



**Research Article**

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# Loneliness and Social Media Addiction among Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Rehabilitation Perspective



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## Abstract

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has transformed adolescent social interaction, communication, and identity formation. While social networking sites offer opportunities for social connectedness, excessive and maladaptive use may lead to social media addiction (SMA), a behavioural addiction characterized by compulsive engagement despite adverse consequences. Emerging evidence suggests that loneliness is a critical psychosocial predictor and outcome of SMA, creating a cyclical relationship that negatively affects psychological well-being. This review synthesizes current literature on the association between loneliness and social media addiction among adolescents, examines underlying psychological mechanisms, and discusses evidence-based rehabilitation strategies. A systematic search of peer-reviewed literature from 2014–2026 was conducted using major databases. Findings indicate a bidirectional relationship between loneliness and SMA mediated by factors such as fear of missing out (FoMO), self-esteem, depression, and emotional dysregulation. Rehabilitation approaches including cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness interventions, psychoeducation, and digital literacy programs demonstrate promising outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to clarify causality and develop culturally sensitive interventions.

**Keywords:** loneliness, social media addiction, adolescents, behavioural addiction, rehabilitation, mental health

**Abbreviation:** SMA: Social Media Addiction; FoMO: Fear of Missing Out; I-PACE: Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution; PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews; CBT: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

## Introduction

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the social experiences of adolescents. The widespread use of social networking platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatsApp has created new opportunities for communication and self-expression. Adolescents are among the most active users of social media, often spending several hours daily engaging with online content and peers. While social media provides benefits such as social support and information sharing, excessive use has raised concerns regarding problematic behaviours and psychological well-being. Social media addiction (SMA), also referred to as problematic social media use, is characterized by excessive preoccupation with social networking activities, impaired self-regulation, withdrawal symptoms, and continued use despite negative consequences [1]. Although not formally recognized as a diagnostic disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR), SMA shares characteristics with behavioural addictions, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, conflict, withdrawal, and relapse.

Adolescence represents a sensitive developmental stage marked by identity formation, emotional changes, and increasing reliance on peer relationships. During this period, loneliness may emerge due to perceived discrepancies between desired and actual social relationships [2]. Loneliness is not merely social isolation but a subjective psychological experience involving dissatisfaction with social connections. Adolescents experiencing loneliness may increasingly rely on social media to satisfy unmet interpersonal needs. However, excessive online engagement may paradoxically intensify loneliness by reducing meaningful face-to-face interactions and promoting unfavourable social comparisons. Consequently, loneliness and social media addiction may create a reciprocal cycle that contributes to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and reduced well-being [3]. This systematic review aims to synthesize current empirical evidence on the relationship between loneliness and social media addiction among adolescents and to examine rehabilitation strategies that may mitigate these concerns.

## Theoretical Framework

### Social Compensation Theory

Social Compensation Theory proposes that individuals with poor offline social relationships may use online platforms to compensate for deficits in face-to-face interactions. Lonely adolescents may perceive digital communication as less threatening and more controllable than in-person relationships.

### Uses and Gratifications Theory

According to Uses and Gratifications Theory, media users actively select technologies to fulfil psychological needs such as entertainment, social interaction, and emotional support [4]. Adolescents experiencing loneliness may use social media to satisfy unmet social needs.

### I-PACE Model

The Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model explains behavioural addictions through interactions among personal predispositions, emotional responses, cognitive biases, and executive functioning deficits. Loneliness may increase vulnerability to SMA through maladaptive coping mechanisms and emotional dysregulation.

## Methods

### Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted following Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

#### Electronic databases searched included:

- PubMed
- PsycINFO
- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar

#### Keywords included:

- "loneliness"
- "Social media addiction"
- "Problematic social media use"
- "adolescents"
- "Behavioural addiction"
- "Social networking addiction"

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine searches.

### Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Were published between 2014 and 2026.
- Included adolescent participants aged 10–19 years.
- Examined loneliness and social media addiction.
- Were peer-reviewed.
- Were written in English.

### Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on adults.
- Examined general internet addiction without social media measures.
- Were editorials or conference abstracts.
- Lacked empirical data.

### Study Selection

After duplicate removal and screening, eligible studies underwent full-text review. Relevant information extracted included sample characteristics, measures used, study design, and key findings.

## Results

### Theme 1: Loneliness as a Predictor of Social Media Addiction

Numerous studies indicate that loneliness significantly predicts problematic social media use. Lonely adolescents may seek online interactions to alleviate negative emotions and fulfil social needs. This compensatory use often reinforces excessive engagement [5]. Research demonstrates that adolescents with higher loneliness scores report increased time spent on social networking platforms and greater dependence on online communication. Social media may provide temporary relief; however, reliance on virtual interactions may reduce opportunities for meaningful offline relationships.

### Theme 2: Social Media Addiction as a Contributor to Loneliness

Excessive social media use may also increase loneliness. Heavy engagement with online platforms may reduce face-to-face interactions, impair relationship quality, and foster social comparison. Exposure to idealized portrayals of peers can increase feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. Consequently, adolescents may experience greater loneliness despite increased online connectivity.

### Theme 3: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Fear of Missing Out refers to anxiety arising from the perception that others are engaging in rewarding experiences without oneself. FoMO has emerged as a critical mediator linking loneliness and SMA. Lonely adolescents often exhibit elevated FoMO, resulting in compulsive checking behaviours and excessive

social media engagement.

#### **Theme 4: Depression and Anxiety**

Depression and anxiety frequently co-occur with loneliness and SMA. Social media may initially serve as an emotion regulation strategy; however, prolonged use often exacerbates psychological distress. Several studies have reported that adolescents with problematic social media use demonstrate higher levels of depressive symptoms and generalized anxiety.

#### **Theme 5: Self-Esteem and Emotional Regulation**

Low self-esteem and emotional dysregulation increase vulnerability to SMA. Adolescents with poor coping strategies may rely on social media to escape negative emotions, thereby reinforcing addictive behaviours.

### **Discussion**

This review provides evidence supporting a complex and bidirectional relationship between loneliness and social media addiction among adolescents [6]. The findings align with theoretical frameworks emphasizing compensatory internet use and emotional regulation mechanisms. The relationship between loneliness and SMA appears cyclical. Adolescents experiencing loneliness often turn to social media to fulfill social needs. While online interactions may provide temporary relief, excessive use may diminish offline relationships, intensify social comparison, and ultimately exacerbate loneliness. The role of FoMO is particularly noteworthy. Adolescents who fear social exclusion may engage in continuous online monitoring, increasing vulnerability to addiction-like behaviours. Similarly, depression and anxiety may both contribute to and result from problematic social media use. Methodologically, most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference [7]. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether loneliness precedes SMA or vice versa. Additionally, many studies rely on self-report measures, which may be affected by social desirability bias. Cross-cultural research remains limited despite substantial differences in social norms, digital access, and family structures across countries. Future investigations should examine cultural moderators influencing the loneliness–SMA relationship.

### **Rehabilitation Perspective**

#### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

CBT remains one of the most effective interventions for behavioural addictions. Therapeutic techniques include cognitive restructuring, behavioural activation, and self-monitoring of digital behaviours. CBT can help adolescents identify maladaptive beliefs such as “I can only connect with others online” and replace them with healthier alternatives.

#### **Mindfulness-Based Interventions**

Mindfulness programs enhance self-awareness and emotional

regulation. Evidence suggests that mindfulness reduces compulsive technology use and improves psychological well-being. Mindfulness training may help adolescents recognize urges to use social media excessively and develop healthier coping strategies.

#### **Family-Based Interventions**

Family communication and parental monitoring significantly influence adolescent technology use. Interventions encouraging open communication and balanced media habits may reduce problematic behaviours [8,9]. Parents should model healthy digital practices and establish clear boundaries regarding screen time.

#### **School-Based Digital Literacy Programs**

Schools play an essential role in promoting digital well-being. Educational programs can teach adolescents:

- Responsible technology use
- Critical evaluation of online content
- Strategies for maintaining healthy relationships

Social-emotional learning programs may also strengthen resilience and interpersonal skills.

#### **Clinical and Educational Implications**

Mental health professionals should routinely assess social media use patterns during psychological evaluations. Screening for loneliness may facilitate early identification of adolescents at risk for SMA [10-14].

Educational institutions should integrate digital wellness curricula into health education programs. Policymakers should develop evidence-based guidelines promoting balanced technology use among youth.

#### **Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered:

- The predominance of cross-sectional studies limits causal conclusions.
- Self-report measures may introduce response bias.
- Diagnostic criteria for SMA remain inconsistent.
- Most studies originate from Western populations.
- Publication bias may affect reported findings.

#### **Future Directions**

Future research should:

- Employ longitudinal designs.
- Utilize objective digital usage metrics.

- Investigate neurobiological mechanisms.
- Develop culturally sensitive interventions.
- Evaluate long-term rehabilitation outcomes.

## Conclusion

The evidence indicates a significant and reciprocal relationship between loneliness and social media addiction among adolescents. Social media may temporarily alleviate loneliness but often contributes to further isolation and psychological distress when used excessively. Effective rehabilitation requires multifaceted approaches incorporating cognitive-behavioural techniques, mindfulness, family support, and digital literacy education. As digital technologies continue to evolve, understanding the psychosocial factors underlying problematic social media use remains essential for promoting adolescent well-being and preventing behavioural addictions.

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