

Mental Health Practitioners Perspectives on the Risks of Social Media Addiction: A Qualitative Exploration

Upasna Srivastava

(Research Scholar) Department of Psychology, School of Liberal Arts, GD Goenka University

Dr. Aruna Maheshwari

(Assistant Professor) Department of Psychology, School of Liberal Arts, GD Goenka University

Abstract:

This qualitative study examines mental health practitioners' perspectives on the risks associated with social media addiction. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with clinical psychologists and counsellors, and the data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Practitioners conceptualised social media addiction as an increasingly prevalent mental health concern, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Key risk factors identified included loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, sleep disturbance, social comparison, peer pressure, distraction, and compulsive digital behaviours. Emotional vulnerability and reliance on online validation emerged as central mechanisms sustaining excessive social media use. Practitioners also reported significant clinical challenges, notably the lack of standardised assessment tools and evidence-based intervention frameworks. The findings highlight the need for structured clinical guidelines, targeted therapeutic interventions, and preventive strategies to address the psychological risks associated with problematic social media use. This study contributes clinically relevant insights that may inform mental health practice and the development of more effective responses to social media addiction.

Introduction:

The rapid integration of social media into everyday life has fundamentally transformed communication, identity formation, and social interaction, particularly among adolescents and young adults. While platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter offer opportunities for connection, self-expression, and information exchange, growing evidence suggests that excessive and compulsive use may lead to social media addiction (SMA), with significant psychological and functional consequences. Social media addiction is commonly characterized by excessive preoccupation, loss of control over usage, mood modification, and withdrawal symptoms when access is restricted, often resulting in impaired academic performance, disrupted social relationships, and deteriorating mental health (Srivastava, 2023; Shukur et al., 2023).

From a psychological perspective, SMA has been associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and emotional dysregulation. Although social media provides virtual avenues for interaction and validation, excessive reliance on these platforms can paradoxically intensify social isolation and emotional distress (Bakry et al., 2022). The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) offers an explanatory framework by suggesting that individuals engage with media to fulfil needs such as social connection, entertainment, and information. However, the continuous feedback mechanisms inherent in social media such as likes, comments, and notifications can reinforce compulsive usage patterns, thereby disrupting real-life functioning and interpersonal relationships (Srivastava, 2023).

Existing research has predominantly focused on the prevalence of social media addiction and its outcomes among students and young adults, linking excessive use to poor academic performance, loneliness, and reduced psychological well-being (Al-Menayes, 2015; Savci & Aysan, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). While these studies offer valuable insights into user experiences, there is comparatively limited qualitative exploration of how mental health practitioners conceptualize, interpret, and assess the risks of social media addiction in clinical contexts.

Grounded in an interpretivist epistemological framework, the present study seeks to critically explore mental health practitioners' perspectives on the risks associated with social media addiction. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding subjective meanings, professional interpretations, and contextual realities rather than objective measurement alone. Accordingly, this research aims not only to describe practitioners' views but to critically analyze how clinical experiences, therapeutic observations, and professional knowledge shape their understanding of social media addiction and its psychological risks. By foregrounding practitioners' interpretive accounts, this study addresses an important gap in the literature and contributes to more contextually grounded clinical insights.

Review Of Literature:

The rapid and widespread expansion of social media platforms has generated growing scholarly attention toward their addictive potential and associated psychological risks. While quantitative research has primarily focused on prevalence rates and correlations with mental health outcomes, qualitative studies have been particularly valuable in capturing users' lived experiences, motivations, and the psychosocial mechanisms underlying problematic social media use. By offering depth and contextual understanding beyond symptom-based assessments, qualitative research provides critical insights into how social media addiction is experienced and sustained. Accordingly, the present review synthesises key qualitative and foundational studies to situate the current research within the existing body of researches.

Early empirical work highlighted the psychological implications of social media use, particularly social comparison and perceived inadequacy, which were linked to diminished well-being (Junco & Cotten, 2012; Chou & Edge, 2012). These findings informed later qualitative investigations by drawing attention to users' emotional responses and cognitive appraisals in digitally mediated environments.

Subsequent qualitative studies emphasised the role of emotional and interpersonal vulnerabilities in the development of social media addiction. Aksoy (2018) demonstrated that university students' engagement with social media often follows a developmental trajectory, wherein initial use driven by loneliness and boredom evolves into sustained engagement due to social obligations and relationship maintenance. Gendered patterns further suggested that problematic use is shaped by contextual and relational factors rather than excessive use alone.

The social embeddedness of social media addiction has been further underscored in research with adolescents. Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2021) reported that young users recognise their addictive behaviours yet perceive limited control, attributing compulsive use to external influences such as peer norms, social expectations, and platform algorithms. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) emerged as a central motivator, framing addiction as a socially reinforced phenomenon.

Platform-specific qualitative research has highlighted the contribution of design features to addictive engagement. Jayadi and Pranata (2021) identified motivations such as recognition, belongingness, and entertainment in Instagram use, noting that visual comparison and feedback mechanisms intensified emotions including envy, insecurity, and mood instability, with implications for self-esteem and identity formation.

Recent studies have extended this psychosocial perspective by focusing on emotional regulation and coping deficits. Chegeni et al. (2023) identified inadequate life skills, including poor emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities, as key vulnerabilities underlying social media addiction. Participants described using social media as a maladaptive coping strategy to manage loneliness and psychological distress. Similarly, Tolan (2023) found that although social media fulfilled needs for validation and connectedness, excessive use resulted in regret, emotional exhaustion, and academic and functional impairment, illustrating its dual role as both a coping resource and a psychological risk factor.

Emerging research has also begun to examine social media addiction within professional and training contexts. Canoğulları (2023) reported that higher levels of social media addiction among psychological counsellor candidates were associated with negative emotional states such as jealousy, tension, and regret, whereas lower levels corresponded with more adaptive emotional experiences. This finding underscores the relevance of problematic social media use within mental health-related professions.

Collectively, the literature conceptualises social media addiction as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by emotional vulnerability, social norms, and platform affordances, rather than solely by individual self-control deficits. However, despite rich qualitative documentation of users' experiences, there remains a notable gap in research exploring mental health practitioners' clinical interpretations, assessment practices, and professional judgments regarding the risks of social media addiction. Addressing this gap is critical for informing clinically grounded assessment frameworks and intervention strategies, thereby providing the rationale for the present qualitative exploration.

Research Methodology:

The present study adopted a qualitative research design to explore mental health practitioners' perspectives on the risks associated with social media addiction. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of subjective meanings, clinical interpretations, and professional experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on professional meaning-

making, this design enabled a rich and contextual understanding of practitioners' clinical observations and conceptualizations.

The study was grounded in an interpretivist epistemological framework, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the meaning's individuals attribute to their lived and professional experiences. Within this framework, knowledge is viewed as socially constructed and context-dependent rather than objectively fixed. Accordingly, the present research sought not only to document practitioners' views but to critically analyse how their clinical experiences, therapeutic engagements, and professional contexts shape their understanding of social media addiction and its psychological risks. This epistemological stance informed the research design, data collection, and analytic process.

Participants:

The participants comprised mental health practitioners, including clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists, and professional counsellors, who were actively engaged in clinical practice.

Participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- (a) Possess relevant clinical experience in mental health practice, enabling reflective and informed professional insights;
- (b) Have professional exposure to adolescents and/or young adults; and
- (c) Have encountered clients presenting with problematic or excessive social media use within a clinical setting.

Rather than imposing a rigid minimum number of years of experience, the inclusion criteria emphasized depth and relevance of clinical exposure, consistent with the interpretivist and qualitative orientation of the study. This approach ensured the inclusion of practitioners capable of providing meaningful, experience-based interpretations while avoiding unnecessary exclusion of valuable perspectives.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, allowing for the deliberate selection of practitioners with direct clinical engagement with the phenomenon under investigation. This sampling strategy facilitated the collection of rich, information-dense data aligned with the study's objectives.

Ethical Considerations:

The study adhered strictly to established ethical research standards. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any adverse consequences. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. All identifying information was removed during transcription to ensure anonymity, and the data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Data Analysis:

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analysis followed a systematic and iterative process comprising:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts,
2. Initial coding of meaningful data segments,
3. Organisation of codes into broader categories,
4. Development of themes reflecting recurring patterns, relationships, and professional interpretations, and
5. Review and refinement of themes to ensure internal coherence and analytic consistency.

NVivo facilitated efficient data management, systematic coding, and visualisation of thematic relationships. The final themes represented a critical synthesis of practitioners' collective insights into the emotional, behavioural, and social risks associated with social media addiction.

Problem Statement:

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed patterns of communication, identity formation, and social interaction. However, excessive and uncontrolled use has emerged as a growing mental health concern, particularly

among adolescents and young adults. While existing research has largely examined social media addiction from the perspectives of users, there remains limited qualitative exploration of mental health practitioners' clinical insights into its psychological risks.

In clinical settings, practitioners increasingly encounter clients presenting with anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, compulsive behaviours, emotional dysregulation, and social withdrawal associated with problematic social media use. Despite its rising clinical relevance, there is a notable lack of standardised assessment frameworks and evidence-based intervention guidelines for social media addiction within mental health practice. Exploring practitioners' perspectives is therefore essential to bridge this gap, enhance clinical understanding, and inform the development of contextually grounded assessment and intervention strategies.

Results and Findings:

Qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with mental health practitioners were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analysis yielded several interrelated themes reflecting practitioners' clinical interpretations of the psychological, behavioural, and social risks associated with social media addiction. Practitioners consistently conceptualised social media addiction as a multidimensional mental health concern, particularly salient among adolescents and young adults, rather than as an isolated behavioural issue.

High coding density across themes indicated that emotional vulnerability, peer-driven social dynamics, compulsive digital engagement, and maladaptive coping strategies play a central role in the development and maintenance of problematic social media use. Practitioners described these factors as mutually reinforcing, creating a cyclical pattern in which emotional distress both contributes to and is exacerbated by excessive online engagement. This interpretive framing aligns with behavioural addiction models emphasising emotional dysregulation, reinforcement processes, and impaired self-regulation (Andreevassen, 2015; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

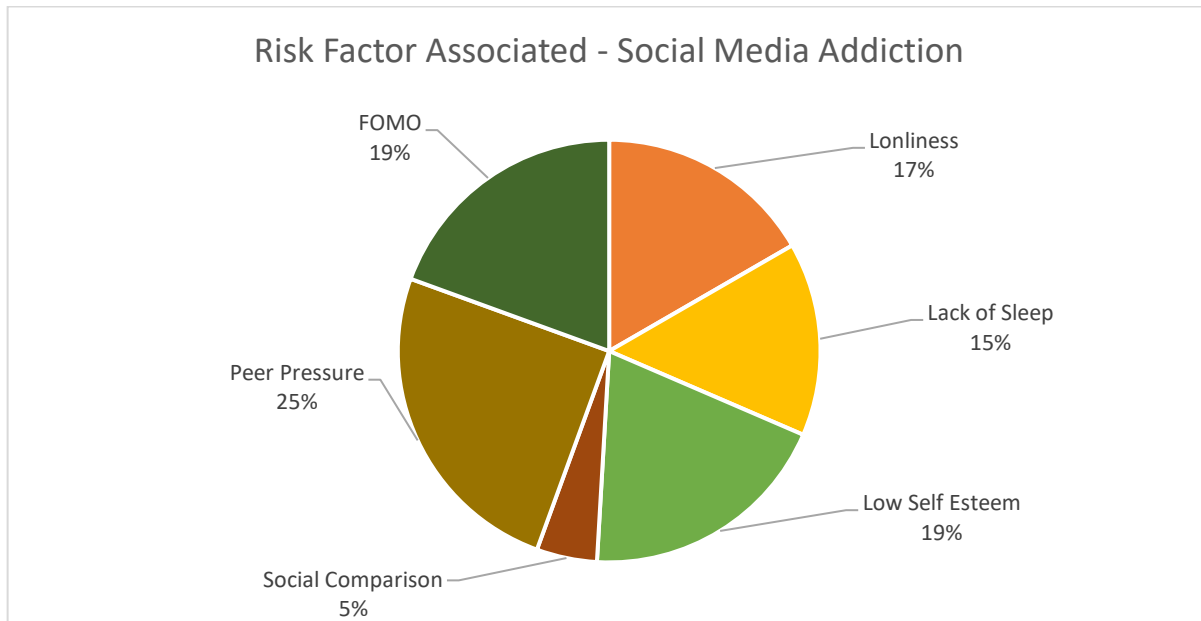
Table 1: Themes Identified by Mental Health Practitioners on Risk Factors Associated with Social Media Addiction

Theme	Coding References	Interpretation
Loneliness	18	Social media was frequently used as a substitute for unmet offline social connection.
Lack of Sleep	16	Night-time usage disrupted sleep patterns, contributing to emotional instability.
Low Self-Esteem	21	Online comparison and validation-seeking reduced perceived self-worth.
Social Comparison	5	Idealized online portrayals intensified feelings of inadequacy.
Peer Pressure	27	Fear of exclusion and need for acceptance strongly motivated excessive use.
Obsessive Behaviours	7	Repetitive checking served as a compulsive coping response.
Compulsive Behaviour	3	Continued use despite awareness of negative consequences.
Distraction	10	Social media functioned as avoidance from real-life stressors.

As shown in Table 1, Peer pressure, low self-esteem, and loneliness emerged as the most prominent themes based on coding frequency. Practitioners emphasised that these risk factors operate within a broader psychosocial context shaped by developmental vulnerability, social expectations, and emotional needs. These findings are consistent with prior qualitative

research highlighting fear of missing out (FOMO), validation-seeking, and social dependency as core drivers of problematic social media engagement (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2021; Jayadi & Pranata, 2021).

Figure 2: Proportional Distribution of Risk Factors Associated with Social Media Addiction Based on Thematic Coding



The relative emphasis of these risk factors is further illustrated in Figure 2, which presents a pie chart depicting the proportional distribution of themes based on coding frequency. Peer pressure constitutes the largest segment of the chart, reinforcing its central role in practitioners' accounts of excessive social media use. Substantial proportions are also represented by low self-esteem and fear of missing out (FOMO), highlighting the importance of emotional vulnerability and social validation in reinforcing compulsive engagement. Loneliness and sleep disturbance contribute meaningfully to the overall distribution, reflecting the emotional and behavioural consequences of prolonged and poorly regulated social media use. Although social comparison occupies a smaller segment of the chart, practitioners emphasised its clinical relevance, particularly in relation to repeated exposure to idealised online portrayals that intensify feelings of inadequacy.

Taken together, these findings situate social media addiction within a broader psychosocial and developmental context shaped by emotional needs, social expectations, and coping capacities. The results are consistent with existing qualitative research identifying FOMO, validation-seeking, and social dependency as key drivers of problematic social media engagement (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2021; Jayadi & Pranata, 2021).

Discussion:

The findings of the present study support existing literature suggesting that social media addiction is closely associated with emotional vulnerability and maladaptive coping strategies (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Mental health practitioners highlighted that adolescents and young adults are particularly susceptible due to ongoing identity formation, heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, and developmental transitions that intensify the need for belonging and validation.

Social comparison emerged as a central psychological mechanism underlying emotional distress. Practitioners observed that sustained exposure to curated and idealised online content promotes unrealistic self-evaluations, contributing to anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and self-critical cognitions. These clinical interpretations are consistent with empirical findings demonstrating the negative mental health impact of upward social comparison (Chou & Edge, 2012; Vogel et al., 2014).

Sleep disturbance was identified as a significant behavioural consequence of excessive social media use. Practitioners reported that late-night digital engagement disrupts circadian rhythms, exacerbating emotional dysregulation, irritability,

and cognitive fatigue. This pattern reflects addiction frameworks that emphasise reinforcement cycles, impaired self-control, and compulsive reward-seeking behaviours (Andreassen, 2015).

Notably, practitioners highlighted clinical challenges related to the absence of standardised diagnostic criteria and evidence-based intervention protocols for social media addiction. Consequently, clinicians often adapt therapeutic approaches designed for anxiety, depression, or impulse-control disorders. While such adaptations may offer partial benefits, practitioners expressed concern regarding the lack of disorder-specific frameworks addressing the unique features of digital addiction.

Conclusion:

This qualitative study provides in-depth insights into mental health practitioners' perspectives on the risks associated with social media addiction. The findings indicate that social media addiction is a complex, context-dependent psychological phenomenon shaped by emotional vulnerability, social dynamics, and behavioural reinforcement mechanisms. Key risk factors identified include loneliness, low self-esteem, peer pressure, social comparison, sleep disturbance, and compulsive digital behaviours. The study further highlights that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable and that clinicians face significant challenges due to the absence of standardised assessment tools and treatment guidelines. By foregrounding practitioners' interpretive accounts, the study contributes clinically relevant insights that may inform the development of more contextually grounded assessment and intervention strategies.

Clinical Implication:

The findings suggest that routine mental health assessments should incorporate systematic evaluation of digital behaviours to facilitate early identification of problematic social media use. Psychoeducation focusing on balanced, mindful engagement with social media should be integrated into therapeutic work, particularly with younger populations. Interventions targeting self-esteem enhancement, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping skills may reduce reliance on online validation. Additionally, therapeutic focus on sleep hygiene, boundary-setting, and structured digital detox strategies may help address behavioural dysregulation associated with excessive social media use.

Recommendations:

The study recommends the development of standardised clinical guidelines for the assessment and treatment of social media addiction to improve consistency and effectiveness in practice. Specialised training programmes should be introduced to enhance mental health professionals' competence in addressing digital addiction and technology-related psychological distress. Collaborative efforts among mental health services, educational institutions, and policymakers are essential to promote responsible digital engagement and preventive mental health strategies. Inclusion of social media addiction awareness within public mental health initiatives may further support early recognition and intervention at the community level.

Suggestions:

The findings suggest the value of integrating mixed-method and longitudinal approaches to better understand the developmental and maintaining factors of social media addiction. Consideration of cultural, contextual, and gender-related influences may further enhance the applicability of interventions. Clinically, greater emphasis is recommended on CBT-based and skills-focused interventions targeting emotional regulation, self-esteem, and adaptive coping. Inclusion of practitioners from diverse clinical and geographical contexts may strengthen the transferability of practice-based insights.

References

1. Adorjan, M., & Ricciardelli, R. (2021). *Smartphones, social media, and the social construction of youth addiction*. *Social Sciences*, *10*(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10040127>
2. Aksoy, M. E. (2018). A qualitative study on social media addiction. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *9*(32), 55–63.
3. Al-Menayes, J. J. (2015). Dimensions of social media addiction among university students in Kuwait. *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, *4*(1), 23–28. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.pbs.20150401.14>
4. Andreassen, C. S. (2015). Online social network site addiction: A comprehensive review. *Current Addiction Reports*, *2*(2), 175–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-015-0056-9>

5. Bakry, A. B., Abdelrahman, A. A., & Hassan, R. M. (2022). Social media use and loneliness among young adults: The mediating role of emotional support. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 39(6), 1581–1600.
6. Canoğulları, Ö. (2023). Social media addiction among psychological counselor candidates: Emotional experiences and implications. *Journal of Educational Technology & Online Learning*, 6(2), 412–425.
7. Chegeni, R., Shokri, O., & Sadeghi, A. (2023). Psychological vulnerabilities underlying social media addiction: A qualitative content analysis. *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, 18, 100515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.abrep.2023.100515>
8. Chou, H. T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). “They are happier and having better lives than I am”: The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others’ lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324>
9. Jayadi, U., & Pranata, D. (2021). Instagram addiction: Motives, emotional consequences, and social comparison. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 33(4), 183–194.
10. Junco, R., & Cotten, S. R. (2012). No A 4 U: The relationship between multitasking and academic performance. *Computers & Education*, 59(2), 505–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.12.023>
11. Karim, F., Oyewande, A. A., Abdalla, L. F., Chaudhry Ehsanullah, R., & Khan, S. (2020). Social media use and its connection to mental health: A systematic review. *Cureus*, 12(6), e8627. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.8627>
12. Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509–523. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268109>
13. Kuss, D. J., & Griffiths, M. D. (2017). Social networking sites and addiction: Ten lessons learned. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(3), 311. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030311>
14. Savci, M., & Aysan, F. (2016). Relationship between impulsivity, social media usage, and loneliness. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 5(2), 106–115. <https://doi.org/10.12973/edupij.2016.52.2>
15. Shukur, Z. H., Rahman, F. A., & Ismail, N. (2023). Social media addiction and psychological well-being among adolescents. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 12(1), 45–57.
16. Srivastava, U. (2023). Social media addiction and mental health outcomes among young adults. *Indian Journal of Mental Health*, 10(2), 98–110.
17. Tolan, B. (2023). University students’ lived experiences of excessive social media use: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(5), 645–661.
18. Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
19. Zhao, N., Zhou, G., & Wang, Y. (2022). Social media addiction and academic performance: The mediating role of mental health. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 127, 107036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107036>
20. Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509–523.
21. Srivastava, U. (2023). *The role of social media addiction on procrastination among adolescents in Delhi NCR*. *Journal of Social Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*.
22. Shukur, S. A. M., Syed Abu Bakar, S. M., Dzulkalnine, N., et al. (2023). Psychological and technology factors contributing to social media addiction. *Information Management and Business Review*, 15(4), 486–491.
23. Al-Menayes, J. (2015). *Dimensions of social media addiction among university students in Kuwait*. *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 4(1), 23–28. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.pbs.20150401.14>
24. Zhao, J., Jia, T., Wang, X., Xiao, Y., & Wu, X. (2022). *Risk factors associated with social media addiction: An exploratory study*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 837766. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.837766>
25. Bakry, H., Almater, A. A., Alslami, D. M., Ajaj, H. S., Alsowayan, R. A., Almutairi, A. F., & Almoayad, F. (2022). *Social media usage and loneliness among Princess Nourah University medical students*. *Middle East Current Psychiatry*, 29, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43045-022-00217-w>
26. Savci, M., & Aysan, F. (2016). *Relationship between impulsivity, social media usage, and loneliness*. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 5(2), 106–115. <https://doi.org/10.12973/edupij.2016.52.2>
27. Karim, F., Oyewande, A., Abdalla, L. F., Chaudhry Ehsanullah, R., & Khan, S. (2020). *Social media use and its connection to mental health: A systematic review*. *Cureus*, 12(6), e8627. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.8627>