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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DIGITAL IMPACT ON SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS AND NEGATIVE THINKING: EXAMINING SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION'S ROLE IN SELF-ESTEEM AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped communication, identity formation, and emotional well-being. While digital platforms facilitate social connection, excessive or compulsive use—commonly referred to as social media addiction is linked to negative psychological outcomes. This review synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature to examine the impact of social media addiction on subjective happiness and negative thinking. The mediating roles of self-esteem, cognitive distortions,and emotional regulation are highlighted.Research consistently shows that problematic social media use lowers self-esteem, increases maladaptive cognitions such as rumination and fear of missing out (FOMO), and impairs emotional regulation. These mechanisms collectively reduce subjective happiness and intensify negative thinking. The paper also draws on regional research and highlights gaps, suggesting interventions focused on cognitive restructu ring, self-esteem enhancement,and emotional regulation training among young adults.

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Introduction:-

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat have become central to daily social interaction, particularly for adolescents and young adults. Individuals spend significant portions of their day online, influencing emotional experiences, social identity, and psychological functioning (Keles et al., 2020). Although digital platforms offer communication benefits and access to information, excessive use—commonly termed social media addiction—has been associated with diminished well-being, heightened negative thinking, and impaired emotional regulation (Andreassen, 2015; Hou et al., 2019).Research in South Asian populations has also linked depression, stress, and anxiety to poor academic and emotional functioning, highlighting the relevance of self-esteem and emotional regulation in young adults (Dar & Lone, 2022; Lone, 2014, 2017). This review examines the psychological impact of social media addiction, focusing on subjective happiness, negative thinking, and mediating mechanisms including self-esteem and emotional regulation.

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Social Media Addiction: Definitions and Theoretical Background:-

Conceptualization:-

Social media addiction is characterized by compulsive, uncontrolled use of digital platforms that interferes with academic, social, or emotional functioning (Griffiths, 2013).

Key features include:-

- **Salience:** Dominance of social media in thoughts and behavior.
- **Tolerance:** Increased engagement required for the same emotional effect.
- **Withdrawal:** Emotional discomfort when unable to access platforms.
- **Conflict:** Disruption of personal or social responsibilities.
- **Relapse:** Return to excessive patterns after attempts to reduce use.

Theoretical Models:-

Social Comparison Theory: Individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others (Festinger, 1954). Social media amplifies upward comparisons, contributing to envy, low self-esteem, and emotional distress (Vogel et al., 2014; Appel et al., 2016).

Cognitive–Behavioral Model: Maladaptive cognitions such as FOMO, negative self-beliefs, and dependency on online validation drive compulsive social media use (Brand et al., 2016; Błachnio&Przepiórka, 2018).

Reward and Reinforcement Theory: Intermittent rewards from likes, comments, and notifications mimic behavioral addiction cycles, reinforcing compulsive checking and scrolling (Turel&Serenko, 2020).

Social Media Addiction and Subjective Happiness:-

Subjective happiness refers to an individual's cognitive and emotional evaluation of life satisfaction (Diener, 2000). Studies consistently demonstrate a negative association between problematic social media use and happiness (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Satici, 2019).

Mechanisms Include:-

- Social Comparison and Envy: Exposure to idealized images fosters dissatisfaction and lowers happiness (Appel et al., 2016).
- Time Displacement: Excessive online activity reduces engagement in offline hobbies, exercise, and academic work (Wang et al., 2020).
- Emotional Contagion: Negative content exposure influences mood and life satisfaction (Kramer et al., 2014).

Social Media Addiction and Negative Thinking:-

Problematic social media use contributes to maladaptive cognitive patterns:-

- Cognitive Distortions: Users often overgeneralize, catastrophize, and personalize negative events (Levenson et al., 2016).
- Rumination: Exposure to idealized content triggers repetitive negative thinking (Feinstein et al., 2013).
- Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): FOMO fosters anxiety, pessimism, and compulsive monitoring of platforms (Przybylski et al., 2013; Błachnio&Przepiórka, 2018).

Self-Esteem as a Mediator:-

Self-esteem, or global self-worth, mediates the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress (Rosenberg, 1965):-

- Impact of Social Comparison: Upward comparisons reduce self-esteem, particularly in young adults (Vogel et al., 2014).
- Validation-Seeking Behavior: Dependence on likes and comments creates unstable self-esteem (Burrow &Rainone, 2017).
- Cyberbullying and Rejection: Online aggression reduces self-esteem and heightens negative thinking (Patchin& Hinduja, 2010).

Regional studies also support these links. Lower self-esteem and higher anxiety have been associated with poorer academic and emotional outcomes among South Asian students (Dar & Lone, 2022; Lone, 2014, 2017).

Emotional Regulation as a Mediator:-

Emotional regulation involves strategies to manage emotional responses (Gross, 1998):-

- **Maladaptive Regulation:** Social media addiction correlates with suppression, avoidance, denial, and rumination (Marino et al., 2018).
- **Reduced Adaptive Strategies:** Problematic users show poor cognitive reappraisal and heightened emotional reactivity (Elhai et al., 2020).

Research indicates that interventions to improve emotional intelligence and regulation enhance subjective happiness and reduce negative thinking (Lone, 2017).

Integrated Pathways:-

Social media addiction impacts psychological outcomes through interconnected mechanisms:-

1. Social Media Addiction → Low Self-Esteem → Negative Thinking
2. Social Media Addiction → Emotional Dysregulation → Reduced Happiness
3. Cognitive Distortions → Emotional Instability → Lower Well-Being

Implications for Practice:-

- Digital Wellness Training: Promote mindful engagement and reduce compulsive behaviors.
- Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions: Target cognitive distortions and FOMO (Hou et al., 2019).
- Self-Esteem Enhancement: Workshops improving self-worth and reducing comparison (Dar & Lone, 2022; Lone, 2017).
- Emotional Regulation Training: Mindfulness and reappraisal strategies improve resilience and well-being (Brailovskaia&Margraf, 2021).

Gaps and Future Directions:-

- Lack of longitudinal studies establishing causal pathways.
- Limited research in Southeast Asian populations.
- Insufficient exploration of gender differences in digital behavior.
- Need to examine protective factors such as resilience and social support.
- Limited analysis of positive digital engagement.

Conclusion:-

Social media addiction negatively affects subjective happiness and increases negative thinking, primarily through reduced self-esteem, increased cognitive distortions, rumination, and impaired emotional regulation. Understanding these mechanisms informs interventions to improve digital well-being, emotional regulation, and self-esteem among young adults.

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