ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 11| November 2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

NAVIGATING PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra32210
DOI No: 10.36713/epra32210

ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media has significantly transformed the communication patterns, social relationships, learning experiences, and emotional development of adolescents. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have become more integral parts of adolescents' everyday lives. Although social media provides opportunities for communication, self-expression, information sharing, and social interaction and problematic engagement may create challenges for emotional development and psychological well-being. Problematic social media use refers to a pattern of excessive, difficult-to-control, and potentially harmful engagement with social networking platforms that interferes with our everyday activities, interpersonal relationships, academic responsibilities, and psychological functioning. Emotional self-regulation is an essential psychological ability that enables adolescents to understand, monitor, manage, and express theirown emotions in different situations. During adolescence, emotional regulation develops alongside cognitive, social, and psychological changes. However, continuous exposure to online interactions, social comparison, cyberbullying, negative comments, fear of missing out and the pressure to maintain an online identity may influence adolescents' emotional responses. The present article examines the relationship between problematic social media use and emotional self-regulation among adolescents. It explores the psychological mechanisms through which excessive social media engagement may influence emotional regulation, identify associated risk and protective factors, and discuss the educational and psychological implications of present issue. The article also highlights the importance of digital literacy, parental guidance, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and school-based intervention programmes in promoting responsible social media behaviour.

KEYWORDS: *Problematic Social Media Use, Emotional Self-Regulation, Adolescents, Digital Behaviour, Digital Age*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has brought more significant changes to the lifestyles, communication patterns, and social experiences of adolescents. Social media has emerged as one of the most influential digital environments in contemporary society. Adolescents increasingly use social networking platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok for communication, entertainment, education, information sharing, and personal expression. These platforms provide higher opportunities for interaction beyond geographical boundaries and enable adolescents to establish and maintain good social relationships. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. During this stage, individuals develop their identity, establish interpersonal relationships, seek social acceptance, and gradually acquire independence. Social media plays an important role in shaping these developmental experiences. The excessive and uncontrolled engagement with social media may create difficulties in maintaining a healthy balance between online and offline activities.

Problematic social media use has become an important psychological and educational concern. It involves excessive engagement, difficulty controlling usage, preoccupation with online activities, and continued use despite negative consequences. Adolescents experiencing problematic use may spend considerable time checking notifications, viewing online content, comparing themselves with others, and seeking approval through likes, comments, and followers. Such behaviours may interfere with academic activities, sleep patterns, family relationships, and emotional well-being. Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to recognize, understand, monitor, and manage emotional experiences in an appropriate manner. It enables individuals to respond effectively to emotional challenges, control impulsive reactions, and maintain psychological balance. Effective emotional self-regulation is particularly important during adolescence because young people encounter various developmental challenges involving peer relationships, academic pressure, identity formation, and social acceptance.

The relationship between problematic social media use and emotional self-regulation deserves particular attention. Online experiences such as cyber bullying, negative feedback, social

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comparison, rejection, and fear of missing out may create emotional disturbances. At the same time, adolescents who experience difficulties in regulating their emotions may use social media as a means of escaping negative feelings or seeking temporary emotional satisfaction. Therefore, the relationship may operate in both directions.Social media is not merely a medium of communication; it has also become an environment in which adolescents develop perceptions about themselves and others. The immediate availability of online feedback may influence or affects their feelings of acceptance, confidence, happiness, and self-worth. The continuous flow of digital information may make it difficult for adolescents to disconnect from online activities and concentrate on their personal, academic, and social responsibilities. Understanding this relationship is important because emotional self-regulation is a developing ability that can be strengthened or developed through appropriate guidance, experience, and supportive environments. A balanced approach to social media use can help adolescents enjoy the advantages of technology while protecting their emotional and psychological well-being.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The increasing integration of social media into adolescent life makes it necessary to understand its influence on emotional development. Although social networking platforms provide several educational and social benefits, problematic engagement may contribute to emotional imbalance, reduced attention, interpersonal conflicts, and disturbances in everyday activities. Emotional self-regulation is an important component of adolescents' psychological adjustment, academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and overall development. Adolescents who have difficulty regulating their emotions may become more vulnerable to online conflicts, negative social comparison, and maximum dependence on digital interactions. The significance of examining this topic lies in identifying how problematic social media behaviours are associated with adolescents' emotional regulation. Such understanding can help teachers, parents, counsellors, and educational administrators develop appropriate intervention programmes. It can also contribute to digital citizenship education, emotional intelligence training, psychological counselling, and responsible technology-use practices in schools.

The study is also significant from an educational perspective because emotional self-regulation is closely associated with classroom behaviour, concentration, problem-solving ability, decision-making, and adjustment with peers. Students who are emotionally balanced may be better equipped to handle academic challenges and interpersonal difficulties. Therefore, understanding the possible association between problematic social media use and emotional self-regulation can provide fruitful insights for developing appropriate educational practices and student-support programmes. The study may contribute to creating awareness among parents and teachers regarding the emotional experiences of adolescents in digital environments. It emphasizes the need to promote healthy technology habits along with emotional awareness, empathy, self-control, and responsible digital behaviour.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Maurya, C., Dhillon, P., Sharma, H., et al. (2024) studies Bidirectional and cross-lag relationship between social media use and psychological well –being. The study examined the association and possible bidirectional relationship between social-media use and depressive symptoms among Indian adolescents and young adults.The findings suggest that social media use and depression may be related, but the relationship may be influenced by gender, age, education, wealth, and employment. Girls were more likely than boys to report depressive symptoms. This study is useful for showing that social media use is associated with emotional well-being among Indian adolescents.

Malik, L., Shahnawaz, M. G., Rehman, U., Pragyendu, Uniyal, R., & Griffiths, M. D. (2024) studies the mediating roles of fear of missing out and boredom proneness on psychological distress and social media addiction among Indian adolescents.This study investigated whether fear of missing out (FoMO) and boredom proneness explain the relationship between psychological distress and social-media addiction among Indian adolescents. Psychological distress, FoMO, boredom proneness, and social media addiction were positively correlated. Psychological distress significantly predicted social media addiction. FoMO and boredom proneness partially mediated the relationship between psychological problem and social media addiction.

Taddi, V. V., Kohli, R. K., &Puri, P. (2024) studies perception, use of social media, and its impact on the mental health of Indian adolescents: This study examined the relationship between social media use and mental well-being among Indian adolescents and young adults, with attention to sleep,fear, self-esteem, and cyberbullying. This study assessed daily social-media use, sleep disturbance, perceived pressure to maintain an online image, self-esteem, anxiety or stress related to likes and followers, fear of judgement, and cyberbullying.This study suggests that social media can negatively affect adolescents through sleep disruption, social comparison, fear of bad evaluation, and online harassment. At the same time, it can provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, and access to information.

RESEARCH GAP

- Limited research specifically analyze problematic social media use in relation to emotional self-regulation among Indian adolescents.
- The relationship between emotional dependence, social comparison, FOMO, and emotional control requires more investigation.
- More research is needed to identify how adolescents use social media to manage negative emotional experiences.
- The impact of parental digital mediation and peer relationships on emotional self-regulation requires additional attention.

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- There is a need for school-based intervention studies that integrate digital citizenship, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the concept and characteristics of problematic social media use among adolescents.
- To understand the importance of emotional self-regulation during adolescence.
- To find the relationship between problematic social media use and emotional self-regulation.
- To identify the psychological and social factors associated with problematic social media engagement.
- To find the role of parents and teachers in promoting healthy social media habits.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Problematic social media use refers to excessive, compulsive, and poorly controlled engagement with social networking platforms that interferes with an individual's daily functioning. It is not simply determined by the number of hours spent online; rather, it involves the inability to control usage and the experience of negative problems. The major characteristics include;

1. **Preoccupation:** Constantly thinking about social media activities and feeling a maximum desire to remain connected.
2. **Loss of control:** Difficulty limiting, denying or stopping social media use even when individuals recognize its negative effects.
3. **Emotional dependence:** Using social media to escape badfeelings, reduce stress, or obtain partial emotional satisfaction.
4. **Social comparison:** Comparing personal appearance, achievements, relationships, and lifestyle with those of others.
5. **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):** Anxiety about missing online activities, information, or social interactions.
6. **Functional interference:** Due to excessive engagement, neglecting academic responsibilities, sleep, family relationships, and offline activities
7. **Withdrawal-like experiences:** Feeling restlessness, irritation, or discomfort when unable to access social media.
8. **Repeated Checking:** Continuous checking notifications, messages, and updates even without a specific purpose.

The design of many social media platforms, including continuous content feeds, notifications, recommendations, and instant feedback, may encourage repeated engagement. These features can make it challenging for adolescents to develop consistent boundaries between digital activities and other aspects of life. Problematic social media use should not automatically be considered a clinical addiction.

CONCEPT OF EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

Emotional self-regulation is the ability to identify, understand, monitor, and regulate emotional responses according to different personal and social situations. It helps individuals respond appropriately to stressful experiences, control impulsive behaviour, and maintain emotional stability. During adolescence, emotional self-regulation becomes particularly important because individuals experience changes in their cognitive abilities, social relationships, personal identity, and emotional experiences.

Components of emotional self-regulation

- Emotional awareness
- Emotional understanding
- Emotional control
- Emotional expression
- Emotional flexibility
- Emotional coping

Effective emotional self-regulation contributes to positive interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, good academic adjustment, and healthy personality development.Emotional self-regulation does not mean suppressing or avoiding emotions. Rather, it involves understanding emotional experiences and responding to them in a constructive and socially appropriate manner. Adolescents who develop these abilities may be better prepared to handle criticism, rejection, academic pressure, peer conflicts, and other conflicting situations. The development of emotional self-regulation is influenced by several factors, including family relationships, peer group interactions, school experiences, personality characteristics, and the surrounding social environment. Supportive relationships ,opportunities and emotional management can strengthen these abilities during adolescence.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

Problematic social media use and emotional self-regulation are closely interconnected psychological constructs. Adolescents who have difficulties managing their emotions may increasingly depend on social media for temporary relief, entertainment, social approval, or emotional balance. Similarly, excessive engagement with social media may expose adolescents to situations that challenge their ability to regulate emotions. The relationship can be explained through the following dimensions.

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Social comparison and self-evaluation: Social media frequently exposes adolescents to carefully selected images and presentations of other people's lifestyles, achievements, and physical appearances. Continuous comparison may develop feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem. These emotional experiences may create difficulties in maintaining better emotional balance.

Fear of missing out (FOMO): Fear of Missing Out refers to the concern that others are experiencing rewarding activities from which an individual is absent. Adolescents experiencing FOMO may repeatedly check notifications, messages, and updates. This peculiar behaviour may increase emotional tension, anxiety, and controlling online engagement.

Cyberbullying and negative online experiences: Cyberbullying, online harassment, negative comments, and social exclusion can create emotional problems among adolescents. Such experiences may lead to anger, sadness, fear, embarrassment, and frustration. Adolescents with limited emotional regulation skills may find it difficult to respond constructively to these unfair experiences.

Impulsivity and emotional control: Continuous exposure to notifications, short videos, and rapidly changing online content may encourage continuous checking and impulsive engagement. Difficulty delaying gratification and controlling online activities may interfere with the development and practice of self-regulatory skills.

Sleep Disturbance and Emotional Balance: Excessive social media engagement, particularly before bedtime, may influence sleep routines. Inadequate sleep can affect attention, mood, emotional responses, and the ability to manage everyday problems.

PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Self-regulation theory by Carver and Scheier(1981)

Self regulation theory explains how individuals monitor and regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours to achieve or gain personal goals. In the context of social media, adolescents require self-regulatory abilities to manage online activities, resist unnecessary notifications, and balance online and offline responsibilities.

The theory emphasizes the importance of goal setting, self-monitoring, feedbackand behavioural control. Adolescents who establish clear limits for social media use and monitor their online habits may be better able to maintain a healthy balance between digital engagement and other responsibilities.

Emotion Regulation Theory

James J Gross(1998,2015),Gross's process model of emotion regulation explains how individuals influence the emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how they express them.The model identifies five major strategies:

1. Situation selection
2. Situation modification
3. Attentional deployment
4. Cognitive change
5. Response modulation

These strategies are relevant to adolescents' online experiences. Adolescents can avoid harmful online environments, redirect attention from negative comments, reinterpret social situations, and manage emotional responses before reacting.This theory provides a useful explanation of how adolescents can manage emotional experiences arising from social media interactions.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1986) emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviours through self-observation, self judgement, self-reaction imitation, reinforcement and self-efficacy. Adolescents may learn emotional expressions, communication patterns, and online behaviours by observing peers, influencers, and other social media users. Positive online role models can encourage responsible communication, empathy, cooperation, and constructive behaviour.

Gratification Theory

Gratification Theory (Jay G Blumler) explains that individuals use media to satisfy particular psychological and social needs, including entertainment, information, social interaction, and emotional satisfaction. Adolescents may use social media to fulfill their need for belongingness, recognition, and emotional support. This theory helps explain why adolescents may spend considerable time on social media. Their usage may be motivated by the desire for companionship, entertainment, social acceptance, or relief from negative emotional experiences. Identifying these underlying needs is important when developing strategies to develop balanced digital behaviour.

ROLE OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN PROMOTING HEALTHY DIGITAL BEHAVIOUR

Parents and teachers play an important role in shaping adolescents' attitudes, habits,interest and emotional responses towards social media. Their guidance can help young people develop responsible digital practices and proper emotional regulation skills.

ROLE OF PARENTS

Parents should maintain open and supportive communication with adolescents regarding their online experiences. Instead of relying only on strict restrictions, they should encourage discussions about digital safety, online relationships, social comparison, and cyberbullying. Establishing reasonable and balanced screen-time boundaries and encouraging offline family activities can also promote balanced technology use.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

Teachers can create proper awareness about responsible social media use through classroom discussions, seminars, awareness programmes, and value-based activities. They can also

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help students recognize emotional difficulties and develop appropriate coping strategies. A supportive and positive classroom environment encourages students to share their concerns without fear of judgement.

ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

School counsellors can provide guidance to adolescents experiencing emotional distress, excessive social media dependence, cyberbullying, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Proper counselling and appropriate referral support can help students develop healthy coping mechanisms and improve their emotional well-being.

A collaborative approach involving parents, teachers, counsellors, and educational institutions is essential for creating a supportive environment in which adolescents can develop healthy digital habits and effective emotional self-regulation skills.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

- **Promoting Digital Literacy and Awareness**: Educational institutions should organize digital literacy awareness programmes to help adolescents understand the negative consequences of excessive social media use. Students should be educated about responsible online behaviour, digital safety, digital privacy, and healthy social media habits.
- **Developing Emotional Self-Regulation Skills:** Institution should provide opportunities to develop emotional awareness, emotional control, stress management, and coping strategies. Activities such as mindfulness, meditation, Yoga practice and reflective practices can help adolescents regulate their emotions effectively.
- **Integrating Counselling and Guidance Services:** School counsellors and teachers should identify students who exhibit signs of problematic social media use, emotional instability, fear, anxiety, or social withdrawal. Individual counselling programmes and group guidance programmes can help students develop healthier behavioural patterns.
- **Encouraging Balanced Digital and Offline Activities:** Educational Institutions should promote participation in sports and games, arts, cultural activities, reading, and interpersonal interactions. Such proper activities help adolescents maintain a healthy balance between digital engagement and real-life experiences.
- **Strengthening Parent–Teacher Collaboration:** Schools should encourage effective communication and cooperation between parents and teachers to monitor and guide adolescents' online activities. Awareness programmes for parents can help them establish appropriate digital boundaries and support the emotional well-being of their ward.
- **Providing Digital literacy programmes:** Schools should organize digital literacy programmes to help adolescents understand responsible social media use, digital safety, privacy, and the consequences of excessive digital engagement.
- **Emotional intelligence education:** Classroom activities should provide opportunities for students to identify, understand, and manage their emotions. Emotional intelligence training programme can help students develop empathy, self-awareness, and emotional well-being .Activities such as group discussions, role-playing, reflective writing, and cooperative learning can provide practical opportunities for developing emotional awareness and appropriate emotional expression.
- **Peer support programmes:** Peer mentoring and group discussions can help adolescents share their experiences, develop empathy, and learn constructive ways of managing online challenges.Peer support activities can also promote a sense of belongingness and encourage students to seek help when they encounter cyberbullying, online harassment, or emotional difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Problematic social media usage and emotional self-regulation represent important interconnected dimensions of the adolescent psychological development. Although social media provides opportunities for communication, learning, entertainment, and social interaction among each other. Uncontrolled and excessive engagement of these may create challenges for emotional balance and psychological well-being. Social comparison, fear of missing out each other,cyber-attack, cyberbullying, online rejection, and emotional dependence are among the factors that may influence adolescents' emotional experiences. Emotional self-regulation enables adolescents to manage their own feelings, control impulsive responses, overcome stressful situations, and develop healthy interpersonal relationships. Therefore, strengthening the emotional regulation skills is essential for promoting responsible online behaviour and positive psychological development.The discussion also highlights that problematic social media usage cannot be understood solely in terms of the screen time. The purpose of usage, emotional dependence, online experiences, and the ability to maintain a balance between the digital and offline activities are equally important considerations. Developing self-awareness, self-control, emotional intelligence, and critical digital literacy can help adolescents respond more precisely and effectively to the challenges of the digital world. Parents, teachers, educational institutions, and mental health professionals should work together or collaboratively to create supportive digital environments. Digital literacy education, emotional intelligence programmes, mindfulness practices, counselling, and parental guidance can contribute to the development of healthy social media habits among adolescents. Ultimately, the aim should not be completely to avoid social media but to encourage its responsible and balanced usage. By integrating emotional development with digital literacy and supportive educational practices, adolescents can be empowered to become emotionally resilient, socially responsible, and also confident digital citizens.

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