

Identifying Psychological Factors Contributing to Emotional Dependence on Social Media Among Adolescents

Dilshod. Karimov¹, Faisal. Al-Kuwari^{2*}, Yanelis. Batista³

¹ Department of Psychology, National University of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

² Department of Behavioral Sciences, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

³ Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Havana, Havana, Cuba

* Corresponding author email address: falkuwari@qu.edu.qa

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Karimov, D., Al-Kuwari, F., & Batista, Y. (2026). Identifying Psychological Factors Contributing to Emotional Dependence on Social Media Among Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 7(9), 1-17.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.6292>



© 2026 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and explain the psychological factors contributing to emotional dependence on social media among adolescents in Qatar. **Methods and Materials:** This qualitative exploratory study was conducted among 24 adolescents aged 13–18 years residing in Qatar and selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation in age, sex, school grade, and social media use patterns. Data were collected using a demographic information form and semi-structured individual interviews focusing on emotional reactions to social media, need for approval, fear of exclusion, social comparison, self-evaluation, emotion regulation, boredom, and repetitive checking behaviors. Interviews lasted approximately 40–65 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis in MAXQDA. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Credibility and dependability were strengthened through iterative coding, team discussion, examination of discrepant cases, analytical memos, and maintenance of an audit trail.

Findings: Thematic analysis generated 186 initial codes, 32 subcategories, 11 intermediate categories, and five overarching themes. The identified psychological factors were dependence on interpersonal validation, social disconnection and fear of exclusion, social comparison and unstable self-evaluation, emotion regulation through social media, and habitual cognitive-behavioral attachment. The findings indicated that emotional dependence developed through reciprocal and self-reinforcing pathways in which adolescents used social media to obtain reassurance, maintain belonging, reduce boredom and distress, regulate mood, and monitor peer activity. At the same time, repeated exposure intensified upward social comparison, insecurity, fear of missing out, sensitivity to feedback, cognitive preoccupation, and automatic checking. The convergence of interpersonal needs, affective regulation, and habitual behavior appeared to distinguish emotionally dependent use from ordinary recreational engagement. **Conclusion:** Emotional dependence on social media among adolescents is a multidimensional psychological phenomenon shaped by the interaction of social validation needs, fear of exclusion, unstable self-worth, maladaptive emotion regulation, and habitual digital engagement.

Keywords: *Adolescents; Social Media; Emotional Dependence; Social Comparison; Fear of Missing Out; Emotion Regulation; Interpersonal Validation.*

1. Introduction

Social media has become deeply embedded in the everyday lives of adolescents, shaping how they communicate, seek information, establish social identities, maintain peer relationships, and regulate emotional experiences. For contemporary adolescents, digital platforms are no longer supplementary spaces operating outside ordinary social life; rather, they form part of the developmental environment within which belonging, self-presentation, interpersonal feedback, social comparison, and emotional adjustment occur. The psychological significance of these platforms is especially important during adolescence because this developmental period is characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, increasing autonomy from family, identity exploration, emotional instability, and an intensified need for social acceptance. Digital technologies can support adolescents by facilitating communication, access to information, creativity, social participation, and connection with supportive communities, and evidence has documented a range of positive outcomes associated with appropriate digital technology use (Haddock et al., 2022). At the same time, the growing integration of social media into adolescents' social and emotional worlds has raised concern about excessive, compulsive, and psychologically dependent patterns of use. Contemporary reviews increasingly emphasize that the effects of digital environments cannot be understood solely in terms of screen duration; the psychological functions of use, the nature of online interactions, individual vulnerabilities, and the broader developmental context must also be considered (Rutte et al., 2024; Socol et al., 2026).

The distinction between frequent social media use and emotional dependence is particularly important. Adolescents may use social networking platforms intensively without necessarily experiencing clinically significant impairment, while others may develop a pattern in which emotional stability, self-esteem, interpersonal reassurance, or mood regulation becomes increasingly dependent on continuous online engagement. Social media addiction and problematic social networking use have been described through features such as preoccupation, loss of control, compulsive checking, tolerance-like escalation, withdrawal-like discomfort, interference with academic or interpersonal functioning, and continuation despite negative consequences (Amirthalingam & Khera, 2024; Fioravanti et al., 2025). Studies examining behavioral and psychological predictors of mobile phone

and smartphone addiction similarly indicate that repeated digital engagement can become reinforced by cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal mechanisms rather than being attributable merely to convenience or technological accessibility (Munusamy & Ghazali, 2022; Munusamy et al., 2021). Research on Instagram dependency and related forms of platform-specific engagement has further suggested that intensive use may influence students' routines, concentration, social functioning, and emotional experiences (Dhiman, 2024). These findings support the need to conceptualize emotional dependence as a multidimensional phenomenon in which adolescents may increasingly rely on social media to obtain reassurance, relieve distress, overcome boredom, monitor peer relationships, and sustain a sense of belonging.

A central psychological mechanism that may contribute to emotional dependence is the adolescent need for social connection. Peer relationships assume heightened developmental importance during adolescence, and the possibility of immediate access to friends, classmates, and broader social networks makes social media especially reinforcing. However, the same connectivity can generate persistent concern about exclusion, delayed responses, missed conversations, or being absent from socially meaningful online events. Social media therefore offers both perceived connection and the possibility of intensified insecurity. Loneliness is particularly relevant in this context. Longitudinal evidence indicates that loneliness in youth develops through a combination of individual, relational, and contextual risk and protective factors (Buecker et al., 2024). Digital environments may temporarily reduce feelings of isolation by enabling communication and social participation, but they may also reinforce compensatory patterns in which individuals increasingly rely on online engagement when offline needs for connection remain unmet. Research on internet addiction has highlighted emotional dysregulation and social compensation as mechanisms that may explain why vulnerable adolescents become increasingly reliant on online environments (Qi et al., 2026). Similarly, longitudinal findings linking short-form video addiction, loneliness, and social anxiety suggest that problematic engagement and interpersonal vulnerability may influence one another over time rather than operating as isolated phenomena (Zhao et al., 2026).

The role of self-evaluation is another important dimension of adolescent emotional dependence on social media. Social networking platforms expose users to continuous streams of curated photographs, achievements,

lifestyles, peer interactions, and indicators of popularity, creating conditions for frequent upward social comparison. Adolescents who compare themselves unfavorably with peers or influencers may experience dissatisfaction, insecurity, envy, reduced self-esteem, or perceived social inadequacy. When these negative evaluations are subsequently addressed through further online engagement, attention seeking, posting, or reassurance seeking, a self-reinforcing dependence cycle may develop. Reviews of psychological risk factors for problematic social network use have identified variables such as low self-esteem, social anxiety, emotional difficulties, maladaptive coping, and related vulnerabilities as recurrent correlates of problematic use (Fioravanti et al., 2025). Cross-cultural research has also shown that young people with internet addiction may exhibit distinctive psychological characteristics related to self-regulation and interpersonal functioning, although the expression of these characteristics may vary across sociocultural settings (Yablonska & Li, 2023). At the same time, psychological resources such as self-compassion may protect individuals from some of the adverse consequences associated with social media exposure by reducing harsh self-evaluation and the need to derive personal worth from external approval (Manjanatha et al., 2025).

The relationship between social media and emotional regulation is equally significant. Adolescents often turn to social media when they are bored, lonely, distressed, angry, anxious, or overwhelmed by academic and interpersonal pressures. Under such conditions, scrolling, messaging, watching short-form videos, or seeking feedback can provide immediate distraction and short-term mood improvement. However, repeated reliance on social media as the primary response to emotional discomfort may gradually reduce opportunities to develop more adaptive regulatory strategies. Existing literature indicates that social media can influence both emotional and cognitive functioning, particularly when patterns of use become persistent and difficult to control (Chaeycharoen, 2022). Systematic reviews of adolescent internet addiction have similarly identified psychological distress, emotional difficulties, family conditions, and pandemic-related disruptions as relevant factors associated with problematic internet use (Kusnadi & Kaloeti, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further illustrated the complex relationship between digital media and adolescent mental health, because increased reliance on online communication could simultaneously provide social continuity while also intensifying exposure to potentially harmful patterns of

digital engagement (Marciano et al., 2022). Such evidence underscores the importance of understanding whether adolescents are using social media primarily for communication and recreation or whether it has become a central mechanism for managing emotional states.

Mental health concerns associated with problematic digital engagement have become increasingly prominent. Research and reviews have linked excessive or maladaptive social media use with depressive symptoms, anxiety, psychological distress, loneliness, sleep problems, emotional instability, and other indicators of reduced well-being, although associations are heterogeneous and may vary according to individual differences and patterns of use (Awopetu et al., 2024; Marano et al., 2025). Narrative analyses of adolescent mental health trends have also discussed the temporal coexistence of expanding social media use and deteriorating indicators of adolescent well-being, while emphasizing that causal pathways remain complex and multifactorial (Burgess, 2025). Cross-sectional evidence among young adults suggests that patterns of mobile phone and social media use may predict psychological distress, reinforcing concerns about the emotional implications of persistent digital engagement (Sahu et al., 2026). At the same time, psychosocial difficulties associated with social media addiction can extend beyond mood symptoms to academic performance, daily functioning, and interpersonal relationships (Akhlaq et al., 2022). These findings do not imply that social media exposure inevitably causes poor mental health; rather, they suggest that specific forms of psychologically dependent use may coexist with or exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Adolescents' social media use must also be understood within the family and broader psychosocial environment. Family relationships, parental monitoring, emotional support, communication quality, household rules, and parental modeling can influence both screen media use and mental health outcomes. Systematic evidence has demonstrated that family-level characteristics are meaningfully associated with adolescents' digital media practices and psychological outcomes, suggesting that problematic use cannot be fully understood without considering the relational environment in which it develops (Liu et al., 2024). More generally, adolescent mental health reflects the interaction of personal, familial, school-related, and social risk factors (Lin & Guo, 2024). Attachment processes may also be relevant because adolescents with less secure interpersonal expectations may seek reassurance or emotional availability through digital communication.

Research on promoting attachment security during developmental transitions demonstrates the broader importance of perceived relational safety and emotional responsiveness in young people's adjustment (Manvelian et al., 2023). From this perspective, emotional dependence on social media may sometimes reflect an attempt to compensate for uncertainty in offline relationships by seeking continuously available signals of acceptance and responsiveness online.

The literature also suggests that adolescents' digital experiences are strongly influenced by the structure and affordances of contemporary platforms. Algorithmically curated feeds, short-form video systems, variable reinforcement schedules, personalized recommendations, visible engagement metrics, and continuous notifications can increase attentional capture and prolong use. These technological features interact with psychological vulnerabilities rather than operating independently of them. Recent discussions of algorithm-driven social media environments have emphasized that clinical and non-clinical adolescents may encounter different forms of risk depending on the interaction between individual susceptibilities and the design of the platforms they use (Socol et al., 2026). The increasing integration of generative artificial intelligence and AI-mediated content into adolescents' digital environments may further transform patterns of engagement and raise new questions about emotional adjustment, mental health, and the intensity of technology-mediated experiences (Nagata, 2026). These developments reinforce the need to examine the subjective psychological meaning of social media use rather than relying solely on behavioral measures such as total time online.

The developmental consequences of these patterns may become particularly serious when emotionally dependent social media use intersects with broader mental health vulnerabilities. Adolescents already experiencing bullying, peer rejection, psychological distress, or social instability may be especially likely to interpret online interactions through a heightened sensitivity to acceptance and exclusion. Research addressing adolescent suicide and related risk factors has emphasized the significance of bullying dynamics, emotional distress, and multidimensional prevention strategies in understanding severe youth mental health outcomes (Pérez-Jiménez, 2026). Broader qualitative evidence from children, adolescents, parents, and professionals similarly indicates that youth mental health difficulties are embedded within complex social, developmental, and relational contexts rather than

arising from a single isolated influence (Morales et al., 2026). Accordingly, identifying psychological pathways contributing to emotional dependence on social media may have preventive value by helping researchers distinguish between ordinary digital participation and patterns in which online engagement becomes tied to emotional security, self-worth, or coping with distress.

Previous scholarship has provided important evidence concerning social media addiction, mental health outcomes, internet dependence, and related risk factors, but several limitations remain. Much of the literature has focused on university students or young adults rather than adolescents, even though adolescence represents a distinct developmental period characterized by greater sensitivity to peer feedback and ongoing maturation of self-regulatory capacities (Fatima et al., 2025). Other studies have emphasized the prevalence or consequences of problematic use but have provided less detailed insight into how adolescents themselves understand the psychological processes that make social media emotionally difficult to disengage from. Reviews of adolescent social networking and emotional well-being have shown that the relationship is complex, with both potentially beneficial and harmful dimensions depending on patterns and contexts of use (Bottaro & Faraci, 2022). Research mapping the impact of social media during adolescence has likewise emphasized the importance of strengthening resilience and addressing emerging psychosocial needs rather than treating digital engagement as uniformly harmful (Falcón-Linares et al., 2023). These findings suggest that qualitative investigation is particularly valuable for identifying the psychological meanings, motivations, and reinforcing experiences that are not easily captured through standardized questionnaires alone.

The sociocultural context is also important. Adolescents' interpretations of approval, privacy, family expectations, peer relationships, emotional expression, and acceptable social behavior are shaped by the environments in which they live. Findings generated in Western or East Asian settings cannot automatically be assumed to represent adolescents in Gulf societies. Qatar has experienced rapid technological development, high digital connectivity, and substantial integration of mobile technologies and social networking into everyday life, making it an important setting for examining the psychological implications of social media use. At the same time, adolescents in Qatar navigate family-oriented cultural norms, rapidly evolving peer cultures, educational pressures, and globalized digital content. These interacting influences may shape the ways in

which social media becomes associated with belonging, identity expression, reassurance seeking, emotional coping, and social comparison. Existing studies have demonstrated that determinants and consequences of digital dependence vary across populations and contexts, highlighting the importance of examining psychological mechanisms within specific cultural environments rather than assuming that problematic use is psychologically identical across societies (Munusamy & Ghazali, 2022; Yablonska & Li, 2023).

Taken together, the available literature indicates that emotional dependence on social media among adolescents is likely to emerge through the interaction of multiple psychological factors, including loneliness, fear of exclusion, social anxiety, contingent self-worth, social comparison, reassurance seeking, emotional dysregulation, boredom, maladaptive coping, and automatic patterns of checking and engagement. Social media may simultaneously satisfy important developmental needs and create conditions in which those needs become increasingly tied to digital participation. The psychological risk is therefore not simply frequent use but a progressive shift in which adolescents come to depend on online feedback, connection, stimulation, or distraction to regulate their emotional state. Identifying these processes requires attention to adolescents' own descriptions of why they return to social media, what they experience when they are disconnected, how they interpret online feedback, and which emotional states most strongly trigger engagement. A qualitative approach can therefore complement existing quantitative and review-based evidence by clarifying how diverse psychological mechanisms converge within adolescents' everyday experiences and by generating a context-sensitive framework for future assessment and intervention.

The aim of this study was to identify the psychological factors contributing to emotional dependence on social media among adolescents in Qatar.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to identify and describe the psychological factors contributing to emotional dependence on social media among adolescents in Qatar. A qualitative approach was selected because emotional dependence on social media is a multidimensional phenomenon involving subjective emotional experiences, cognitive processes, interpersonal needs, patterns of self-evaluation, and behavioral responses that may not be

adequately captured through predetermined quantitative measures alone. The study population consisted of adolescents aged 13–18 years residing in Qatar and regularly using at least one social media platform. Participants were recruited from secondary schools and youth educational centers in Doha, Al Rayyan, and Al Wakrah using purposive sampling with maximum variation in age, sex, school grade, and reported patterns of social media use. A total of 24 adolescents participated in the study. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new psychological concepts or categories related to emotional dependence on social media. Inclusion criteria were being between 13 and 18 years of age, having lived in Qatar for at least one year, using social media on a daily basis for at least the preceding six months, having sufficient ability to communicate in Arabic or English, and expressing willingness to discuss personal experiences related to social media use. Adolescents with conditions that substantially interfered with their ability to participate in an interview or provide meaningful responses were excluded. Participants and their parents or legal guardians received information regarding the study objectives, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of the data, and their right to discontinue participation at any stage without consequence. Written parental or guardian consent and adolescent assent were obtained before data collection. All identifying information was removed during transcription, and codes were assigned to participants to preserve anonymity. The research procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving minors.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using a demographic information form and a semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for the objectives of the study. The demographic form was used to record participants' age, sex, school grade, area of residence, most frequently used social media platforms, approximate daily duration of social media use, number of years of social media use, and general patterns of online activity. The semi-structured interview guide was developed after reviewing the conceptual literature on problematic social media use, emotional attachment to digital environments, psychological needs, adolescent development, interpersonal relationships, and emotion regulation. The interview format was designed to permit systematic examination of common domains across

participants while providing sufficient flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. Interviews began with broad questions concerning participants' everyday use of social media and gradually focused on their emotional responses to being connected or disconnected, perceived need to check social media, expectations concerning feedback from others, emotional reactions to likes, comments, messages, and online exclusion, experiences of loneliness or boredom, social comparison, fear of missing out, self-esteem and self-evaluation, reassurance seeking, need for social approval, perceived social support, identity expression, emotional regulation, and the perceived role of social media in managing negative affect. Participants were also asked to describe situations in which they felt unable to reduce or interrupt their social media use despite wanting to do so and to explain the thoughts and feelings associated with these situations. Follow-up probes such as requests for examples, explanations, comparisons, and descriptions of emotional reactions were used when necessary to obtain richer information. The interview guide was reviewed by three specialists in adolescent psychology, clinical psychology, and qualitative research to evaluate its relevance, clarity, comprehensiveness, and developmental appropriateness. Minor modifications were subsequently made to simplify several questions and improve their suitability for adolescent participants. Two pilot interviews were conducted to assess the comprehensibility and sequencing of the questions; these interviews were not included in the final analysis. Individual interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting or through a secure online meeting platform when face-to-face participation was not feasible. Participants were allowed to choose Arabic or English according to their preference. Each interview lasted approximately 40–65 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Field notes were also prepared immediately after each interview to document contextual information, notable emotional expressions, pauses, and preliminary analytical observations. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and interviews conducted in Arabic were analyzed in the original language to minimize loss of meaning during the analytical process.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive orientation, allowing psychological factors associated with emotional dependence on social media to emerge primarily from participants' accounts rather than

being imposed through a predetermined theoretical classification. Data management and coding were performed using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. Analysis began with repeated reading of the complete interview transcripts and field notes to achieve immersion in the data and develop an initial understanding of recurring psychological experiences. During the initial coding stage, meaningful units of text related to emotions, cognitions, psychological needs, motivations, interpersonal concerns, self-perceptions, and behavioral tendencies associated with social media dependence were identified and assigned concise descriptive or interpretive codes. Coding remained sufficiently inclusive during the early stages so that potentially relevant concepts were not prematurely excluded. Codes representing similar psychological meanings were subsequently compared and grouped into preliminary subcategories. Through constant comparison across participants and transcripts, these subcategories were further organized into broader categories and overarching themes representing the principal psychological factors contributing to adolescents' emotional dependence on social media. Particular attention was given to relationships among factors such as fear of missing out, need for approval and reassurance, loneliness, social comparison, low or unstable self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, boredom intolerance, perceived social inadequacy, identity-related needs, and reliance on social media for mood regulation, while the final thematic organization was determined by the empirical data rather than by these concepts in advance. Themes were repeatedly reviewed against both the coded extracts and the complete dataset to ensure internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and adequate representation of participants' experiences. Analytical memos were maintained throughout the process to document coding decisions, emerging interpretations, relationships among categories, and modifications to the thematic structure. To enhance credibility, selected interpretations were discussed among members of the research team, and discrepant cases were actively examined rather than excluded from the analysis. An audit trail documenting recruitment, interview procedures, coding decisions, category development, and theme refinement was maintained to strengthen dependability and transparency. Representative participant quotations were selected during the final stage to illustrate the meaning of each identified theme while preserving anonymity. Analysis continued until a coherent thematic framework was established that accounted for the major psychological processes through which adolescents

described developing and maintaining emotional dependence on social media.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 24 adolescents participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years, with a mean age of 15.63 years ($SD = 1.53$). Thirteen participants (54.2%) were female and 11 (45.8%) were male. With respect to school grade, 5 participants (20.8%) were in Grades 7–8, 10 (41.7%) were in Grades 9–10, and 9 (37.5%) were in Grades 11–12. Most participants resided in Doha ($n = 12$, 50.0%), followed by Al Rayyan ($n = 7$, 29.2%) and Al Wakrah ($n = 5$, 20.8%). The reported duration of daily social media use ranged from approximately 2.5 to 8.5 hours, with an average of 5.21 hours per day. Seventeen participants (70.8%) reported using social media for at least four hours per day, and 9 (37.5%) indicated that they routinely checked

social media within the first 10 minutes after waking. The most frequently used platforms were Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and WhatsApp, with most participants reporting active use of three or more platforms. The duration of social media experience ranged from approximately 2 to 7 years. Participants differed in the intensity of their use and in the functions they assigned to social media; however, nearly all described social media as an integral part of their daily emotional and interpersonal life. Several adolescents reported that social media was not merely a source of entertainment but had become closely linked to mood regulation, peer connection, self-evaluation, relief from boredom, and feelings of social inclusion. Analysis of the interview data resulted in 186 initial codes. Through iterative comparison, condensation, and abstraction, these codes were organized into 32 subcategories, 11 intermediate categories, and 5 overarching psychological themes explaining adolescents' emotional dependence on social media.

Table 1

Overarching Themes, Categories, and Core Meanings of Emotional Dependence on Social Media

Overarching theme	Main categories	Core psychological meaning
Dependence on interpersonal validation	Need for approval and reassurance; sensitivity to feedback; fear of social rejection	Emotional security became contingent on receiving visible signs of recognition, acceptance, and responsiveness from others
Social disconnection and fear of exclusion	Fear of missing out; perceived peer exclusion; continuous monitoring of social activity	Adolescents experienced disengagement from social media as a threat to belonging and access to peer-related information
Social comparison and unstable self-evaluation	Appearance comparison; lifestyle comparison; performance comparison; contingent self-worth	Exposure to idealized online representations shaped self-evaluation and intensified reliance on online feedback
Emotion regulation through social media	Escape from negative emotions; boredom reduction; distraction; mood repair	Social media was repeatedly used as an accessible strategy for reducing distress or generating immediate emotional stimulation
Habitual cognitive-behavioral attachment	Automatic checking; intrusive thoughts; difficulty disengaging; perceived loss of control	Repeated use evolved into an automatic psychological habit maintained by anticipation, notification cues, and emotional reinforcement

Table 1 presents the five overarching themes generated from the thematic analysis. The findings indicated that emotional dependence on social media was not attributable to a single psychological factor but emerged through the interaction of interpersonal, cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms. Dependence on interpersonal validation represented a prominent theme and reflected adolescents' tendency to associate online reactions with personal acceptance, social value, and interpersonal security. Social disconnection and fear of exclusion captured the anxiety participants experienced when they were unable to follow peer interactions, trends, conversations, or emerging events in real time. Social comparison and unstable self-evaluation reflected the extent to which participants evaluated their appearance, popularity, lifestyle,

achievements, or social position by comparing themselves with selected online representations of others. Emotion regulation through social media described the use of platforms to manage loneliness, boredom, sadness, stress, anger, and academic pressure. Finally, habitual cognitive-behavioral attachment reflected the gradual transformation of initially voluntary social media use into automatic checking, preoccupation, and difficulty disengaging. These themes were closely interconnected. For example, social comparison often increased negative affect, which subsequently intensified the use of social media for reassurance or mood repair, while fear of exclusion reinforced repeated checking and strengthened habitual dependence.

Table 2

Subcategories and Representative Indicators of Dependence on Interpersonal Validation and Social Exclusion

Main category	Subcategory	Representative psychological indicator	Number of participants mentioning the issue
Need for approval and reassurance	Importance of likes and reactions	Mood improvement following positive reactions to posts or stories	18
Need for approval and reassurance	Reassurance through messaging	Interpreting quick replies as evidence of closeness or acceptance	15
Sensitivity to feedback	Emotional response to low engagement	Disappointment, embarrassment, or self-doubt when expected reactions were absent	16
Sensitivity to feedback	Deleting or modifying content	Removing posts that received fewer reactions than expected	10
Fear of social rejection	Concern about being ignored	Anxiety when messages were seen but unanswered	14
Fear of missing out	Monitoring peer activities	Repeated checking to avoid missing conversations, gatherings, or trends	19
Perceived peer exclusion	Distress about unseen social events	Feeling rejected after viewing peers together without the participant	13
Continuous monitoring	Need to remain updated	Checking platforms repeatedly even without receiving notifications	20

As shown in Table 2, interpersonal validation and fear of exclusion were among the most frequently expressed mechanisms underlying emotional dependence. Twenty participants described repeatedly checking social media even in the absence of notifications, indicating that the behavior was often anticipatory rather than purely reactive. Nineteen participants explicitly discussed fear of missing conversations, peer activities, trends, or new content, suggesting that remaining continuously connected served a social surveillance function. For many participants, likes, replies, views, reactions, and message responsiveness acted as visible indicators of social acceptance. Eighteen adolescents described feeling happier, calmer, or more confident when their content received expected levels of

engagement, whereas 16 reported disappointment or self-questioning when posts attracted limited reactions. Several participants interpreted a delayed response, being left on “seen,” or exclusion from group interactions as a sign that others might be losing interest in them. Such experiences increased the urge to recheck applications, monitor others' online status, or post new content to restore a sense of interpersonal security. Ten participants reported having deleted, edited, or reposted content after judging that it had received insufficient attention. The data therefore suggest that emotional dependence was strengthened when adolescents used quantifiable indicators of online engagement as proxies for social worth, interpersonal closeness, or peer acceptance.

Table 3

Psychological Processes Related to Social Comparison, Self-Evaluation, and Emotion Regulation

Psychological process	Subcategory	Typical manifestation in participants' accounts	Frequency, n (%)
Upward social comparison	Physical appearance	Comparing attractiveness, body image, clothing, or perceived physical perfection	16 (66.7)
Upward social comparison	Lifestyle and popularity	Comparing travel, possessions, friendships, outings, or social visibility	15 (62.5)
Achievement comparison	Academic or personal success	Comparing academic performance, talents, productivity, or accomplishments	10 (41.7)
Contingent self-worth	Feedback-based self-evaluation	Feeling more valuable when content received favorable responses	14 (58.3)
Mood regulation	Escape from sadness or loneliness	Using short-form videos, feeds, or messaging to avoid unpleasant emotions	17 (70.8)
Mood regulation	Stress reduction	Using social media after school, conflict, or demanding academic activities	15 (62.5)
Boredom intolerance	Need for continuous stimulation	Opening social media immediately during unstructured or quiet moments	21 (87.5)
Emotional distraction	Avoidance of difficult thoughts	Scrolling to postpone thinking about problems or responsibilities	14 (58.3)

Table 3 demonstrates that social comparison and affect regulation were central psychological processes in the development and maintenance of emotional dependence. Twenty-one participants described opening social media almost automatically whenever they experienced boredom, inactivity, waiting, or an absence of external stimulation. This was the most frequently reported psychological-behavioral pattern across the dataset. Seventeen adolescents reported using social media when feeling lonely, sad, or emotionally uncomfortable, while 15 specifically described it as a means of reducing academic stress, interpersonal tension, or mental fatigue. These accounts suggest that social media gradually acquired a regulatory function in which unpleasant emotional states became cues for platform use. Social comparison was also highly prominent. Sixteen participants reported comparing their physical appearance with peers, influencers, or other online figures, and 15

reported comparison regarding lifestyle, friendships, popularity, possessions, or social opportunities. These comparisons were frequently upward in direction and tended to involve highly curated or idealized online content. Participants described feeling temporarily inspired in some cases, but more commonly reported dissatisfaction, self-consciousness, envy, inadequacy, or a sense of being “behind” others. Fourteen participants described self-worth as at least partially contingent on the quantity or quality of online responses they received. This interaction between comparison and emotion regulation created a potentially self-reinforcing process: social media use exposed adolescents to material that could worsen self-evaluation, while the negative emotions generated by these comparisons could subsequently motivate further use as a source of reassurance, distraction, or mood repair.

Table 4

Cognitive and Behavioral Indicators of Habitual Attachment to Social Media

Dimension	Identified indicator	Description of participants' experiences	n (%)
Automaticity	Unconscious application opening	Opening an application without a deliberate intention to use it	18 (75.0)
Preoccupation	Recurrent thoughts about online activity	Thinking about messages, reactions, or missed content while offline	15 (62.5)
Cue reactivity	Immediate response to notifications	Feeling compelled to check the phone after alerts or vibrations	20 (83.3)
Checking behavior	Repetitive platform checking	Reopening platforms shortly after previously checking them	19 (79.2)
Loss of control	Use lasting longer than intended	Difficulty stopping after deciding to use social media briefly	18 (75.0)
Discomfort during restriction	Restlessness or irritability	Feeling uneasy when access was restricted by parents, school, or connectivity problems	14 (58.3)
Sleep-related use	Delayed bedtime	Continuing use despite intending to sleep	16 (66.7)
Task interference	Interrupting study activities	Switching from academic tasks to social media despite awareness of distraction	17 (70.8)

Table 4 shows that emotional dependence was accompanied by a clear pattern of cognitive preoccupation, cue-driven behavior, and reduced self-regulation. Twenty participants reported responding rapidly to notifications or phone vibrations, frequently describing an immediate urge to determine who had contacted them or what had occurred online. Nineteen adolescents described reopening applications within a short period after having already checked them, suggesting that repeated checking was not always driven by meaningful new information. Eighteen participants reported that they sometimes opened social media applications almost unconsciously or found

themselves scrolling without remembering the original reason for opening the application. An equal number described remaining online longer than intended despite previous decisions to limit their use. Seventeen participants acknowledged interrupting homework, studying, reading, or other tasks to check social media, while 16 reported delaying sleep because of continued scrolling, messaging, or viewing short-form content. Fourteen participants reported irritability, restlessness, frustration, or a feeling that “something was missing” when internet access was unavailable or when parents or school rules prevented social media use. These findings indicate that emotional

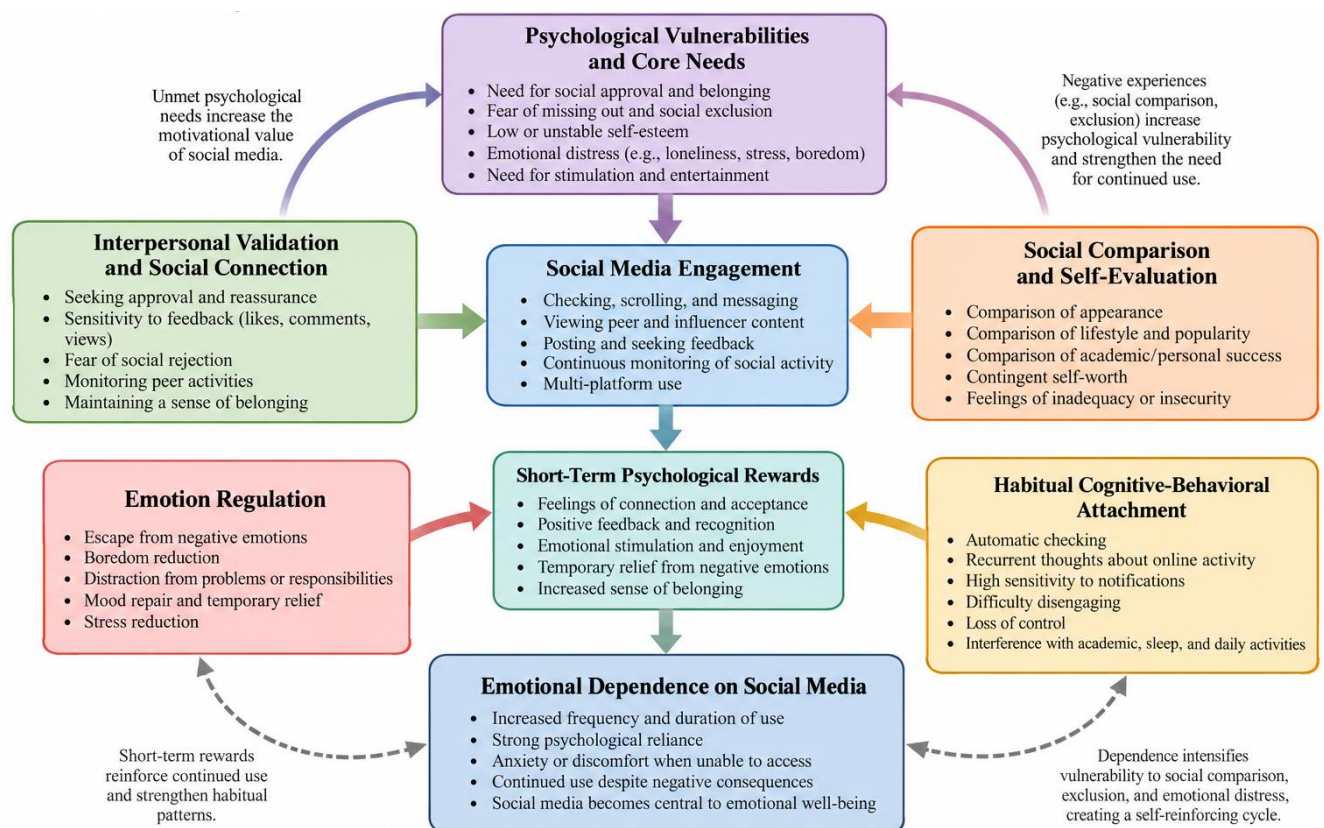
dependence had moved beyond simple preference or frequent engagement for many participants. The platforms had become cognitively salient and behaviorally automatic, with internal states such as boredom and loneliness and external cues such as notifications jointly triggering repeated engagement.

A more detailed comparison of the themes indicated that the identified psychological factors were not independent. Rather, participants' narratives revealed a sequential and cyclical pattern linking emotional vulnerability, online engagement, short-term reinforcement, and subsequent dependence. For some adolescents, the process began with loneliness, boredom, stress, or uncertainty regarding peer relationships. Social media then offered immediate access to communication, entertainment, social information, or reassurance. Positive feedback temporarily improved mood

and reinforced continued use. However, continued exposure also increased opportunities for social comparison, perceived exclusion, and concern about online evaluation. These experiences could generate additional insecurity or negative affect, thereby strengthening the perceived need to return to social media. Over time, repeated engagement became increasingly automatic and less dependent on conscious decision-making. Participants who reported stronger fear of exclusion also tended to describe more frequent checking, while those who were highly sensitive to reactions and peer responses often reported greater emotional fluctuation following online interactions. Similarly, those who used social media primarily as a means of escaping boredom or negative emotional states tended to describe greater difficulty stopping their use once they had started.

Figure 1

Thematic Model of Psychological Pathways Contributing to Emotional Dependence on Social Media Among Adolescents



The thematic model represented in Figure 1 integrates the relationships among the five overarching themes identified in the analysis. The model proposes that emotional dependence develops through reciprocal pathways rather than through a simple linear sequence. Psychological vulnerability may originate in needs for belonging,

interpersonal reassurance, self-esteem regulation, emotional relief, or stimulation. These needs increase the motivational value of social media because the platforms provide rapid social feedback, continuous access to peers, novel content, and immediate distraction. The resulting short-term psychological rewards reinforce platform use. At the same

time, frequent exposure may generate new sources of emotional vulnerability through social comparison, perceived exclusion, uncertainty about peer reactions, and heightened monitoring of others. Repeated use under these conditions strengthens cognitive salience and behavioral automaticity, leading adolescents to check social media in response to increasingly minor internal or external cues. Thus, social media shifts from being an optional communication or entertainment tool to functioning as a psychologically significant environment for regulating emotion, confirming belonging, assessing social standing and maintaining a sense of connection.

Across the interviews, the strongest recurring pattern was the convergence of three processes: the need to remain socially connected, the use of social media to regulate uncomfortable emotional states, and the gradual development of automatic checking behavior. Participants rarely described emotional dependence solely in terms of enjoyment. Instead, their accounts suggested that use became difficult to control when social media fulfilled several psychological functions simultaneously. For example, an adolescent might open a platform because of boredom, remain because of peer-related content, evaluate personal worth through comparison and feedback, experience anxiety about missing further interactions, and subsequently return to the platform shortly after closing it. This multi-functionality appeared to distinguish emotionally dependent use from ordinary recreational engagement. In participants with stronger dependence patterns, the absence of social media was experienced not merely as the absence of entertainment but as temporary disconnection from peer life, loss of reassurance, reduced access to mood-regulating stimulation, and uncertainty regarding ongoing social events.

The findings also revealed meaningful individual differences in the relative importance of these pathways. For some participants, dependence was primarily interpersonal and centered on peer communication, social approval, and responsiveness. For others, the dominant mechanism involved emotion regulation and the use of social media to manage loneliness, academic pressure, boredom, or unwanted thoughts. A third group placed greater emphasis on social comparison and described frequent monitoring of peers and influencers as a way of evaluating their own appearance, achievements, or social position. Despite these differences, the majority of participants displayed overlap between at least two major themes, and many described experiences corresponding to four or all five themes. This

overlap supports the interpretation of emotional dependence on social media as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon in which interpersonal needs, affective regulation, self-evaluation, and learned behavioral patterns interact dynamically.

Taken together, the findings indicate that emotional dependence on social media among adolescents in Qatar was shaped by a network of mutually reinforcing psychological mechanisms. The central factors included the need for approval and reassurance, fear of missing out and social exclusion, upward social comparison, unstable or externally contingent self-worth, reliance on social media for emotion regulation, low tolerance for boredom, cognitive preoccupation, notification sensitivity, automatic checking, and difficulty disengaging. The results further suggest that emotional dependence is maintained because social media provides immediate short-term psychological rewards while simultaneously creating conditions that can intensify insecurity, comparison, and the perceived need for continued connection. This cyclical pattern provides the central explanatory framework for understanding how ordinary social media engagement may progressively acquire emotional significance and become difficult for adolescents to regulate independently.

4. Discussion

The present study identified five interconnected psychological themes contributing to emotional dependence on social media among adolescents in Qatar: dependence on interpersonal validation, social disconnection and fear of exclusion, social comparison and unstable self-evaluation, emotion regulation through social media, and habitual cognitive-behavioral attachment. These themes suggest that emotional dependence on social media is not adequately explained by the amount of time adolescents spend online. Rather, dependence appears to emerge when social media assumes a central psychological role in satisfying needs for reassurance, belonging, self-evaluation, emotional relief, stimulation, and interpersonal monitoring. The findings further showed that these processes were mutually reinforcing. Adolescents who relied on social media for approval or relief from negative affect were more likely to engage in repeated checking and remain sensitive to online reactions, while continued exposure increased opportunities for social comparison, exclusion concerns, and emotional instability. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the multidimensional

nature of problematic social media use and the importance of psychological vulnerability, emotional regulation, and interpersonal functioning in its development (Amirthalingam & Khera, 2024; Fioravanti et al., 2025).

One of the most prominent findings was the importance of interpersonal validation and reassurance. Many participants interpreted likes, comments, views, replies, and message responsiveness as indicators of social acceptance and relational security. Positive feedback improved mood and confidence, whereas limited engagement, delayed replies, or being ignored could produce disappointment, self-doubt, or anxiety. These findings support the view that social media platforms can transform interpersonal approval into visible and quantifiable signals that are easily incorporated into adolescents' self-evaluation. Previous research on problematic social network use has consistently identified reassurance seeking, low self-esteem, interpersonal sensitivity, and social anxiety as relevant psychological risk factors (Fioravanti et al., 2025). Research on behavioral and psychological predictors of mobile phone use has similarly demonstrated that emotional and interpersonal motives contribute to the development of excessive or addictive patterns of engagement (Munusamy & Ghazali, 2022; Munusamy et al., 2021). The current results extend this evidence by illustrating how adolescents themselves experience these processes: online feedback is not simply informational but may become psychologically meaningful as evidence that one is noticed, accepted, or valued.

The importance of validation can also be interpreted in relation to adolescent developmental needs. Adolescence is a period in which peer relationships become increasingly central to emotional adjustment, identity development, and perceived social standing. The finding that adolescents repeatedly monitored social media to assess whether others had responded or included them is therefore developmentally plausible. Attachment-related processes may also help explain why responsiveness from others carries such emotional weight. Although previous research on attachment security has not focused exclusively on social media, it demonstrates the importance of perceived emotional availability and relational security in developmental transitions (Manvelian et al., 2023). In the context of social media, digital responsiveness may function as an immediate cue of relational availability. When adolescents become uncertain about whether others are interested in, approving of, or connected to them, repeated checking may temporarily reduce uncertainty while

simultaneously reinforcing dependence on digital reassurance.

Fear of missing out and perceived social exclusion constituted another major theme. Participants described a strong need to remain updated about peer activities, conversations, trends, social events, and emerging content. Being disconnected was frequently associated with concern about missing socially important information or becoming peripheral to peer interactions. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that problematic internet use may be maintained by social compensation processes, especially among individuals experiencing emotional or interpersonal vulnerability (Qi et al., 2026). It also aligns with evidence showing longitudinal associations among problematic short-form video use, loneliness, and social anxiety (Zhao et al., 2026). These relationships suggest that adolescents who already experience social insecurity may use digital platforms to compensate for perceived deficits in belonging, but this compensatory use may eventually increase dependence by making constant access seem necessary for maintaining social connection.

The connection between social exclusion concerns and loneliness is particularly important. Adolescents who fear exclusion may become more vigilant toward online social information, and this vigilance can increase awareness of gatherings, friendships, and interactions from which they are absent. Thus, social media may simultaneously provide connection and expose adolescents to evidence of exclusion. Systematic longitudinal evidence indicates that loneliness in youth is shaped by multiple individual and relational risk factors and can persist when supportive social needs are not adequately met (Buecker et al., 2024). Reviews of adolescent digital experiences have similarly emphasized that online engagement can have both beneficial and adverse effects depending on how it interacts with adolescents' emotional and social circumstances (Bottaro & Faraci, 2022; Haddock et al., 2022). The present findings therefore support a bidirectional interpretation: adolescents may turn to social media because they fear disconnection, but social media exposure may also increase awareness of exclusion and strengthen the perceived necessity of staying continuously connected.

Social comparison and unstable self-evaluation represented another central pathway. Participants frequently compared their physical appearance, lifestyle, popularity, social relationships, and achievements with those displayed by peers and influencers. Such comparisons were often upward in direction and were associated with feelings of

inadequacy, insecurity, and diminished self-worth. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that problematic social media use is associated with self-esteem vulnerability, maladaptive comparison, and emotional distress (Fioravanti et al., 2025). Reviews of social media exposure among youth have also described associations with a range of psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and reduced well-being (Marano et al., 2025). The present study adds qualitative detail by showing that adolescents may not merely passively encounter idealized content; they may actively use this content as a benchmark for judging their own attractiveness, popularity, success, and social value.

The relationship between comparison and emotional dependence may be especially important because the same platform that contributes to negative self-evaluation also offers opportunities for immediate reassurance. When adolescents experience insecurity after comparing themselves with others, they may respond by posting content, checking reactions, or seeking communication in an attempt to restore self-confidence. In this way, social comparison may generate distress that subsequently increases further engagement. Research on self-compassion provides a relevant contrast, as self-compassion appears to reduce vulnerability to some of the adverse psychological consequences of social media use by weakening excessive self-criticism and dependence on external comparison (Manjanatha et al., 2025). This suggests that adolescents with greater internal self-acceptance may be less likely to rely on digital feedback as a primary source of self-worth, whereas those with more contingent self-esteem may be especially vulnerable to emotionally dependent patterns.

Emotion regulation was another major mechanism identified in the study. Participants commonly reported using social media to reduce boredom, escape loneliness, distract themselves from stress, avoid difficult thoughts, and improve mood. In several accounts, uncomfortable emotional states appeared to function as immediate triggers for social media use. This finding is highly consistent with theoretical and empirical work emphasizing emotional dysregulation as a central pathway to problematic digital engagement (Qi et al., 2026). Previous studies also indicate that social media can affect both emotional and cognitive functioning and that persistent or poorly regulated use may become linked with psychological distress (Chaeycharoen, 2022; Sahu et al., 2026). The present findings suggest that the psychological function of social media may be more important than simple frequency of use: when adolescents

repeatedly depend on social media as a primary mechanism for reducing negative affect, the behavior may become strongly reinforced.

Boredom intolerance was particularly prominent, with many participants describing a almost automatic use of social media during unstructured moments. This suggests that adolescents may increasingly develop difficulty tolerating low-stimulation states when immediate digital content is constantly available. The design of contemporary platforms, especially short-form video systems and algorithmically personalized feeds, may strengthen this pattern by providing rapid and variable rewards. Reviews of adolescent digital environments have emphasized that algorithmic structures can interact with psychological susceptibilities and increase attentional capture (Socol et al., 2026). Similarly, discussions of social media dependence highlight the role of continuous access, personalized content, and immediate reinforcement in maintaining repetitive engagement (Amirthalingam & Khera, 2024). The current findings therefore support the interpretation that boredom-driven use may not remain a neutral habit; repeated relief from boredom may condition adolescents to turn to social media automatically whenever stimulation decreases.

The finding that adolescents frequently used social media to manage stress, loneliness, and negative emotions is also consistent with evidence from the COVID-19 period, when digital media became an especially prominent means of maintaining social interaction and coping with disruption. Systematic review and meta-analytic evidence has shown that digital media use during the pandemic was related to adolescent mental health in complex ways, with both supportive and potentially adverse consequences depending on the pattern and purpose of use (Marciano et al., 2022). Similarly, reviews of internet addiction during the pandemic identified emotional distress, family environment, and maladaptive coping as relevant correlates (Kusnadi & Kaloeti, 2022). These findings reinforce the interpretation that social media use may become problematic when it functions as an inflexible coping strategy rather than one of several available methods of emotional regulation.

Habitual cognitive-behavioral attachment was the final major theme and represented the point at which emotional dependence became visible as automatic behavior. Participants described opening applications without conscious intention, responding immediately to notifications, repeatedly checking platforms after brief intervals, continuing use longer than planned, delaying sleep, and interrupting academic tasks. These findings

correspond closely with descriptions of problematic and addictive digital use involving preoccupation, diminished control, cue reactivity, and functional interference (Akhlaq et al., 2022; Amirthalingam & Khera, 2024). Research on smartphone addiction has likewise identified habitual behavior and psychological predictors as important determinants of persistent engagement (Munusamy & Ghazali, 2022; Munusamy et al., 2021). The present results suggest that emotionally dependent social media use may gradually shift from deliberate behavior into automatic responding, especially when internal triggers such as loneliness or boredom combine with external cues such as notifications.

The interference reported in academic activities and sleep also supports previous evidence linking problematic social media use with broader functional difficulties. Studies among students have shown that social media addiction can be associated with psychosocial problems and lower academic functioning (Akhlaq et al., 2022). Broader reviews have further identified relationships between heavy or maladaptive social media use and mental health difficulties in adolescents and young adults (Awopetu et al., 2024; Burgess, 2025). However, the findings of the present study should not be interpreted as evidence that all intensive social media use is harmful. Positive digital experiences, including social connection, access to information, creative engagement, and supportive communication, are well documented (Haddock et al., 2022). The critical distinction appears to be whether social media remains one component of adolescents' social and emotional lives or becomes a central and increasingly necessary mechanism for maintaining emotional equilibrium.

The results also support a cyclical rather than linear model of dependence. Adolescents may initially use social media because of loneliness, insecurity, boredom, or the desire for connection. The platform then provides immediate rewards such as feedback, entertainment, social information, and distraction. These rewards reinforce continued use. At the same time, ongoing exposure increases opportunities for comparison, exclusion, and uncertainty, which can intensify negative emotions and generate further use. This self-reinforcing cycle is consistent with current models emphasizing the interaction of emotional dysregulation and social compensation in problematic internet use (Qi et al., 2026). It also corresponds with broader literature showing that mental health and digital engagement influence one another through complex and potentially reciprocal pathways (Marano et al., 2025; Rutte et al., 2024). The

current thematic model therefore provides a useful framework for understanding why emotional dependence may persist even when adolescents recognize negative consequences.

The broader mental health context is also relevant. Adolescents experiencing anxiety, depressive symptoms, interpersonal difficulties, or peer-related stress may be particularly vulnerable to dependent digital use. Reviews of adolescent mental health consistently identify multiple interacting risk factors rather than single causal pathways (Lin & Guo, 2024). Research considering the perspectives of young people, parents, and professionals similarly emphasizes the complex social and emotional ecology of youth mental health (Morales et al., 2026). In more severe contexts, peer victimization, bullying, and social exclusion can contribute to substantial psychological risk (Pérez-Jiménez, 2026). The present findings suggest that emotionally dependent social media use may be especially important to assess among adolescents already experiencing these vulnerabilities, because online environments can become both a source of temporary relief and a context in which insecurity is repeatedly activated.

Family factors should also be considered when interpreting the findings. Although the present study focused primarily on adolescents' psychological experiences, family support, communication, monitoring, and modeling likely influence the extent to which social media becomes emotionally central. Systematic evidence indicates that family-level factors are related to both adolescent screen media use and mental health outcomes (Liu et al., 2024). In the Qatari context, where family relationships and interdependence may play a particularly important role in adolescent development, the balance between digital peer engagement and offline relational support may be especially relevant. Strong family communication and emotional availability may reduce the need to seek reassurance exclusively through online interactions, whereas relational distance or inconsistent monitoring may increase dependence on digital environments for connection and self-regulation.

The findings are also important in light of rapidly evolving digital technologies. Algorithmically driven feeds, short-form video, personalized recommendations, and increasingly AI-mediated content may intensify engagement by continuously adapting to users' interests and emotional responses. Contemporary reviews have emphasized that algorithmic platforms may amplify both beneficial and harmful experiences among adolescents depending on

underlying vulnerabilities (Socol et al., 2026). The expanding use of generative artificial intelligence may further alter how adolescents interact with digital platforms and how emotionally salient digital experiences are produced (Nagata, 2026). Consequently, emotional dependence should be viewed as a dynamic phenomenon that may evolve alongside technological changes rather than as a fixed response to a particular platform.

5. Conclusion

The present findings align with research emphasizing the need for resilience-based rather than exclusively restrictive approaches to adolescent social media use. Social media is unlikely to disappear from adolescents' lives, and its elimination is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. Studies mapping the developmental impact of social media have highlighted the importance of strengthening psychological skills that enable adolescents to navigate digital environments more effectively (Falcón-Linares et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence on protective factors such as self-compassion suggests that internal psychological resources may reduce susceptibility to the harmful consequences of social comparison and external validation (Manjanatha et al., 2025). The results of the present study therefore imply that intervention should focus not only on reducing screen time but also on strengthening emotion regulation, self-worth, social confidence, boredom tolerance, and critical awareness of online feedback mechanisms.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample consisted of 24 adolescents from selected areas of Qatar and was recruited purposively, which limits the transferability of the findings to all adolescents in Qatar or to other cultural contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data, and participants may have underreported or selectively described behaviors that they perceived as socially undesirable or problematic. Third, because the study was qualitative and cross-sectional, the findings cannot establish causal relationships among psychological vulnerability, social media use, and emotional dependence. Fourth, the concept of emotional dependence was explored through participants' subjective experiences rather than through a standardized diagnostic framework, and therefore the findings should not be interpreted as identifying a clinical disorder. Finally, the rapidly changing nature of social media

platforms means that specific patterns of engagement, algorithmic design, and platform popularity may evolve over time, potentially affecting the relevance of particular behavioral manifestations.

Future studies should examine the identified psychological pathways in larger and more diverse adolescent samples across different regions of Qatar and other Gulf countries. Quantitative research could develop and test structural models incorporating interpersonal validation, fear of missing out, social comparison, emotional dysregulation, boredom intolerance, self-esteem, and habitual checking as predictors of emotional dependence. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for determining the temporal direction of the relationships and identifying whether psychological vulnerabilities precede dependent use or become intensified through repeated engagement. Future research could also compare adolescents with different levels of social media use, age groups, sexes, and family environments and examine whether specific platforms produce different psychological patterns. Mixed-method studies may provide a more comprehensive understanding by integrating standardized measures with detailed accounts of adolescents' experiences. Research should additionally investigate protective factors, such as self-compassion, offline social support, emotion-regulation skills, secure family relationships, and digital literacy, and evaluate whether these factors weaken the progression from intensive use to emotional dependence.

Practical interventions should address the psychological functions of social media use rather than relying exclusively on restrictions or screen-time limits. Schools, families, counselors, and mental health professionals should help adolescents recognize the emotional triggers that lead to repeated checking, including loneliness, boredom, stress, insecurity, and fear of exclusion. Programs should strengthen emotion-regulation skills, tolerance of boredom, self-esteem that is less dependent on external approval, and critical understanding of social comparison and algorithmically curated content. Parents can support healthier use by maintaining open communication, modeling balanced technology habits, and establishing collaborative rather than purely punitive digital boundaries. Schools can incorporate digital well-being and media literacy into health and life-skills education, while counselors should assess whether adolescents are using social media as a primary coping mechanism for emotional distress or interpersonal insecurity. Interventions are likely to be most effective when they preserve the social and informational benefits of digital

platforms while helping adolescents develop greater psychological autonomy from online feedback, constant connectivity, and habitual engagement.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

References

- Akhlaq, B., Iqbal, A., & Ikram, A. (2022). Assessment of Psychosocial Issues Due to Social Media Addiction Among University Students and Their Relationship With Academic Grades. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 04(03), 1020--1031. <https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v4i03.1283>
- Amirthalingam, J., & Khera, A. (2024). Understanding Social Media Addiction: A Deep Dive. *Cureus*. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.72499>
- Awopetu, R. G., Olabimitan, B. A., Kolawole, S. O., Newton, R., Odok, A. A., & Awopetu, A. (2024). The Systematic Review of Social Media Addiction and Mental Health of Nigerian University Students: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences*, 2(1), 767-788. [https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2024.2\(1\).69](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2024.2(1).69)
- Bottaro, R., & Faraci, P. (2022). The Use of Social Networking Sites and Its Impact on Adolescents' Emotional Well-Being: A Scoping Review. *Current Addiction Reports*, 9(4), 518-539. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-022-00445-4>
- Buecker, S., Petersen, K., Neuber, A., Zheng, Y., Hayes, D., & Qualter, P. (2024). A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Risk and Protective Factors for Loneliness in Youth. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1542(1), 620-637. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.15266>
- Burgess, K. (2025). The Decline in Adolescents' Mental Health With the Rise of Social Media: A Narrative Review. *Creative Nursing*, 31(2), 119-126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10784535251328925>
- Chaeycharoen, S. (2022). Social Media Affects Emotional and Cognitive Status. *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review*, 05(07). <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/v5-i7-47>
- Dhiman, B. (2024). ≪strong>≪/Strong>A Study of Instagram Dependency on Indian Youth: Assessing Its Impact on Students' Lives. <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202406.0998.v1>
- Falcón-Linares, C., González-Yubero, S., Mauri-Medrano, M., & Moreno, M. J. C. (2023). Impact of Social Media on Adolescence: Mapping Emerging Needs to Build Resilient Skills. *Societies*, 13(11), 238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13110238>
- Fatima, A., Akhter, M. S., Kanekar, A., Roy, S., Imade, B., & Sharma, M. (2025). A Scoping Review of the Use and Determinants of Social Media Among College Students. *Healthcare*, 13(17), 2234. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13172234>
- Fioravanti, G., Benucci, S. B., & Ghinassi, S. (2025). Psychological Risk Factors for Problematic Social Network Use: An Overview of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses. *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, 21, 100600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.abrep.2025.100600>
- Haddock, A., Ward, N. L., Yu, R., & O'Dea, N. (2022). Positive Effects of Digital Technology Use by Adolescents: A Scoping Review of the Literature. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(21), 14009. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114009>
- Kusnadi, S. P. A. P., & Kaloeti, M. P. D. p. D. V. S. (2022). Related Factors of Internet Addiction on Adolescents During COVID-19 Pandemic : Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Educational Health and Community Psychology*, 11(4), 744. <https://doi.org/10.12928/jehcp.v11i4.24674>
- Lin, J., & Guo, W. (2024). The Research on Risk Factors for Adolescents' Mental Health. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(4), 263. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14040263>
- Liu, X., Liu, J., Flores, D. D., & McDonald, C. C. (2024). Family Factors Related to Adolescent Screen Media Use and Mental Health Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Recommendation for Practices. *Journal of adolescence*, 96(7), 1401-1427. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12367>
- Manjanatha, D., Pippard, N. S., & Bloss, C. S. (2025). Self-Compassion as a Protective Factor Against Adverse Consequences of Social Media Use: A Scoping Review. *PLoS One*, 20(5), e0322227. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0322227>
- Manvelian, A., Boyd, S., O'Hara, K. L., Watters, C., Liu, Y., & Sbarra, D. A. (2023). Promoting Attachment Security During the Transition to College: A Pilot Study of Emotionally Focused Mentoring. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(12), 4075-4101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231195530>
- Marano, G., Lisci, F. M., Rossi, S., Marzo, E. M., Boggio, G., Brisi, C., Traversi, G., Mazza, O., Pola, R., Gaetani, E., & Mazza, M. (2025). Connected but at Risk: Social Media Exposure and Psychiatric and Psychological Outcomes in Youth. *Children*, 12(10), 1322. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children12101322>
- Marciano, L., Ostroumova, M., Schulz, P. J., & Camerini, A.-L. (2022). Digital Media Use and Adolescents' Mental Health

- During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.793868>
- Morales, A., Bleda-Cruz, M. J., Espada, J. P., & Orgilés, M. (2026). Exploring Mental Health in Spanish Youth: Insights From Children, Adolescents, Parents, and Professionals. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 31(4), 1775-1801. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045261424541>
- Munusamy, K. A. P., & Ghazali, A. H. A. (2022). Behaviour Factors and Smartphone Addiction Among Youth in Selected Public Universities in Klang Valley. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(7). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i7/14426>
- Munusamy, K. A. P., Ghazali, A. H. A., Zawawi, J. W. M., & Razi, S. A. M. (2021). Psychological Predictors of Mobile Phone Use and Addiction Among Youths. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(15). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v11-i15/10633>
- Nagata, J. M. (2026). Generative Artificial Intelligence Use and Adolescent Mental Health. *Current Pediatrics Reports*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40124-026-00388-8>
- Pérez-Jiménez, J. M. (2026). Adolescent Suicide During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Bullying Dynamics, Risk Factors, and Prevention Strategies—A Systematic Review. *Healthcare*, 14(16), 2582. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare14162582>
- Qi, X., He, J., Wang, Q., Liu, S., Zhang, L., Zhao, J., Ma, D., & Zhao, D. (2026). A Systematic Review of Internet Addiction in Hospitalized Adolescents: Proposing a Hospital-Adapted Moderated Dual Mediation Model of Emotional Dysregulation and Social Compensation. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2026.1830013>
- Rutte, J. L. d., Findley, A., & Dennis-Tiway, T. A. (2024). Living in a Digital World: Understanding the Development of Adolescent Emotional Adjustment in the Context of Digital Technologies. 159-181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000406-009>
- Sahu, A., Dhiman, A., & Sharma, M. (2026). Examining the Role of Mobile Phone and Social Media Use in Predicting Psychological Distress Among Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Cureus*. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.110232>
- Socol, A., Andrei, L. E., Dijmarescu, C. M., Dragomir, D., Iotu, A.-D., Mihăilescu, I., & Rad, F. (2026). Navigating the Algorithm: A Narrative Review of Social Media's Impact on Mental Health in Clinical and Non-Clinical Adolescent Populations. *Children*, 13(7), 872. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children13070872>
- Yablonska, T., & Li, Y. (2023). Psychological Characteristics of Young Men With Internet Addiction: A Cross-Cultural Study. *Scientific Bulletin of Mukachevo State University Series "Pedagogy and Psychology"*, 9(3), 91-101. <https://doi.org/10.52534/msu-pp3.2023.91>
- Zhao, S., Lan, J., & Zong, R. (2026). Short-Form Video Addiction and Loneliness Among College Students: The Longitudinal Mediating Role of Social Anxiety in a Three-Wave Cross-Lagged Panel Study. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9685271/v1>