

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

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R e v i e w e r s

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The Introduction paragraph beginning with “The distinction between frequent social media use and emotional dependence is particularly important” correctly recognizes an essential conceptual distinction, but the argument should be developed further. Specifically, the sentence “Social media addiction and problematic social networking use have been described through features such as preoccupation, loss of control...” risks positioning emotional dependence as equivalent to addiction. The authors should explain which of these features are theoretically relevant to emotional dependence and which belong specifically to addiction frameworks. A conceptual diagram or concise theoretical proposition distinguishing frequency of use, problematic use, behavioral addiction, and emotional dependence would substantially improve construct validity.

The Introduction currently synthesizes many relevant variables—including loneliness, social anxiety, self-esteem, social comparison, fear of exclusion, emotion dysregulation, boredom, and reassurance seeking—but lacks a clearly articulated integrative theoretical framework. For example, the paragraph stating that “social media may simultaneously satisfy important developmental needs and create conditions in which those needs become increasingly tied to digital participation” could be anchored in an established model such as compensatory internet use, uses-and-gratifications theory, attachment theory, or an

affect-regulation framework. The authors should identify a primary theoretical lens and explain how it guided the interview domains and interpretation of the five themes.

The treatment of Arabic- and English-language interviews requires more methodological detail. The manuscript reports that “interviews conducted in Arabic were analyzed in the original language to minimize loss of meaning,” which is commendable, but it does not state how quotations were translated for publication, whether translation was performed by bilingual researchers, whether back-translation or independent verification was used, or how culturally embedded expressions were handled. Because qualitative interpretation depends heavily on linguistic nuance, the manuscript should describe the translation and quotation-verification procedure explicitly.

The Data Analysis paragraph contains a potentially important methodological inconsistency in the statement that “selected interpretations were discussed among members of the research team.” In reflexive thematic analysis, researcher subjectivity is typically treated as an analytic resource rather than a source of error to be eliminated through inter-rater agreement. The authors should therefore clarify the purpose of team discussion. If discussions were used to deepen reflexivity and challenge interpretations, this should be stated explicitly; if agreement or reliability was assessed, the analytic approach should be reconsidered or more accurately labeled.

The manuscript would benefit substantially from a researcher reflexivity statement. Because the study addresses adolescents' emotionally sensitive relationships with social media, researchers' disciplinary backgrounds, assumptions about problematic technology use, and expectations regarding adolescent vulnerability could influence interviewing and theme construction. The Methods section should therefore include information about who conducted the interviews and analysis, their professional backgrounds, prior relationships with participants, assumptions brought to the study, and procedures used to reflect on potential interpretive influence.

In the initial Findings paragraph, the statement that “analysis of the interview data resulted in 186 initial codes...32 subcategories, 11 intermediate categories, and 5 overarching psychological themes” presents the analysis as highly structured, but the hierarchical relationship among these analytic levels is not sufficiently transparent. Table 1 presents themes and “main categories,” yet the 11 intermediate categories and 32 subcategories are not systematically mapped. The authors should provide a complete analytic hierarchy or clearly explain how codes progressed into subcategories, categories, and themes so that readers can assess the internal logic of the thematic structure.

Tables 2–4 report frequencies and percentages for qualitative themes—for example, “Boredom intolerance...21 (87.5%)” and “Cue reactivity...20 (83.3%).” Although frequency counts can be used cautiously in qualitative research, the current presentation risks converting interpretive themes into quasi-quantitative prevalence estimates and may imply representativeness that a purposive sample of 24 participants cannot support. The authors should justify why frequency counting was analytically appropriate, clarify that counts indicate mentions rather than population prevalence or inferential importance, and avoid interpreting higher frequencies as evidence that one psychological mechanism is objectively stronger than another.

The Findings section should include more direct participant evidence. Although the Methods paragraph states that “representative participant quotations were selected,” Tables 1–4 and the accompanying narrative contain no verbatim quotations. For example, the interpretation that adolescents viewed “likes, replies, views, reactions, and message responsiveness” as indicators of social worth is plausible but currently rests primarily on researcher summary. Each major theme should be illustrated with carefully selected quotations showing how adolescents themselves articulated validation seeking, fear of exclusion, comparison, emotion regulation, and automatic checking.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the paragraph discussing the Qatari context, the manuscript states that “Qatar has experienced rapid technological development, high digital connectivity, and substantial integration of mobile technologies and social networking into everyday life.” This contextualization is potentially important but remains largely descriptive and unsupported by Qatar-specific

empirical evidence. The authors should either provide appropriate evidence on adolescent digital engagement in Qatar or revise the paragraph to avoid broad contextual claims that are not directly substantiated by the cited reference set. More importantly, the manuscript should explain which culturally specific features of Qatar were expected to influence emotional dependence and how these features informed sampling, interviewing, or interpretation.

In the Methods section under “Study Design and Participants,” the sentence “A qualitative approach was selected because emotional dependence on social media is a multidimensional phenomenon...” provides a reasonable justification, but the specific qualitative methodology remains underdefined. The manuscript describes the study as “qualitative exploratory” while later using reflexive thematic analysis. The authors should specify whether the research follows a generic qualitative descriptive design, interpretive description, phenomenological orientation, or another methodological tradition. This distinction matters because epistemological assumptions determine sampling logic, interviewing style, researcher reflexivity, and the interpretation of themes.

The recruitment description in the Study Design and Participants paragraph requires greater reproducibility. The statement that participants “were recruited from secondary schools and youth educational centers in Doha, Al Rayyan, and Al Wakrah using purposive sampling with maximum variation” should be expanded to identify how institutions were selected, how adolescents were approached, who made first contact, whether school personnel screened potential participants, and how voluntariness was protected given that participants were minors. The manuscript should also explain which dimensions were intentionally varied during maximum-variation sampling and whether recruitment quotas were used.

The assertion that “recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved” is methodologically inconsistent with the stated use of reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis generally does not conceptualize meaning as something exhaustively discoverable through saturation in the same manner as grounded theory or codebook thematic approaches. The authors should either justify their use of saturation within their analytic orientation or adopt a more compatible rationale, such as information power, sufficient conceptual richness, or adequate diversity of accounts. The current combination of reflexive thematic analysis, saturation, and quasi-consensus procedures requires methodological clarification.

The Methods section states that “the interview guide was reviewed by three specialists in adolescent psychology, clinical psychology, and qualitative research,” but the procedure used to establish content relevance is insufficiently described. The authors should explain whether these experts independently reviewed the guide, what criteria they considered, what substantive revisions resulted, and whether developmental appropriateness and cultural sensitivity for Qatari adolescents were specifically evaluated. The statement that “minor modifications were subsequently made” should be supported with at least one example of how a question was revised to improve clarity or age appropriateness.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.