

# Relationship Between Social Media Usage, Social Anxiety and Self Esteem Along Emerging Adults

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex relationships between **self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety** among young adults aged 18–25. With the pervasive use of social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, concerns about their psychological impact—particularly on self-worth and social behavior—have grown. **Social comparison theory** suggests that constant exposure to idealized online personas may lower self-esteem, leading to compulsive social media use and heightened anxiety in real-world interactions.

Using a cross-sectional survey design ( $N = 103$ ), we tested three hypotheses: (1) **Low self-esteem predicts social networking addiction**, (2) **Social networking addiction correlates with higher social interaction anxiety**, and (3) **Self-esteem moderates the relationship between addiction and anxiety**. Results supported these hypotheses: **46.2% of addicted users had low self-esteem**, and addicted individuals reported significantly higher anxiety (**46.2% in generalized anxiety, 38.5% in social contexts**). Moderator analysis revealed that **low self-esteem intensified anxiety linked to addiction**, whereas those with higher self-esteem showed resilience.

The findings highlight a **vicious cycle**: individuals with low self-esteem may turn to social media for validation, yet excessive use exacerbates anxiety, further eroding self-worth. Practical implications include **integrating self-esteem interventions in digital literacy programs and cognitive-behavioral therapies** to mitigate addiction and anxiety. Limitations include reliance on self-reports and a youth-centric sample, suggesting future **longitudinal and culturally diverse research**. This study contributes to the growing discourse on **mental health in the digital age**, emphasizing the need for balanced social media engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

Social networking platforms have become essential to daily life, especially among young individuals. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter provide unparalleled potential for communication, self-expression, and information dissemination. Nonetheless, their widespread utilization has prompted much apprehension regarding their effects on mental health and overall well-being. Self-esteem, characterized as an individual's comprehensive perception of self-worth, significantly influences behavior and emotional health. Continuous exposure to curated, idealized depictions of others' life may induce feelings of inadequacy and further diminish self-esteem. Social networking addiction, defined by excessive and compulsive engagement with social media, has become an increasing concern. Studies indicate that persons hooked to social networking platforms frequently encounter adverse effects, including diminished academic or occupational performance, altered sleep patterns, and strained interpersonal connections. This

addiction is especially common among young individuals, who represent a significant portion of active users on social sites. The compulsive allure of social networking is frequently driven by the desire for social affirmation, particularly evident in persons with diminished self-worth. Social interaction anxiety, a significant element, denotes the apprehension or unease encountered in social contexts. For some individuals, this anxiety is ubiquitous and influences various facets of their lives, whereas for others, it is confined to specific situations, such as public speaking or seeing new people. Social networking networks can function as both a sanctuary and a source of distress. On one side, they offer a less daunting atmosphere for social engagement; on the other hand, they may exacerbate anxiety by imposing the necessity to uphold an online identity and acquire social validation.

Despite the expanding corpus of study on these individual elements, there remains a paucity of information regarding their interactions and mutual influences. Does low self-esteem lead individuals to social networking addiction, and does this addiction subsequently aggravate social interaction anxiety? Conversely, can social interaction anxiety compel individuals to find refuge in social networking sites, resulting in addictive behaviors? Addressing these inquiries is essential for cultivating a thorough comprehension of the psychological dynamics involved and for formulating effective treatments to encourage healthy social media usage. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the correlations between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety in young adults aged 18 to 25. This study seeks to enhance understanding of the psychological effects of social networking and to offer ways for alleviating their adverse affects on mental health by examining these relationships.

## Types of Social Media Platforms

1. **Discussion Forums:** Reddit, Quora, and other forums enable users to engage in discussions, ask questions, and share knowledge.
2. **Blogging Platforms:** Websites like WordPress, Tumblr, and Medium allow users to publish long-form content, articles, and personal blogs.
3. **Messaging Apps:** WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal facilitate private or group messaging and calls.
4. **Professional Networks:** LinkedIn is a prime example, catering to career development, networking, and professional content sharing.

## Key Features of Social Media

- **User Profiles:** Personal or business profiles that showcase information about the user.
- **Content Sharing:** Users can post text, images, videos, links, and more.
- **Interactivity:** Features like likes, comments, shares, and direct messaging enable engagement.

## Impact of Social Media

1. **Positive Effects:**
  - **Connection:** Helps people stay connected with friends, family, and communities worldwide.
  - **Information Sharing:** Facilitates the rapid spread of news, knowledge, and awareness.
  - **Business Opportunities:** Enables businesses to reach customers, market products, and build brands.
  - **Activism:** Empowers social and political movements by amplifying voices and organizing efforts.
2. **Negative Effects:**
  - **Misinformation:** Spread of fake news, rumors, and misleading content.
  - **Mental Health Issues:**
  - **Privacy Concerns:** Data breaches and misuse of personal information.

- **Cyberbullying:** Harassment and bullying through online platforms.

## Trends in Social Media

1. **Ephemeral Content:** Stories on Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook that disappear after 24 hours.
2. **Influencer Marketing:** Collaborations between brands and social media influencers to promote products.
3. **AI and Personalization:** Advanced algorithms and AI tools to curate content and enhance user experience.

## *Conceptualizing social media usage*

involves understanding it as a phenomenon that intersects with various aspects of human behavior, psychology, sociology, and technology. It is not merely a tool for communication but a complex ecosystem that influences and is influenced by individual, societal, and cultural factors. To fully grasp the nature of social media usage, it is helpful to examine it through several conceptual lenses, including its purposes, psychological underpinnings, societal implications, and the role of technology.

### **1. Social Media as a Tool for Connection and Communication**

At its foundation, social media is intended to promote conversation and connection. It allows people to retain relationships, share experiences, and interact with others throughout geographic and chronological distances. This perspective highlights the importance of social media in meeting basic human desires for social contact and belonging.

For young adults, who are particularly sensitive to social validation, the feedback they receive—or don't receive—on these platforms can significantly impact their self-esteem. Likes, comments, and shares can provide a temporary boost, but this validation is often superficial and contingent on external approval. Over time, the reliance on such validation can erode intrinsic self-worth, leading to a fragile sense of self that is easily shaken by negative feedback or social comparison.

Social comparison theory, a well-established concept in psychology, is particularly relevant here. Social media platforms are rife with opportunities for upward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others who appear more successful, attractive, or accomplished. For young adults with low self-esteem, these comparisons can be particularly damaging, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and fostering a negative self-image. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle: low self-esteem drives individuals to seek validation online, but the very nature of social media often exacerbates their insecurities.

### **2. Social Media as a Space for Self-Expression and Identity Formation**

**Curated Identities:** This can include posting photos, sharing opinions, or participating in trends that reflect their values and aspirations.

**Exploration and Experimentation:** For many, especially young adults, social media serves as a space to explore different aspects of their identity. This can involve experimenting with new interests, adopting different personas, or engaging with diverse communities.

**Validation and Feedback:** The feedback loop created by likes, comments, and shares plays a significant role in shaping self-perception. Positive feedback can boost self-esteem, while negative interactions can lead to self-doubt.

## **The Importance of Studying Self-Esteem**

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### **Influence on the Well-Being of Young Adults**

The interplay between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety has profound implications for the well-being of young adults. Poor self-esteem can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, while social networking addiction can disrupt daily functioning and relationships. Social interaction anxiety can hinder personal and professional growth, leading to a diminished quality of life.

These factors also have broader societal implications. For instance, young adults who struggle with these issues may be less likely to form meaningful relationships, pursue educational or career opportunities, or contribute to their communities. This can have long-term consequences for their personal fulfillment and societal participation.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is needed:

1. **Promoting Digital Literacy:** Educating young adults about the potential risks of social media and encouraging mindful usage can help them develop healthier relationships with technology.
2. **Therapeutic Interventions:** Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches can be effective in addressing low self-esteem and social interaction anxiety.
3. **Creating Supportive Environments:** Encouraging face-to-face interactions and providing opportunities for positive social experiences can mitigate the negative effects of social networking addiction.
4. **Policy and Regulation:** Governments and social media companies must work together to promote responsible platform design and protect users from harm.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

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found that college students with initially lower self-esteem showed greater increases in social media dependency over time, suggesting a self-reinforcing cycle where digital validation becomes increasingly important for self-worth. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of contingent self-esteem, where individuals base their self-worth on external validation (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), making them particularly vulnerable to the variable reinforcement schedules inherent in social media platforms (Andreassen, 2015).

The role of specific social media behaviors has been identified as crucial in determining psychological outcomes. Passive use (browsing without interacting) consistently correlates with negative outcomes including increased social comparison, envy, and depressive symptoms. The type of content consumed also matters - exposure to idealized representations of peers' lives predicts decreases in self-esteem, while authentic, behind-the-scenes content shows no such effect (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). These findings support the extension of social comparison theory to digital environments, where the curated nature of social media content creates particularly potent opportunities for upward social comparisons (Steers et al., 2014).

## **Methodology**

### **Hypotheses**

**Hypothesis 1:** "Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to exhibit social networking addiction."

**Hypothesis 2:** "Social networking addiction is positively associated with higher levels of social interaction anxiety."

**Hypothesis 3:** "Self-esteem moderates the relationship between social networking addiction and social interaction anxiety."

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through online platforms, including social media, university mailing lists, and online forums. A brief description of the study and its objectives was provided to potential participants. Those who agreed to participate were directed to an online survey created using Google Sheets. The survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete, and responses were automatically recorded in Google Sheets for analysis. Incomplete or inconsistent responses were removed from the dataset, resulting in a final dataset of 103 valid responses.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process began with descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to summarize participant demographics and scale scores. We used statistical tests, like the chi-square test and Pearson correlation, to find out how strong and which way the relationships were between continuous variables (like Rosenberg scores and social anxiety scores) and categorical variables (like self-esteem categories and addiction status). To enhance the interpretation of the results, bar charts and Venn diagrams were created to visually represent the relationships and overlaps between variables.

## Analysis of Result

This section presents the findings of the study in great depth, covering all processes and analyses conducted to examine the relationships between **self-esteem**, **social networking addiction**, and **social interaction anxiety**. The results are organized to first discuss the **correlation analysis**, followed by hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics, and visual representations. Each step of the analysis is explained in detail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

### Descriptive Statistics

- **Self-Esteem:**
  - Mean: 18.5, SD: 4.2, Range: 0–30.
  - 28 participants (27.2%) had low self-esteem (scores <15), while 72 participants (72.8%) had moderate/high self-esteem (scores ≥15).
- **Social Networking Addiction:**
  - Mean: 64.3, SD: 12.8, Range: 0–234.
  - 13 participants (12.6%) were classified as addicted (scores ≥84).
- **Social Interaction Anxiety:**
  - Mean: 25.7, SD: 8.4, Range: 0–60.
  - 17 participants (16.5%) had high anxiety across many situations (scores ≥38), 21 participants (20.4%) had high anxiety specific to social contexts (scores 20–37), and 62 participants (63.1%) had low anxiety (scores <20).

## Hypothesis Testing

### Hypothesis 1:

#### Descriptive Statistics

- **Low Self-Esteem (Rosenberg Score <15):** 28 participants.
- **Moderate/High Self-Esteem (Rosenberg Score ≥15):** 72 participants.
- **Social Networking Addiction (Score ≥84):** 13 participants.

#### Contingency Table

|                       | Addicted (84+) | Not Addicted (<84) | Total |
|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------|
| Low Self-Esteem (<15) | 6              | 22                 | 28    |
| Moderate/High (≥15)   | 7              | 65                 | 72    |
| <b>Total</b>          | 13             | 87                 | 100   |

#### Analysis

- Out of the 13 participants classified as addicted to social networking, **6 (46.2%)** had low self-esteem, while **7 (53.8%)** had moderate/high self-esteem.

### Hypothesis 2:

#### Descriptive Statistics

- **High Anxiety (Many Situations):** 17 participants.
- **High Anxiety (Specific Context):** 21 participants.
- **Low Anxiety:** 62 participants.

## Contingency Table

|                    | High Anxiety (Many Situations) | High Anxiety (Specific Context) | Low Anxiety | Total |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Addicted (84+)     | 6                              | 5                               | 2           | 13    |
| Not Addicted (<84) | 11                             | 16                              | 60          | 87    |
|                    | High Anxiety (Many Situations) | High Anxiety (Specific Context) | Low Anxiety | Total |
| <b>Total</b>       | 17                             | 21                              | 62          | 100   |

## Analysis

- Among the 13 participants classified as addicted to social networking, **6 (46.2%)** exhibited high anxiety across many situations, and **5 (38.5%)** exhibited high anxiety specific to social contexts.

## Hypothesis 3:

### Descriptive Statistics

- **Moderate/High Self-Esteem and High Anxiety (Many Situations):** 7 participants.
- **Moderate/High Self-Esteem and High Anxiety (Specific Context):** 9 participants. Contingency Table

|                             | High Anxiety (Many Situations) | High Anxiety (Specific Context) | Low Anxiety | Total |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Low Self-Esteem (<15)       | 10                             | 12                              | 6           | 28    |
| Moderate/High ( $\geq 15$ ) | 7                              | 9                               | 56          | 72    |
| <b>Total</b>                | 17                             | 21                              | 62          | 100   |

## Analysis

- Among participants with **low self-esteem**, **10 (35.7%)** exhibited high anxiety across many situations, and **12 (42.9%)** exhibited high anxiety specific to social contexts.
- Among participants with **moderate/high self-esteem**, only **7 (9.7%)** exhibited high anxiety across many situations, and **9 (12.5%)** exhibited high anxiety specific to social contexts.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer insightful analysis of the interactions among young individuals aged 18 to 25 between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety.

### 3. Implications of the finding

#### 3.1 Theoretical Implications

**Integration of Theories:** The results support the integration of Social Comparison Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and the Cognitive-behavioral Model in understanding the relationships between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety (Festinger, 1954; Katz et al., 1973; Beck, 1976).

**Moderation Effects:** The study emphasizes in psychology research the need of considering moderation effects. Other possible moderators, such as personality qualities or coping mechanisms, should be investigated in next investigations (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

### **3.2 Applications in Practical Terms**

**therapies:** The results imply that self-esteem and social interaction anxiety should also be addressed in those meant to be targets of therapies meant to lower social networking addiction. Particularly successful may be mindfulness-based treatments and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1976; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

**Digital Literacy Programs:** Young adults can build resilience and lower their risk of anxiety and addiction by means of educational initiatives encouraging wise use of social media and digital literacy (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

## **4. Limitations of the study**

### **4.1 Cross-Sectional Architects**

The cross-sectional nature of the study restricts the capacity to prove causal linkages. To investigate the temporal links between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety, future studies ought to use longitudinal designs (Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

### **4.2 Self-Report Instruments**

The dependence on self-report data could include prejudices such as recollection bias or social desirability bias. Objective measurements, such as behavioral data from social media platforms, should be included in next studies (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

### **4.3 Sample attributes**

The sample of the study consisted only of young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, so restricting the generalizability of the results. Future studies ought to feature a more varied sample with regard to socioeconomic level, cultural background, and age (Henrich et al., 2010).

## **5. Future Research Directions**

### **5.1 Longitudinal Studies**

Longitudinal designs should be used in next studies to investigate the causal links among social interaction anxiety, social networking addiction, and self-esteem (Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

### **5.2 Exploration of additional variables**

Future research should investigate extra elements that might affect the interactions between self-esteem, social networking addiction, and social interaction anxiety, like personality traits, coping strategies, and cultural elements (Twenge et al., 2018).

### **5.3 Interventions Research**

Interventions meant to lower social networking addiction and raise self-esteem and social interaction anxiety should be developed and tested in future studies (Beck, 1976; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

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