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Social Media Addiction and Psychological Distress in Adolescents: The Serial Mediating Roles of Fear of Missing Out and Social Comparison

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The paragraph introducing psychological distress states that “Psychological distress is a broad construct encompassing symptoms of anxiety, depressive affect, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, and general emotional strain.” This section should be more closely aligned with the actual outcome measure, the K10. The authors should explain that the K10 assesses nonspecific psychological distress rather than diagnosing anxiety or depressive disorders. Throughout the manuscript, terms such as “mental health problems,” “depression,” “anxiety,” and “psychological distress” should therefore not be used interchangeably. The Discussion in particular should avoid interpreting the K10 score as evidence of specific psychiatric conditions unless these conditions were directly assessed.

The paragraph beginning “One of the most prominent mechanisms proposed to explain the psychological consequences of social media addiction is fear of missing out” would benefit from a stronger theoretical account of FoMO. The manuscript currently describes FoMO phenomenologically but does not adequately identify the motivational framework underlying it. The authors should explain how unmet needs for relatedness, belonging, or social inclusion may contribute to FoMO and why

compulsive monitoring of social media can temporarily reduce uncertainty while simultaneously reinforcing the underlying concern. This theoretical clarification would make the proposed first-stage mediation pathway more compelling.

The paragraph beginning "Another important mechanism potentially linking social media addiction to psychological distress is social comparison" should distinguish between general social comparison orientation and specific forms of online social comparison. The study uses the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure, which assesses a relatively broad dispositional tendency to compare oneself with others and is not specifically designed to assess upward comparison on social media. The Introduction and Discussion currently imply that participants were specifically comparing themselves with idealized social media portrayals, although this was not directly measured. The authors should revise these interpretations and explicitly acknowledge that the INCOM captures general comparison orientation rather than platform-specific, upward, appearance-based, or status-based social comparison.

The manuscript states that "FoMO may precede and intensify social comparison, creating a sequential psychological process through which problematic social media engagement contributes to negative emotional outcomes." This is the central theoretical assumption of the article and requires considerably stronger justification. Because both reverse and reciprocal processes are plausible—for example, frequent social comparison may itself generate FoMO—the authors should explain why FoMO was positioned before social comparison rather than the reverse. Ideally, the Introduction should discuss competing models and justify the selected order using developmental and psychological theory rather than solely relying on previously observed correlations.

The final part of the Introduction appropriately identifies a research gap, but the paragraph beginning "Despite a growing body of literature, several important gaps remain" should more clearly state the study hypotheses. The manuscript currently ends with only an aim statement. For a mediation study with a highly specific serial model, explicit hypotheses would improve conceptual transparency. The authors should specify expectations regarding the positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress, the individual indirect effects through FoMO and social comparison, and the sequential indirect effect through FoMO followed by social comparison.

The statement that "Internal consistency was evaluated in the study sample before conducting the primary analyses" should be expanded methodologically. Cronbach's alpha alone may not fully characterize reliability, particularly if item loadings are heterogeneous. At minimum, the authors should state the criterion used to judge adequacy; preferably, McDonald's omega should also be reported. Moreover, because the entire serial mediation model depends on the distinctiveness of four self-report constructs, evidence of measurement validity would considerably strengthen the manuscript. A confirmatory factor analysis comparing a four-factor model with plausible alternative models would help demonstrate that social media addiction, FoMO, social comparison, and psychological distress are empirically distinguishable rather than reflecting a common negative-response tendency.

The Data Analysis section states that "Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 together with the PROCESS macro," but the version of PROCESS should also be reported. More importantly, the authors need to clarify the treatment of missing data. The current manuscript mentions screening for missing values without reporting how many values were missing, whether missingness was assessed systematically, and whether listwise deletion, mean substitution, multiple imputation, or another method was used. Given the sample size and multivariate model, transparent reporting of missing-data handling is essential because even modest nonrandom missingness may bias regression and mediation coefficients.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Methods section, the sentence "The target population consisted of adolescents enrolled in secondary schools in Canada during the 2025–2026 academic year" is insufficiently specific for reproducibility. Canada is geographically, linguistically, culturally, and educationally heterogeneous, and recruitment procedures differ substantially across provinces and school

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boards. The authors should identify the province or provinces, municipalities or school districts, number of participating schools, school type, and language of instruction. Without this information, readers cannot adequately judge the representativeness or external validity of the sample.

The Methods paragraph reports that "A total of 428 adolescents participated in the study," but no sample-size justification is provided. Because the central analysis is a serial mediation model involving several regression paths and bootstrap estimation of indirect effects, the manuscript should report an a priori power analysis or other defensible sample-size determination procedure. The authors should specify the assumed effect size, statistical power, alpha level, number of predictors, and software or analytical method used to determine the required sample. A post hoc statement that the sample was "adequate" would not substitute for a transparent sample-planning rationale.

The sentence "A multistage sampling procedure was used to obtain a heterogeneous adolescent sample" requires substantial methodological clarification. The subsequent description does not establish whether schools, classes, or students were randomly selected or whether recruitment depended on school willingness and participant availability. The authors should explicitly describe every sampling stage, the sampling frame, number of schools approached, number agreeing to participate, number of students invited, number providing consent/assent, and number excluded. If convenience or volunteer elements were involved, the procedure should be labeled accordingly rather than described broadly as multistage sampling.

The Methods section states that "Questionnaires were administered either electronically through a secure survey platform or in supervised school settings, depending on the procedures permitted by each participating school." This mixed mode of administration may introduce systematic measurement differences. Adolescents completing questionnaires privately online may respond differently from those completing measures in supervised school environments, particularly for psychological distress and addictive behavior. The authors should report how many participants completed each administration mode, whether conditions were standardized, whether mode effects were examined, and whether administration mode was considered as a potential covariate or sensitivity-analysis variable.

The ethical procedure requires greater precision. The sentence "appropriate parental or guardian consent and adolescent assent procedures were implemented in accordance with institutional ethical requirements and applicable Canadian standards" is too generic for a manuscript involving minors. The authors should report the name of the approving research ethics board, institutional affiliation, approval number, and approval date, as well as the consent procedure used for minors and the procedure applied to participants who were legally able to consent independently under applicable jurisdictional rules. Because the K10 assesses substantial emotional distress, the manuscript should also state whether participants were provided with referral information or support procedures if elevated distress or discomfort arose during data collection.

The Data Collection Tools section should provide substantially more psychometric detail for each instrument. For example, the sentence "The BSMAS is a brief self-report instrument designed to assess problematic and potentially addictive patterns of social media use" should be followed by evidence regarding its validity and reliability in adolescent samples, preferably including evidence relevant to Canadian or English-speaking populations. The same issue applies to the FoMOS, INCOM, and K10. The manuscript currently explains what each instrument measures but provides little evidence that the instruments are psychometrically appropriate for the present population. The original developers, scoring procedures, possible score ranges, interpretation, and prior reliability/validity evidence should be documented.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.

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