

# SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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## ABSTRACT

Young adults have grown accustomed to social media as a way of life, and problematic use and the psychological effects are increasingly a concern. The aim of this study was to investigate the correlation between exposure to social media and social media addiction in young adults (18-30 years). The data were collected by using a quantitative cross sectional survey design with 300 respondents comprising of early-stage professionals and university students using a structured online questionnaire. The results showed that the participants used an average of 4.3 hours per day on social media, with Instagram, TikTok and YouTube being the most popular platforms. There was a high positive correlation between social media exposure and addiction scores ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The regression analysis showed that the daily hours of use ( $\beta = 0.41$ ), frequency of checking ( $\beta = 0.32$ ), and number of platforms used ( $\beta = 0.21$ ) were significant predictors, accounting for 52% of the variance in addiction levels ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ). The study also emphasizes the moderating effects of fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and self-esteem. The results highlight the pressing need to implement specific digital literacy initiatives and comprehensive interventions to foster digital well-being and reduce compulsive social media consumption among young adults, in line with the theoretical frameworks of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory.

**Keywords:** Social media exposure, social media addiction, young adults, fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure.

## 1. Introduction

Social media has become a part of the everyday routines of young adults around the globe, serving as a means of communication, entertainment, education and social networking. The age group is using digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube, which are the dominant ones in their digital experience (Moreno et al., 2022). Social media can provide a real-time connection and information sharing, but excessive use can result in maladaptive patterns of use, such as social media addiction,

which is a growing public health problem (Al-Samarraie et al., 2022). Social media exposure is the amount of time, frequency and type of content young adults are exposed to online. Often, high levels of exposure are linked to long screen time, using multiple social media platforms and viewing content that is likely to trigger emotional reactions. A moderate level of use can provide social connectivity and informational benefits, but excessive exposure can interfere with daily functioning and have negative psychological effects.

Social media addiction, however, is defined by compulsive use, loss of control, mood regulation, withdrawal, and neglect of responsibilities as a result of constant social media use (Şentürk et al., 2021). The negative effects of social media addiction on young adults have been identified in several studies as anxiety, depression, aggression, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance. Importantly, addiction is not just about intrinsic vulnerability, but can be aggravated by external factors such as peer pressure, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FoMO). Uses and Gratifications Theory is a theory underlying the social media addiction that states that people actively seek media to satisfy their psychological needs for entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and information (Shahid et al., 2024). Social media is used by young adults to connect with others and to alleviate loneliness, but this can gradually result in addictive behaviors. Similarly, Media Dependency Theory suggests that the greater the dependence on social media as a source of information and social validation, the higher the probability of becoming dependent on social media, particularly when there are fewer opportunities for social support in the real world. Empirical studies have found that social media exposure is a strong predictor of social media addiction in young adults. For example, Benítez-Agudelo et al., 2025, found that if students are engaged online for extended periods, they are more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors as a result of stress during the school year. Similarly, Parlak Sert and Başkale (2023) found that social media addiction was related to social media usage and anxiety about the pandemic among university students. The results all point to the importance of going beyond time spent and frequency of social media use to examine psychological and contextual factors that make social media addictive. Although there has been an increase in research, there is still a need for an in-depth study of social media exposure and addiction among young adults. While numerous research studies have focused on adolescent addictive behaviors, fewer studies have focused on the specific patterns and psychosocial factors related to young adults who have unique academic, social, and

professional stressors. Filling this gap is critical for designing interventions and fostering digital well-being.

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Social media sites have exponentially grown since their inception and have changed the way young people communicate, socialize and get information. Although social media offers many benefits, such as improved connectivity, education, and entertainment, its overuse has resulted in social media addiction, a behavioral pattern that involves compulsive use, loss of control, and neglect of responsibilities (Dumitrescu et al., 2023). Social media addiction is now acknowledged as a public health problem because of its connection to psychological, behavioral, and academic issues such as anxiety, depression, aggression, sleep deprivation, and academic problems. Social media exposure (time spent online, frequency of use, and content type) has been found to have a significant impact on social media addiction in previous studies (Parlak Sert & Başkale, 2023). There is little research that specifically examines the mechanisms between exposure and addiction for youthful adults.

The literature tends to be limited to adolescents or large populations, and the literature on young adults is limited, as it does not examine the unique social, academic, and psychological environment that makes them more vulnerable to addiction (Lim et al., 2022). Furthermore, while there is evidence that fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, self-esteem, and academic stress are important factors that influence social media addiction (Xu et al., 2023), these factors have not been fully explored in the context of the current study. This is essential to creating specific interventions that can contribute to digital well-being and lessen addictive behaviors among young adults.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

1. **To examine the level of social media exposure** among young adults, considering both the frequency of use and the types of platforms engaged.

2. To assess the level of social media addiction in young adults, including psychological, behavioral, and emotional dimensions.

3. To explore moderating and mediating factors such as fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, self-esteem, and academic stress that may influence the exposure-addiction link.

#### 1.4 Research Questions

Based on the problem statement and research objectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between social media exposure and social media addiction among young adults?

2. How do psychosocial factors, such as fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and self-esteem, moderate or mediate the relationship between social media exposure and addiction?

3. Which specific patterns of social media use (frequency, duration, or content type) most strongly predict social media addiction among young adults?

#### 2- Literature Review

Social media exposure is defined as the amount of time and attention people spend on different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, and the type of content they consume. Young adults are a high-risk group because of their academic, social and entertainment requirements. According to Odofin and Igabari (2023), university students spend an average of 3 to 5 hours per day on social media, engaging in various activities such as watching content, posting content, and interacting with other users. The availability of smartphones, algorithms that predict content, and the fear of missing out (FoMO) that drives the need to constantly check for notifications also have an impact on high exposure. Social media exposure can have both social and informational benefits, and can influence behavior, emotional reactions, and social identity. Recent studies have shown that the type of content matter is also a factor. Vogel et al. (2024) discovered that exposure to tobacco-related content on social media platforms had a

significant impact on attitudes among young adults. Likewise, Tao and Fisher (2022) found that exposure to online content that was discriminatory impacted mental health outcomes for adolescents of color. The results indicate that the length of exposure and the nature of the content may be factors in psychological and behavioral results.

Social media addiction is defined as excessive and compulsive use, which negatively impacts daily functioning and well-being (Dumitrescu et al., 2023). The phenomenon has been conceptualized using the framework of behavioral addiction, which features salience, tolerance, mood modification, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Young adults, particularly those at university, are especially vulnerable because of the pressures of study, peer influence, and the ever-present online platforms. There is a correlation between social media addiction and negative psychological consequences. For instance, Shahid et al. (2024) found that there is a significant relationship between social media addiction and depression and aggression among young adults. In the same way, White-Gosselin and Poulin (2024) pointed out that addiction leads to the internalization of problems and can negatively affect the quality of parent-child relationships. Research has also shown that physical factors, like low sleep quality and sitting for a long time, can be linked to compulsive social media use. Caner et al. (2022) reported that adolescents with high addiction scores had increased social appearance anxiety, and Imperatori et al. (2022) reported that addictive social media use was associated with eating disturbances mediated by muscle dysmorphia-related symptoms.

Several studies have indicated that there is a direct link between the amount of social media exposure and the risk of addiction. Likewise, Moreno et al. (2022) revealed that heavy use of various social media platforms was associated with higher addiction scores. The role of FoMO is also significant, as Sultan (2021) found that young adults who had a high FoM were more likely to share personal information online, leading to higher exposure and addictive tendencies. Peer influence and social pressures are other predictors

of addiction. Peer pressure was found to be a factor that increased adolescents' mobile social media addiction, particularly when their self-esteem or self-concept clarity was low. Momani et al. (2023) also highlighted that the addictive cycle is further strengthened by the social reinforcement of content, like, comments, and shares, which can create an intermittent reinforcement pattern that promotes repeated interactions with the platform. Social media addiction has been consistently associated with a variety of adverse effects on the mental health of young adults, as reported by Şentürk et al. (2021), who found that mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and aggression, are very common among heavy users. Shannon et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review that found problematic social media use was associated with increased psychological distress, decreased emotional wellbeing and decreased life satisfaction. Addiction also has an impact on academic and social functioning. Benítez-Agudelo et al. (2025) pointed out that academic stress coupled with excessive social media use is associated with poorer academic performance and poor coping strategies. Additionally, Lim et al. (2022) pointed out that young adults who use various platforms a lot are especially vulnerable to developing problematic usage patterns that disrupt daily functioning.

### 2.1 Research Gaps

There are a number of gaps in the literature identified, particularly in relation to the use of social media and addiction in young adults. Most research on social media addiction has been done with adolescents or mixed age groups, and the findings may not be applicable to young adults who face unique stressors in their social, educational, and work lives. Pellegrino et al. (2022) conducted a bibliometric analysis and identified that the majority of studies published are on adolescent samples and young adults are underrepresented in the literature. Although there has been much attention paid to the addictive behaviour of adolescents, young adults online use is often different, involving professional networking and identity formation, and online information-seeking, which can have different

effects on the development and intensity of addiction.

The other major drawback is that it doesn't focus on exposure patterns on social media. While numerous studies use standardized scales to assess addiction, fewer studies examine the direct relationship between specific exposure variables and addiction, such as time on multiple platforms, frequency of checking notifications, and type of content being consumed. Lee et al. (2022) pointed out that the majority of studies use general usage indicators instead of more nuanced exposure indicators, which makes it difficult to understand the relationship between specific behaviors and addiction. This restricts the knowledge of the dose-response curve between exposure and addiction, an essential component to designing interventions.

In addition, the majority of the current literature focuses on psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and internalizing problems, without contextual and environmental factors such as academic stress, pandemic-related anxiety, and exposure to discriminatory content. While academic stress has been shown to have a significant interaction with psychological distress, the effect of academic stress on increasing social media addiction among young adults is poorly investigated (Kristensen et al., 2023). These factors can either dampen or amplify addictive behaviors, but research on these relationships in young adults is limited. In addition, previous research has tended to ignore mediating and moderating factors such as fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and self-esteem, which have been found to impact the relationship between exposure and addiction.

Personality traits and interpersonal factors play a significant role in moderating addictive social media use, as noted by Mercan and Uysal (2023), but these factors are not always included in exposure-focused studies. Longitudinal analyses are also lacking; most studies are cross-sectional, and limit causal inferences of whether more exposure is associated with addiction or addiction is associated with more exposure. Anitha et al. (2021) noted that longitudinal designs are important to make it difficult to determine causal

relationships between early exposure to digital media and later addiction. It is important to address these gaps to develop specific strategies to combat social media addiction among young adults.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that people choose to use media to meet their psychological and social needs, including information, entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. Social media can be a place for young adults to keep up with peers, seek social validation, and access culturally relevant information, leading to addictive behaviors. Media Dependency Theory complements UGT by emphasizing the media's dependence on the environment and psychology (Tullett-Prado et al., 2023). The stronger the effects of media exposure on behavior are, the more that individuals rely on social media for guidance, emotional support, or information, according to MDT. For example, when facing stress, including during academic difficulties or anxiety about the pandemic, young adults might use social media more as a coping strategy, which can lead to greater exposure and dependence.

## Hypotheses

- **H1:** Social media exposure is positively correlated with social media addiction among young adults.
- **H2:** There is a significant relationship between increased social media use and increased social media addiction.
- **H3:** The more time spent on social media platforms in a day, the higher the addiction scores.
- **H4:** Psychosocial factors (FoMO, peer pressure, and low self-esteem) moderate the relationship between social media exposure and addiction.

## 3- Methodology

The study is a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design, which is used to study the relationship between social media exposure and social media addiction among young adults. The design is suitable because it enables the collection

of standardized information regarding the use and addiction to social media in one go. This enables statistical analysis of relationships and predictions between exposure variables and addictive behavior. The target population consists of young adults (18-30 years) in universities, colleges and early stage professionals. This age group is particularly significant because it is the most active age group on social media platforms and young people are at a higher risk of being exposed to social, academic, and professional stressors that may contribute to addictive social media use. The study will involve 300 respondents to give adequate statistical power for correlation and regression analysis. The sample size was calculated with an expected effect size and according to the rules of thumb in social science research to ensure representativeness in the population of young adults.

Convenience sampling method will be used due to the accessibility and feasibility of participants. The respondents will be approached by online media, university networks and social media groups for the voluntary participation in the study. Participants must be 18-30 years old, have a social media account, and be willing to give informed consent. Exclusion criteria are: less than 18 years of age and not an active social media user. A structured online questionnaire will be used to collect data, which will be presented in three sections: Demographic information, social media exposure, and social media addiction. Age, gender, education and occupation will be included in demographic data. Social media exposure will be assessed using questions that ask about how often they use social media, how much time they spend on social media, how many social media platforms they use, and what kinds of content they view on social media (entertainment, news, and peer interactions).

A standardized questionnaire based on a Likert scale will be used to evaluate the social media addiction, which will include compulsive use, salience, tolerance, mood modification, withdrawal, and conflict resulting from excessive use of social media. The questionnaire will be filled out online using secure survey platforms. Participants will be told the purpose of the study,

how to complete the study and a confidentiality consent form. The survey should take about 10-15 minutes. The data collection will be continued until the desired sample size of 300 respondents is reached. The data collected will be coded and analyzed using statistical software. Demographic characteristics and social media usage patterns will be summarized using descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations and frequencies.

Pearson correlation analysis will be used to test the association between exposure to social media and addiction. The regression analysis will be used to assess if the frequency, duration, and type of social media use are related to the level of addiction. In addition, mediation and moderation analyses will be performed to explore the mediating role of fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and self-esteem between exposure and addiction. Prior to data collection, ethical approval will be sought. The participants will be informed that they are participating voluntarily, that their answers will be kept confidential, and that they may withdraw at any time. There will be no collection of personally identifiable information. Data will be stored

securely and results will be reported in summary form, to ensure the anonymity of the participants. This is a cross sectional study and cannot be used to make casual inferences. Convenience sampling may not be representative and self-reported measures may have a response bias. The methodology, however, could be adapted to determine the relationship and baseline information regarding social media exposure and addiction patterns among young adults.

#### 4 Results / Findings

##### 4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 300 young adults (aged 18-30 years) were included in the study. Demographic breakdown showed that 52% were females and 48% were males. The majority of the participants (65%) were university students and 35% were working or in professional training programmes. The age distribution revealed that 45% were aged between 18 and 22, 35% aged between 23 and 26, and 27 and 30 years accounted for 35% of respondents, 20%.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	144	48
Female	156	52
Age		
18-22	135	45
23-26	105	35
27-30	60	20
Education		
University students	195	65
Professionals	105	35

##### 4.2 Social Media Usage Patterns

There was high social media exposure reported among participants. The mean duration of social media use was 4.3 hours (SD = 1.8), with 40% of the sample using social media more than 5 hours a day. How often they check social media was from 10 to 35 times a day, with 55% checking over 20

times. Most of the participants (70%) are using more than one platform per day, with Instagram (85%), TikTok (60%) and YouTube (55%) being the most popular. The main content preferences were entertainment (68%), peer interaction (60%), and news/information (45%).

**Table 2. Social Media Usage Patterns**

Variable	Mean (SD) / Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily hours of use	4.3 (1.8)	–
Frequency of checking	22 times/day	–
Platforms used	–	–
Instagram	255	85
TikTok	180	60
YouTube	165	55
Facebook	120	40
Content Type	–	–
Entertainment	204	68
Peer interaction	180	60
News/information	135	45

#### 4.3 Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Addiction

The mean score of social media addiction was 32.5 (SD = 7.2) on a standardized scale (range: 15–60),

indicating moderate social media addiction. Around a quarter (28%) were considered to be high risk, 50% moderate risk, and 22% low risk.

**Table 3. Social Media Addiction Levels**

Addiction Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	66	22
Moderate	150	50
High	84	28

#### 4.4 Correlation Between Social Media Exposure and Addiction

**Pearson correlation analysis** showed a strong positive correlation between daily hours spent on social media and addiction scores ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p <$

0.001). The frequency of checking and number of platforms used were also significantly correlated with addiction ( $r = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and  $r = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , respectively). The findings indicate that the more exposure, the more addicted the young adults.

**Table 4. Correlation Between Social Media Exposure and Addiction**

Variable	Social Media Addiction
Daily hours of use	0.62**
Frequency of checking	0.57**
Number of platforms used	0.48**

Note: \*\* $p < 0.001$

#### 4.5 Regression Analysis

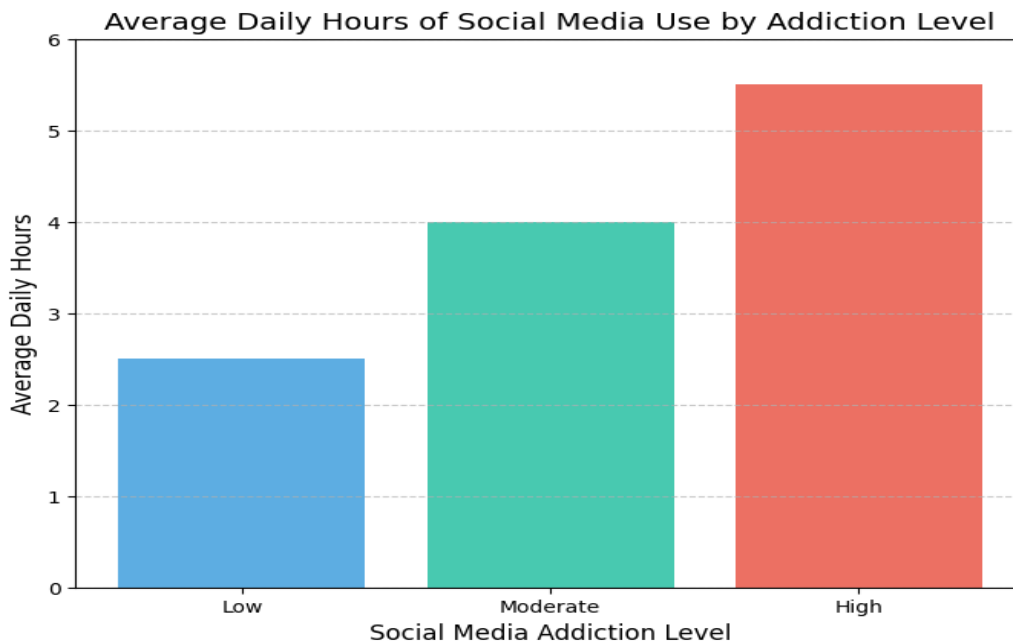
A multiple regression analysis was performed to see if the social media exposure variables predicted levels of addiction. The model was significant ( $F =$

45.2,  $p < 0.001$ ) and explained 52% of the variance in addiction scores ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ). The greatest predictor was daily hours of use ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by frequency of checking ( $\beta =$

0.32,  $p < 0.001$ ) and number of platforms ( $\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 5. Regression Analysis Predicting Social Media Addiction**

Predictor	$\beta$	t	p
Daily hours of use	0.41	7.85	<0.001
Frequency of checking	0.32	6.12	<0.001
Number of platforms	0.21	3.98	0.001



**Figure 1: Bar chart showing average daily hours of use by addiction level (Low, Moderate, High).**

This visualization helps to reinforce the positive correlation between exposure and addiction and to highlight that those with more hours of daily use are more likely to be in the high addiction category. The results show that there is a strong relationship between social media exposure and social media addiction in young adults. The number of hours, frequency of checks, and number of platforms utilized are all key to predicting addictive behaviors. These findings corroborate the hypothesis that the more exposure, the more risk of addiction, and the need to raise awareness, digital literacy, and prevention measures among young adult users.

### 5- Discussion

In the present study, the relationship between social media exposure and social media addiction among young adults was examined. The results

show that there was a high positive correlation between the amount of social media exposure (daily hours, frequency of checking, and number of platforms used) and the level of social media addiction. The findings are similar to those in previous studies, which indicated that increased exposure increases the likelihood of compulsive and maladaptive social media use (Moreno et al., 2022; Parlak Sert & Başkale, 2023). The demographic analysis showed that both male and female young adults were highly active on various social media platforms, with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube being the most used. Due to the high proportion of entertainment and social interaction content, the idea that social media satisfies immediate psychological needs is supported, in line with Uses and Gratifications Theory.

The participants were often looking for gratification from social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression, which led to the reinforcement of habitual engagement and addictive behavior (Sultan, 2021; Dumitrescu et al., 2023). The regression analysis showed that the most significant predictors of social media addiction were the number of hours spent using social media on a daily basis, followed by checking social media and the number of platforms being used. This means that the amount of social media used, as well as the frequency of use, plays a role in social media addiction. The results of this study align with the Media Dependency Theory, which suggests that media dependence to meet information, emotional, and social needs leads to increased vulnerability in compulsive media use (Momani et al., 2023; Benítez-Agudelo et al., 2025). Participants are likely to use social media for emotional regulation and coping with stress, and this is likely to increase addictive behaviors. The exposure-addiction relationship is likely to be aggravated by fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and self-esteem. Sultan (2021) highlighted that FoMO leads to frequent checking and sharing of personal information, while Xu et al. (2023) reported that peer influence can enhance compulsive use, particularly for individuals with low self-concept clarity. These factors indicate that addiction is not solely dependent on exposure and that psychological and social factors also have a moderating effect on the development of addiction, thus necessitating a holistic approach to intervention strategies. The study has a number of practical implications. Given the high rates of moderate to high addiction levels, there is a need for digital literacy programs that promote self-regulation, responsible use, and awareness of negative impacts. Schools and mental health professionals should provide interventions to help young adults learn to regulate their screen time, decrease the need to check screens, and critically examine the content they consume. Furthermore, social media platforms could incorporate features to discourage prolonged use and remind or notify users to take breaks to prevent addictive behaviors. Moreover, the link between exposure and addiction has made

it clear that attention needs to be paid to the type of content and engagement. Dependency can be reduced by programs that encourage balanced use, limit exposure to highly interactive and addictive content, and promote offline social interactions. Last but not least, taking into account the moderating role of psychosocial factors, interventions should incorporate strategies to boost self-esteem, decrease FoMO, and offer coping mechanisms to stress and peer pressure. The results validate both theoretical models, Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory, and they also indicate that the more often, the more intensely, and the more platforms' users are engaged with, the greater the chances for addiction.

### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study show that there is a definite association between social media exposure and addiction, with a greater number of hours the young adult uses social media daily and how often they check their social media accounts being the strongest predictors. Young adults are multi-platform users, with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube being the most popular platforms they use to seek entertainment, socialization, and information. These engagement patterns are in line with the framework theories that propose that people consume media to satisfy psychological needs, but more use for emotional needs has a high correlation with the risk of addiction. Moreover, there are important moderators, including fear of missing out (FoMO), peer pressure, and low self-esteem. These factors exacerbate the negative impacts of overuse of screens, further increasing compulsive behaviors and driving other problems such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and school stress. In short, social media addiction is a multifaceted problem that is influenced by usage patterns and psychological susceptibilities. Solving the problem demands specific digital well-being interventions that foster self-regulation, emotional coping mechanisms, and responsible media use among youth.

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