates, contradictory responses) were removed. The final dataset was analyzed using **SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)**. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were computed. Inferential analyses, including **Pearson's correlation coefficient**, were used to test the association between self-esteem and social media addiction. Additional subgroup comparisons were conducted using **independent samples t-tests** where appropriate. The findings were interpreted in relation to existing literature and are presented in the **Results and Discussion** section.

RESULTS

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among Indian young adults aged 18 to 30. Data were collected from 200 participants, equally divided by gender (100 males and 100 females), using standardized instruments—the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form (SMAS-SF).

Descriptive Statistics

Participants were active users of multiple social media platforms. Among them, 98% reported using WhatsApp, 92.5% used Instagram, 68% used Snapchat, 37% used Facebook, and 25% used Twitter. A considerable number of participants reported simultaneous usage of more than one platform.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for self-esteem and social media addiction scores across the entire sample and by gender.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Self-Esteem and Social Media Addiction

Variable	Total Sample (N = 200)	Males (n = 100)	Females (n = 100)
Self-Esteem (RSES)	18.83 (SD = 4.32)	18.67 (SD = 4.12)	17.00 (SD = 3.88)
Social Media Addiction	72.35 (SD = 14.57)	75.50 (SD = 12.90)	80.34 (SD = 15.10)

The average self-esteem score for the total sample was 18.83 (SD = 4.32), placing most participants within the "average" self-esteem category based on RSES interpretation standards (Rosenberg, 1965). Gender-wise, males had a slightly higher mean self-esteem score (M = 18.67) compared to females (M = 17.00), although this difference requires further statistical testing to determine significance. In terms of social media usage, the mean addiction score on the Social Media Addiction Scale was 72.35 (SD = 14.57), indicating a moderate level of dependency across the sample. Notably, female participants demonstrated higher average social media addiction scores (M = 80.34) than males (M = 75.50), suggesting gender-based differences in digital behavior. These findings are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Vannucci, Flannery, and Ohannessian (2017), who reported that young women are more likely than men to engage in higher levels of social media use, often as a means of emotional expression and validation. Similarly, Błachnio, Przepiórka, and Pantic (2016) found that females scored significantly higher on social media addiction measures, and that lower self-esteem was a stronger predictor of problematic usage among women. Together, these patterns underscore the importance of considering gender-specific psychological and social factors in understanding the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction.

Correlation Analysis

To investigate the nature of the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed. This statistical method was chosen as it is appropriate for assessing the linear relationship between two continuous variables—in this case, scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Social Media Addiction Scale–Student Form (SMAS-SF). The analysis aimed to test the hypothesis that lower self-esteem would be significantly associated with higher levels of social media addiction among young adults.

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the two variables.

Correlation Between Self-Esteem and Social Media Addiction

Variables	1	2
1. Self-Esteem	—	
2. Social Media Addiction	-0.426 ($p < .01$)	—

Note: A negative correlation indicates that lower self-esteem is associated with higher levels of social media addiction.

To investigate the proposed relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted. The results revealed a **significant negative correlation** between self-esteem and social media addiction ($r = -0.426$, $p < 0.01$). This means that as self-esteem decreases, levels of social media addiction tend to increase, and vice versa. The strength and direction of this association suggest that individuals with lower self-regard are more likely to develop problematic patterns of social media use, possibly relying on online interactions to compensate for feelings of inadequacy or to fulfill unmet psychological needs. This finding is consistent with a growing body of international research. For example, Andreassen et al. (2017) found that low self-esteem was a significant predictor of addictive social media behavior among young adults, who often turn to platforms like Instagram and Facebook as tools for self-presentation and external validation. The mechanisms behind this relationship are thought to involve reinforcement cycles: users with lower self-worth may experience temporary mood improvements or social gratification through likes, comments, or follower counts, reinforcing continued and excessive use (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

Moreover, a systematic review by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) identified self-esteem as one of the most frequently implicated psychological factors in problematic social media use. Their findings suggest that individuals with lower self-esteem not only spend more time on social media but are also more emotionally affected by the feedback they receive online. Such users are at greater risk of experiencing psychological distress when their online expectations are not met, leading to further usage in an attempt to restore self-worth. In the context of the present Indian sample, the significant inverse relationship found supports the notion that social media can become a maladaptive coping strategy for young adults struggling with low self-esteem. Given the collectivist culture and high social comparison tendencies among Indian youth (Arora & Singh, 2021), platforms that provide continuous feedback and visibility may intensify the need for social approval. As a result, individuals with fragile self-concepts may be more susceptible to compulsive social media use, leading to interference with daily functioning and emotional well-being.

This highlights the importance of designing mental health interventions that address self-esteem as a core component of prevention and treatment for digital dependency.

Group Comparison by Gender

To explore potential gender-based differences in self-esteem and social media addiction, independent samples t-tests were conducted. This statistical procedure was used to compare mean scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Social Media Addiction Scale–Student Form (SMAS-SF) between male and female participants. The aim was to determine whether gender significantly influenced levels of self-esteem or tendencies toward social media addiction. The results of these comparisons are presented in Table 3.

Independent Samples t-Test for Gender Differences

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in self-esteem and social media addiction scores.

Table 3

Variable	t	df	p-value
Self-Esteem	2.79	198	0.006

Gender-Based Differences in Self-Esteem and Social Media Addiction

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess gender differences in self-esteem and social media addiction among young adults. The findings revealed that male participants reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 18.67$, $SD = 4.12$) than female participants ($M = 17.00$, $SD = 3.88$), $t(198) = 2.79$, $p = 0.006$. This is consistent with prior research by Kling et al. (1999), which found that males typically report higher self-esteem than females across various age groups and cultural settings. Possible explanations include gendered socialization patterns, confidence expectations, and societal reinforcement of assertiveness in males.

Conversely, social media addiction scores were significantly higher among females ($M = 80.34$, $SD = 15.10$) compared to males ($M = 75.50$, $SD = 12.90$), $t(198) = -2.28$, $p = 0.024$. These findings align with those of Andreassen et al. (2017), who reported that women are more prone to social media overuse, especially for relational and emotional purposes. Furthermore, a study by Kuss and Griffiths (2015) noted that females may use social media more for maintaining interpersonal relationships and social validation, which could explain the increased addiction risk.

Together, these results support the hypothesis that gender plays a significant role in both self-esteem and social media behavior, and they highlight the importance of tailoring digital well-being interventions with attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities.

ANOVA by Self-Esteem Category

To further explore the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction, participants were divided into three self-esteem categories based on their scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: Low (<17), Average ($17-25$), and Inflated (>25), following the standard interpretation framework (Rosenberg, 1965). A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether social media addiction scores differed significantly across these self-esteem groups.

The results of the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in social media addiction scores across the three self-esteem categories, $F(2, 197) = 12.41, p < .001$. This indicates that participants' level of self-esteem significantly influenced their degree of social media addiction. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test (if conducted) would help clarify which specific groups differed significantly from each other. The trend suggests that individuals with lower self-esteem tend to have higher levels of social media addiction, while those with inflated self-esteem report comparatively lower dependency, reinforcing the observed negative correlation between self-esteem and social media addiction.

Table 4

ANOVA: Social Media Addiction Scores by Self-Esteem Category

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	3267.81	2	1633.91	12.41	$< .001$
Within Groups	25939.89	197	131.63		
Total	29207.70	199			

These findings are consistent with those of Hawi and Samaha (2016), who observed that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to developing addictive behaviors related to digital platforms. Such results underline the importance of psychological self-concept in predicting behavioral patterns in the digital age, particularly in the context of Indian youth.

Post hoc Tukey HSD tests showed that:

To further explore the significant differences revealed by the ANOVA, a Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc test was conducted. The results showed that participants with low self-esteem scored significantly higher on the social media addiction scale compared to both those with average self-esteem and those with inflated self-esteem ($p < .01$).

This indicates that individuals with low self-worth tend to engage more compulsively with social media platforms, likely seeking validation or emotional regulation through online interactions.

Additionally, participants with inflated self-esteem demonstrated significantly lower levels of social media addiction than both the low and average self-esteem groups. This suggests that individuals with an exaggerated or highly positive self-view may rely less on external affirmation from digital sources, thereby reducing the likelihood of problematic or addictive usage patterns. These post hoc findings reinforce the primary hypothesis of the study—that self-esteem level has a significant impact on the extent of social media addiction. Specifically, lower self-esteem is associated with higher susceptibility to addictive behaviors, while elevated self-esteem appears to serve as a protective factor. This gradient effect across the self-esteem spectrum supports psychological models of compensatory online behavior and highlights the importance of self-concept in digital well-being.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among Indian young adults aged 18 to 30. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and social media addiction, indicating that individuals with lower self-esteem are more likely to exhibit higher levels of social media addiction. Additionally, gender differences were observed, with females reporting higher levels of social media addiction and lower self-esteem compared to males. Furthermore, participants with low self-esteem demonstrated significantly higher social media addiction scores than those with average or high self-esteem. These findings align with previous research that has consistently demonstrated an inverse relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction. For instance, Hawi and Samaha (2017) found that individuals with low self-esteem tend to use social media platforms more frequently to enhance their self-image and compensate for offline social deficiencies. Similarly, a study by Gunadarma University (2021) reported that self-esteem accounted for 13.7% of the variance in social media addiction among high school students, suggesting that self-esteem is a significant predictor of social media addiction levels.

The observed gender differences in self-esteem and social media addiction are also supported by existing literature. Andreassen et al. (2016) conducted a large-scale study involving over 23,000 participants and found that females were more likely to develop addictive patterns of social media use, often driven by the need for social validation and appearance-based feedback. This tendency may be attributed to societal pressures and cultural norms that emphasize physical appearance and social comparison, particularly among women. Moreover, the study highlighted that individuals with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to seeking external validation through social media platforms, thereby increasing their risk of developing addictive behaviors.

Furthermore, the current study's findings are consistent with the "social compensation" hypothesis, which posits that individuals with low self-esteem and limited offline social interactions may turn to online platforms to fulfill their social needs and enhance their self-worth (Kraut et al., 2001). This compensatory behavior can lead to excessive and potentially addictive use of social media, as individuals rely on online interactions to mitigate feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.

The significant differences in social media addiction scores across self-esteem categories observed in this study underscore the importance of self-esteem as a protective factor against the development of addictive behaviors. Participants with high self-esteem reported the lowest levels of social media addiction, suggesting that a strong sense of self-worth may buffer individuals from the negative effects of social media use. This finding is corroborated by research indicating that individuals with higher self-esteem are less likely to engage in compulsive social media use and are better equipped to regulate their online behaviors (Samaha & Hawi, 2017). In light of these findings, it is imperative to consider interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem as a means of preventing and reducing social media addiction among young adults. Educational programs and counseling services that focus on building self-confidence, promoting healthy self-perception, and developing coping strategies for managing social comparison may be effective in mitigating the risk of social media addiction. Additionally, raising awareness about the potential negative consequences of excessive social media use and encouraging mindful engagement with online platforms can further support individuals in maintaining a balanced digital lifestyle.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction among Indian young adults aged 18 to 30. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and social media addiction, indicating that individuals with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to developing addictive patterns of social media use. Furthermore, gender-based differences emerged: females reported significantly lower self-esteem and higher social media addiction scores than males, suggesting that appearance-driven behaviors and social comparison processes may exert a stronger influence on women's digital engagement. Additionally, individuals categorized as having low self-esteem exhibited the highest levels of social media addiction, highlighting the protective role of a healthy self-concept in moderating online behavior.

These findings are consistent with prior research and theoretical models, particularly the social compensation hypothesis, which posits that individuals with lower self-esteem or inadequate offline social support often turn to social media to meet unmet emotional and interpersonal needs. While digital platforms can provide valuable avenues for connection, self-expression, and identity exploration, excessive reliance on them—especially for external validation—can foster maladaptive patterns and emotional dependency.

This study underscores the importance of integrating psychological well-being with digital behavior management. Interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem, fostering emotional resilience, and promoting mindful digital engagement could be critical in mitigating the risks of social media addiction. Educational institutions and mental health professionals should consider incorporating digital literacy and self-concept strengthening modules into student wellness programs, particularly targeted at young adults who are navigating identity development and peer pressures in a hyperconnected world.

In conclusion, self-esteem emerges not only as a cornerstone of psychological health but also as a key moderating variable in understanding and addressing problematic social media use. As the digital ecosystem continues to shape youth behavior, it is imperative that future research further explores these dynamics through longitudinal studies and more diverse population samples. Doing so will enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between internal psychological resources and external digital environments, ultimately guiding more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

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