

SOCIAL MEDIA USE, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Owaise Jan Kirmani¹
Manzoor Ahmad Rather²

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed adolescents' social interactions and emotional experiences. While these platforms offer opportunities for communication, identity exploration, and peer support, they may also expose adolescents to emotional stressors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and digital pressure. This qualitative study explores adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between social media use, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen adolescents aged 14–18 years from senior secondary school of Central Kashmir. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. Four major themes emerged: (1) Social media as a medium for emotional expression, (2) Emotional turbulence resulting from online interactions, (3) Emotional intelligence as a coping resource, and (4) Digital pressures influencing psychological well-being. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence may support adolescents in interpreting and regulating emotional responses to online experiences. The study highlights the importance of integrating emotional intelligence development and digital literacy education within school settings to support adolescents' well-being in digitally mediated environments.

Keywords: Social media, Emotional intelligence, Adolescents, well-being, Digital literacy

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical period of psychological, emotional, and social development. During this stage, individuals experience significant changes in identity formation, peer relationships, and emotional regulation. In contemporary society, these developmental

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kashmir

² Associate Professor, Department of Education, University of Kashmir

processes increasingly occur within digitally mediated environments. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp have become integral components of adolescents' everyday lives. These platforms allow adolescents to communicate with peers, share experiences, and construct social identities in ways that were previously unavailable. Through digital interaction, adolescents can maintain social relationships, access peer support, and engage in self-expression. Despite these potential benefits, social media environments also present challenges. Adolescents may encounter unrealistic portrayals of others' lives, exposure to cyberbullying, pressure for social validation, and excessive digital engagement. Such experiences may contribute to emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and diminished psychological well-being. The psychological consequences of social media use are therefore complex and influenced by individual differences. One factor that may shape adolescents' responses to digital experiences is emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions effectively. Adolescents with stronger emotional competencies may be better equipped to interpret online interactions, regulate emotional responses, and maintain psychological balance.

Although numerous studies have examined the relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being, much of the existing research relies on quantitative approaches. Less attention has been devoted to adolescents' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of digital environments. Understanding these experiences is important for developing educational strategies that promote healthy social media engagement. This study therefore explores adolescents' perceptions of how social media use interacts with emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. By examining adolescents' experiences, the study seeks to contribute insights that may inform educational practices and interventions aimed at supporting emotional development in digitally connected environments.

Review of Literature

Social Media and Adolescent Development

Social media has become a dominant aspect of adolescents' social lives. Online platforms enable young people to communicate instantly with peers, maintain friendships, and share personal experiences. Research suggests that these digital spaces can support social connectedness and provide emotional support among adolescents. However, the use of social media may also expose adolescents to psychological risks. Studies have associated excessive social media engagement with increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and stress. Social comparison, fear of missing out, and exposure to cyberbullying represent some of the key challenges that adolescents may encounter in digital environments.

Emotional Intelligence in Adolescence

Emotional intelligence refers to the capacity to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions in one and others. Emotional intelligence plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, stress management, and psychological well-being. Adolescence represents a particularly important period for the development of emotional competencies. Research has shown that adolescents with higher emotional intelligence tend to demonstrate better emotional regulation, stronger social relationships, and greater resilience when facing stressful experiences.

Social Media, Emotional Intelligence, and Psychological Well-Being

The interaction between social media use and emotional intelligence has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Emotional intelligence may influence how adolescents interpret and respond to emotionally challenging online experiences. Adolescents with stronger emotional awareness may recognize unrealistic portrayals on social media and regulate feelings of inadequacy or envy. Conversely, adolescents with lower emotional regulation abilities may experience greater

vulnerability to online stressors.

Although these relationships have been examined through quantitative research, qualitative investigations exploring adolescents' subjective experiences remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by exploring adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between social media use, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being.

Objectives

The study aims to explore adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between social media use, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine adolescents' experiences with social media use.
2. Identify emotional responses associated with online interactions.
3. Explore how adolescents regulate emotions related to social media experiences.
4. Understand adolescents' perceptions of the role of emotional intelligence in managing digital environments.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore adolescents' lived experiences related to social media use and emotional responses. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences.

Participants

Fifteen adolescents aged 14–18 years from senior secondary schools of Central Kashmir participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all participants were regular users of social media platforms. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Parental consent and participant

assent were obtained to ensure ethical compliance.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed participants to discuss their experiences openly while ensuring that key topics were addressed.

Interview questions focused on:

- Patterns of social media use
- Emotional experiences related to online interactions
- Coping strategies used to manage digital stress
- Perceived role of emotional intelligence in navigating social media.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke.

The analysis involved:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Identification of potential themes
4. Review of themes
5. Definition and naming of themes
6. Reporting of findings.

Theme Saturation

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews did not produce substantially new insights.

Researcher Reflexivity

To enhance methodological transparency, the researchers maintained

a reflexive journal throughout the analysis process. This journal documented analytic decisions and reflections on potential researcher bias. Peer discussion with colleagues was also used to review coding and theme development.

Findings

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
Social media as emotional expression	Sharing emotions, peer communication
Emotional turbulence from online interactions	Social comparison, negative feedback
Emotional intelligence as coping resource	Emotional awareness, self-regulation
Digital pressures affecting well-being	Excessive use, emotional fatigue

Social Media as Emotional Expression

Participants frequently described social media as a platform that allowed them to express emotions and maintain communication with friends. Sharing posts, stories, and messages enabled adolescents to communicate personal experiences and seek social support.

Emotional Turbulence from Online Interactions

Despite these benefits, many participants reported emotional challenges associated with online interactions. Social comparison and negative feedback were commonly mentioned sources of emotional distress.

Emotional Intelligence as a Coping Resource

Some participants described strategies that reflected emotional intelligence, such as recognizing unrealistic portrayals on social media and consciously regulating emotional responses to online feedback.

Digital Pressures Affecting Psychological Well-Being

Participants also noted that excessive social media use could lead to fatigue, stress, and sleep disruption. Continuous exposure to digital content sometimes created pressure to remain constantly connected.

Discussion

The findings highlight the multifaceted role of social media in adolescents' emotional lives. Social media platforms serve as spaces for communication and emotional expression while also presenting challenges related to social comparison and online validation. Emotional intelligence appears to influence how adolescents interpret and manage these experiences. Participants who demonstrated greater emotional awareness reported being more capable of regulating their reactions to online interactions.

However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the small qualitative sample and context-specific nature of the study. Emotional intelligence may represent one of several factors influencing adolescents' experiences with social media.

Educational Implications

The findings underscore the importance of integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) and digital literacy education within school curricula. Educational programs that strengthen emotional intelligence may help adolescents develop healthier relationships with digital technologies. Such initiatives may enable students to regulate emotional responses to online experiences, critically interpret digital content, and maintain psychological well-being.

Limitations

The study involved a relatively small sample drawn from a specific geographical context, which may limit the transferability of findings. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall bias. Future research may benefit from larger samples and mixed-method designs to further examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and digital experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored adolescents' perceptions of social media use in relation to emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. The findings suggest that social media plays both supportive and challenging roles in adolescents' emotional lives. Emotional intelligence may help adolescents navigate online environments by supporting emotional awareness and regulation. Educational initiatives that integrate emotional intelligence development with digital literacy education may therefore contribute to promoting adolescent well-being in digitally connected societies.

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