

From Likes to Distress: Social Media Addiction and Psychological Distress Among Emerging Adults

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Abstract: Greater use of social media in recent years by emerging adults has led to concern for the overall implications on mental health, particularly psychological distress. Objective The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress among emerging adults in Indonesia. A positive correlation is hypothesized between social media addiction and psychological distress. This was a quantitative, non-experimental study involving 150 subjects aged 18-22 years from the Greater Jakarta area. Self-report questionnaires constructed from the Mental Health Inventory (MHI) and Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) to collect data. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and simple linear regression with JASP. The results yielded a strong positive correlation between social media addiction and psychological distress ($r = .532, p < .001$). Also, social media addiction was found to be a significant independent variable accounting for the variance in psychological distress using regression analysis ($\beta = .532, p < .001$), which accounted for 28.3% of the variance in psychological distress. These results suggest that heavy/compulsive use of social media may correlate with adverse mental health for emerging adults. The findings underline the need to promote healthy engagement with social media and greater awareness of mental health issues in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media Addiction, Psychological Distress, Emerging Adults, Social Media Use, Mental Health.

1 Introduction

Digital technology has evolved exponentially, which has revolutionized how individuals connect, interact and obtain information. Due to unique growth tasks of adolescents and emerging adults, social media is even more pervasive in their everyday life. Two years ago, reports noted Indonesia had an estimated 143 million social media user identities since Jan 2025 and the societies are leveraging the power of digital recently (Ahdiat, 2025). Social media serves as both a mode of communication and as a go-to platform for information, and the virtual building of social relationships. Furthermore, according to Ahdiat (2025) Indonesia also became one of the highest countries in social media usage duration in the world with 188 minutes per day daily use. Keywords Social media Indonesians This finding shows that social media has become an inseparable part of daily life and social interaction by Indonesian society, especially for younger levels.

Social media has made its way into the daily lives of people, bringing both advantages and disadvantages as well. Fortunately, social media allows you to communicate too much do communicate and emotionally attach but quickly access the information you want no matter how far apart you are from someone. But the misuse of

social media may add to many psychological and social matters too. Overuse of social media can lead to reduced direct contact, an unstable mood, and having more trouble controlling the action. In addition, social networks are rife with misinformation, so the spread of harmful content and unrealistic social comparisons only serve to increase psychological pressure and negatively affect mental health. Placed study is an abbreviated kind of twice longitudinal conducted indicated that internet using frequency has a relation on anxiety, experience with cyberbullying, and emotional distress among the youth indicated by adults and binge drinking at the adolescents poor coping skills (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Moreover, the relations of social network exposure to adverse effects and depressive symptoms have been related especially during COVID-19 stressful events (Zhao & Zhou, 2020).

Emerging adulthood is theorized to be a distinct developmental stage with certain characteristics, including exploratory activity in love and work, instability in social roles and self-identity, and heightened perception of social evaluation. The 18-22 years group also has a high level of engagement in social media use due to this population's greatest developmental need for individual and peer interaction (Orben et al., 2020). This transition phase is characterised by numerous psychological, emotional and social changes and, as a result,

many emerging adults are especially susceptible to mental health problems (Barkham et al., 2019). A previous line of research has indicated that during adolescence and emerging adulthood is because adolescents can be particularly sensitive to social deprivation, peer rejection and loneliness, all detrimental for psychological well-being (Orben et al., 2020). Furthermore, extensive social media utilization during this crucial developmental period can lead to overexposure to cyberbullying experiences and unrealistic social norms and FOMO which have been associated with increased psychological distress and emotional struggles for young people (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

2 Method

Research Design: Quantitative Non-Experimental design was used to examine the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress among emerging adults. Hence, the main aim was to find out how much extent addictive patterns of social media engagement are statistically related to mental distress in 18–22 years age group. Data was collected via self-report questionnaires delivered through an online survey platform to enable optimised access for participants and collection of their responses. The general structure of the research consisted of reviewing books/literature related to the topic, identifying the problem at hand, developing our measurements instruments (scales), data collection, and actual analysis of results with related interpreting findings:

2.1 Participants

This was conducted on emerging adults aged between 18 to 22 years who used social media for about 5–12 hours or longer each day. The survey comprised 150 subjects, including 122 females and 28 males. Recruitment of participants was performed in several areas of the Greater Jakarta region, consisting of Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. Inclusion criteria were established by age group and level of daily social media use, leading to an active participation in everyday life on social media.

2.2 Research Instrument

The instruments used in this study were psychological distress scale and social media addiction scale. Psychological distress was measured based on the Mental Health Inventory created by Veit and Ware (1983) while social media addiction was measured with a tool from the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS). The questionnaire consisted of modified informed consent; demographic characteristics and a set of statements aimed at measuring the research variables in a Likert-scale response format. The psychiatric symptom measure was a brief scale that assessed dimensions of anxiety,

depression and impaired emotional control. The social media addiction scale on the other hand, addressed the components of tolerance and salience withdrawal and conflict associated with social media use. Individual ratings to each statement were made using a five-point Likert scale varying between 1 = strongly disagree; and 5 = strongly agree.

2.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive analysis was conducted on data acquired from the study using JASP statistical software. Demographic characteristics of participants were summarised using descriptive statistical procedures and to ascertain the categorization levels of psychological distress and social media addiction identified in the sample. In the next step, reliability analysis was performed to test for consistency of each measurement scale. Moreover, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress. To further evaluate the degree of association between social media addiction and psychological distress, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted.

3 Results

Methods: The distribution of psychological distress and social media addiction among emerging adults was evaluated through a descriptive statistical analysis using Date Science. Results showed that many participants assessed themselves as having higher levels of psychological distress.

Table 1: Categorization of Psychological Distress and Social Media Addiction

Variabel	Category	Frequency(n)	Percentage(%)
Psychological Distress	High	42	28,0 %
	Very High	17	11,3 %
Social Media Addiction	High	29	19,3 %
	Very High	9	6,0 %

Note. The table presents the distribution of participants categorized in high and very high levels of psychological distress and social media addiction.

According to the results of this categorization, 42 (28.0%) and 17 (11.3%) participants were identified in the high and very high category of psychological distress, respectively. These findings show that there are 59 participants which were revealed to be in too poor mental health condition. Regarding social media addiction, 29 participants (19.3%) fall into the high category and 9 participants (6%) in the very high category of social media addiction. Results revealed that 38 participants

experienced significant levels of social media addiction.

We performed reliability testing to evaluate the internal consistency of instruments measuring psychological distress and social media addiction. Reliability: Cronbach’s Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of measurement items. The results showed that the Psychological Distress scale performed well, as measured by a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .831$ with a 95% CI between .800 and .858). The coefficient achieved suggest that the instrument to assess psychological distress among emerging adults shows a high degree of internal consistency. On the other hand, the Social Media Addiction scale showed an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .768$ and at 95% CI .724 to .806). These results indicate that the tool retained sufficient internal consistency to assess addictive tendencies in relation to social media use. Both measurement scales were therefore regarded as suitable because both yielded reliability coefficients above the acceptable minimum criterion, demonstrating that they were sufficiently stable and consistent in measuring the psychological constructs of interest.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Variabel	Cronbach α	95%CI
Psychological Distress	.831	[.800,.858]
Social Media Addiction	.768	[.724,.806]

Note. Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients above .70 indicate acceptable internal consistency, demonstrating that both instruments possessed adequate reliability for measuring the intended psychological constructs.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to evaluate construct validity by checking if the measurement models were appropriate with respect to the Psychological Distress and Social Media Addiction scales. Each goodness-of-fit indices including Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual, along with Goodness of Fit Index (GFI). Results of the analysis indicated that Psychological Distress showed acceptable construct validity, (CFI = .869, TLI = .846, RMSEA = .067, SRMR = .064, and GFI = .980). Those values indicated a reasonable fit of the measurement model with the dataset collected in this study. Also, for the Social Media Addiction scale showed a sufficient level of construct validity as indicated by CFI = .851, TLI = .793, RMSEA = .127, SRMR = .081, and GFI = .981. Various indices of goodness-of-fit were not well within acceptable ranges, but the RMSEA indicated that the overall fit of the model was poorer than one for the Psychological Distress scale. However, overall results have confirmed that both instruments remained sufficiently appropriate to measure the identified psychological constructs in the context of the

current research.

Table 3: Construct Validity Analysis

Variabel	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	GFI
Psychological Distress	.869	.846	.067	.064	.980
Social Media Addiction	.851	.793	.127	.081	.981

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; GFI = Goodness of Fit Index. Values approaching .90 for CFI, TLI, and GFI indicate acceptable model fit, whereas lower RMSEA and SRMR values indicate better construct validity.

The association between social media addiction and psychological distress among emerging adults was analysed using Pearson correlation analysis. The results showed that both variables had a statistically significant positive correlation, meaning the higher the level of social media addiction was directly correlated with psychological distress. The correlation coefficient achieved is indicative of a moderate positive relationship, $r = .532$ and $p < .001$. A simple linear regression analysis was performed to investigate the predictive role of social media addiction for psychological distress. Social media addiction was a significant predictor for psychological distress among emerging adults, $\beta = .532$ and $p < .001$. In addition, the coefficient of determination also showed that 28.3% of the variance in psychological distress was accounted by social media addiction ($R^2 = .283$). The regression model was entered as statistically significant: $F = 58.471$, $p < .001$.

Table 4: Correlation and Regression Analysis

Analysis	Coefficient	p-value
Pearson Correlation(r)	.532	$p < .001$
Regression Coefficient(β)	.532	$p < .001$
R^2	.0283	—
F	58.471	$p < .001$

Note. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between social media addiction and psychological distress. Simple linear regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive contribution of social media addiction toward psychological distress among emerging adults.

These results indicate that increased social media use may be associated with higher rates of psychological distress between adolescence and emerging adulthood. Finally, excessive social media practices may be an essential psychological vulnerability concerning subjective well-being regarding modern digital culture.

4 Discussion

The current study was carried out to find the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress in young adults. A positive association was found between addictive social media use and psychological distress in 18 to 22-year-olds ($B = 9.26$; $P < .001$). Moreover, regression analysis showed that social media addiction was a significant predictor of psychological distress, and this explained 28.3% of variance in psychological distress scores. Our findings suggest that problematic social media use may be an important predictor of mental health during the emerging adult years in our contemporary digital landscape.

The results are consistent with previous research linking heavy social media use to poorer psychological well-being. Zhao and Zhou (2020) further claimed that high utilization of social media platforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with elevated negative affect as well as depressive symptoms. Similar results were also described by O'Reilly et al. (2018), who claimed that adolescents not only experience anxiety, emotional distress and cyberbullying behaviour on social media but all these lead to deteriorating psychological well-being. Thus, the current results add to a growing body of empirical evidence linking higher levels of social media usage with increased emotional vulnerability among youth.

Several psychological mechanisms could explain the relationship identified in this study. One of these explanations are related to the natural inclination towards social comparison in digital spaces. Through social media platforms, users are persistently inundated with idealistic representations of appearance, accomplishment, lifestyle and relationships. Regular contact with this kind of material can produce inadequacy, unhappiness, poor self-esteem and hardship. Valkenburg et al. (2022) reported that adolescents and emerging adults are particularly vulnerable to the negative psychological consequences of online social comparison and fear of missing out (FoMO). Both phenomena have been consistently associated with increased emotional distress, depressive symptoms, and reduced psychological well-being among young individuals.

In addition, addictive social media use behaviour can lead to emotional dysregulation and psychological addiction. Social media addiction is marked by compulsive checking patterns, preoccupation with online interactions and a struggle to control the use of social media even at an expense. Such patterns can disrupt sleep quality, academic performance, work productivity, and face-to-face relationships that lead to an increase in psychological distress. The results from the current study are consistent with previous research indicating that problematic social media use is like behavioral ad-

dictions characterized by compulsive engagement and self-control difficulties.

Characteristics of emerging adulthood related to sources of vulnerability also shed light on several mechanisms underlying the distinct pattern between social media use and psychological distress. The development of emerging adulthood is marked by identity exploration, emotional instability, and increased susceptibility to evaluations from others as well as the need for social acceptance. Psychologically, social validation and interaction between peers tends to conclude a highly vivid need in that developmental timeline. Consequently, excessive reliance on social media as a source of social validation and interpersonal connection may increase sensitivity to online criticism, rejection, and social comparison. Such experiences can contribute to emotional distress and negatively affect psychological well-being. Orben et al. (2020) emphasized that adolescents and emerging adults are particularly vulnerable to social deprivation and interpersonal evaluation, both of which may have adverse consequences for mental health.

The current study also adds to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian context. Previous studies on social media addiction and mental health focused primarily on countries in the West, whereas very few involving Indonesian emerging adults have been conducted. Given the rapid increase of social media use in Indonesia, along with the long hours Indonesian users are spending each day on social media platforms, the current results highlight that research on people's digital behavior in developing countries needs to consider psychological factors. Our results also suggest that social media addiction might be a developing mental health issue in Indonesian adolescents and emerging adults.

However, a few limitations do need to be recognized. There are a number of limitations to be noted in this study. Second, self-report questionnaires might provide higher risk for the response bias leading to inaccuracies in reporting participant experiences – re-activity. Third, nearly all of the participants were female, which may further limit the generalizability of these findings across gender. Future research should therefore use longitudinal research designs, larger and more representative samples, as well as different psychological variables related to addictive behaviors in regard of social network sites (e.g., self-esteem; emotional regulation; loneliness; fear of missing out). Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media addiction is significantly associated with psychological distress among emerging adults. The present research highlights the importance of encouraging healthier digital behavior, increasing awareness regarding responsible social media use, and developing psychological interventions aimed at reducing problematic social media engagement among young individuals.

5 Conclusion

Results: The current study demonstrated a considerable association between social media addiction and psychological distress in emerging adults. Considerable evidence shows that social media users aged 18–22 years have higher levels of psychological distress with increasing engagement in addictive patterns of social media use. These findings also suggest that social media addiction could be an additional psychological facade for emotional predisposition during the transition to emerging adulthood, especially with the extensive digital exposure and online socialization. Besides this, the present study is also important to the researchers of psychological science in providing empirical evidence for the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress on Indonesian emerging adults who are mostly neglected in previous studies. This highlights the need of grasping onto the mental effects of heavy utilisation in quick-moving settings. Such findings also underscore the need for psychosocial preventative strategies, digital literacy enhancements and mental health interventions aimed at promoting healthier and more adaptive use of social media by youth in an increasingly online world.

6 Implication

The current findings underscore a need to raise public awareness about the psychological effects of high social media usage among emerging adults. The strong correlation between social media addiction and psychological distress highlights the importance of designing preventive and promotive mental health programs to facilitate effective digital behavioral patterns and adaptive engagement with social media. Lastly, educational settings may consider more tailored digital literacies and psychoeducation initiatives/policy to promote healthier social media use among youth. Additionally, prospective studies should be conducted to examine other potential psychological correlates of social media addiction, including self-esteem, emotional regulation ability, loneliness and

fear of missing out (FoMO). We also recommend the use of longitudinal research designs to gain deeper insight into the causal association between social media addiction and psychological distress.

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