Predictors of Adolescents' Social Media Engagement and Digital Addiction

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Abstract

The ways in which social media may affect adolescents' mental health and well-being have been intensively studied in the past decade, with studies pointing to the positive aspects and outcomes of online interactions, while a growing base of research seems to reinforce the opposite view. Several meta-analyses show associations between social media use, with its many definitions (time spent, frequency of use, engagement, appearance-focused use), depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, ADHD, social anxiety, eating disorders, and social factors. However, little is known about the directionality of these variables, and if, social media predicts negative mental health outcomes, or if it is otherwise. Moreover, when it comes to predicting social media use and digital addiction based on pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities, the literature is scarce. The purpose of the present study was to shed more light on the predictors of social media engagement and to further investigate the associations between social factors (bullying, help-seeking behaviors, stigma, social support), mental health outcomes (anxiety, depression, ADHD, eating disorders), social media engagement, and digital addiction. In line with the I-PACE model, suggesting that psychopathological and social factors have an important role in Internet addiction, and in line with existing research, linking mental health factors and social factors to digital behaviors, we hypothesized that psychopathological factors will be a significant predictor of (1) elevated social media engagement, and (2) digital addiction. This hypothesis was examined while accounting for demographic variables, and social factors (social support, bullying experiences, stigma, and help-seeking behavior). A total of 524 adolescents (51% females, 46.6% males, and 2.5% others) ages 15 to 19 years old (M = 17; SD = 0.90) completed the instrument. To test our hypothesis, we used hierarchical regression, entering demographics in the first step, then the social factors in the following four steps, and mental health variables in the last four steps. We found supporting evidence for an association between mental health factors, social media engagement, and digital addiction. Eating disorders (as the last hierarchical step) accounted for 21.7% of the social media engagement variance, and 32.3% of the digital addiction variance. Contrary to what we hypothesized, social factors were not associated with social media engagement.

The examination of the hypotheses provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between psychosocial factors and digital behaviors. These findings might help us to better understand the relationship between social media use, and mental health, which could lead us to design targeted interventions and effective measures to protect adolescents' use of digital environments. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of considering a comprehensive range of psychosocial factors in future research and intervention strategies aimed at mitigating the risks associated with problematic digital behaviors.

Keywords: social media engagement, digital addiction, mental health, social factors, predictors