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The Influence of Social Media on Young People: On Digital Addiction and Its Psychological Implications

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Abstract

This paper summarizes recent survey findings with previous psychological research to analyze the usage of social networking platforms in daily life and its implications for digital hygiene, self-regulation, and mental well-being. The study is particularly focused on populations susceptible to digital dependency, such as the young people.

The analysis reveals a strong tendency towards immediate and frequent social media engagement upon waking and before tasks, alongside a complex emotional landscape ranging from mood enhancement to feelings of sadness and irritability upon disconnection. Furthermore, a significant portion of the surveyed population demonstrates a struggle with controlling their social media use, including failed attempts at cessation and the prioritization of digital engagement over essential life functions like sleep.

Furthermore, the study employed the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) among 246 young adult respondents, revealing challenges with self-regulation and behavioral control. These findings collectively suggest a concerning trend of digital dependency, echoing warnings from researchers regarding attention degradation, compulsive usage, and the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities by digital platforms.

Keywords: social media, addiction, communication, young people, education

Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social networking sites (SNS) have become deeply interwoven into the fabric of daily life, transforming communication, information consumption, and social interaction. While offering numerous benefits, the pervasive presence of these platforms has raised significant concerns regarding their potential to increase dependency and negatively impact user well-being, attention management, and self-regulation. This paper draws upon survey results detailing user behaviors and perceptions related to social media use, while integrating these findings with external psychological research to illuminate the complex effects of the users' digital engagement. This paper also investigates the extent to which young adults demonstrate behavioral and emotional indicators of social media addiction. The main aim is to identify the prevalence of addictive social media behaviors and discuss their implications for the mental health and well-being of the users.

Pervasive Digital Habits and the Gateway Phenomenon

The proliferation of digital technologies has catalyzed deep changes in the behavioral patterns of young individuals. One significant development is the formation of "pervasive digital habits", frequent, often automatic engagement with digital devices, applications, and social platforms. These habits may function as gateways towards more problematic or addictive forms of social media use among young adults.

Pervasive digital habits manifest in various behaviors, such as frequent checking of digital devices, responding to notifications, switching between apps, and habitual use of social networks in s.c. non-optimal contexts (e.g., during study, before sleep). Spencer et al. (2011) explored checking habits and demonstrated how brief, repetitive inspections of dynamic content, often in response to micro-rewards or cues, reinforce behavior and increase overall usage. Meanwhile, mobile technology habits have been linked with individual differences in impulse control and preference for immediate over delayed rewards (delay discounting), indicating that cognitive and affective traits moderate the intensity and risk of these habits transitioning to maladaptive use.

The gateway phenomenon refers to the idea that habitual, relatively benign digital behaviors may pave the way for more compulsive or harmful engagement with social media. For young people, this process often begins with pervasive use, such as frequent smartphone checking or moderate social media involvement. It gradually

escalates through deeper psychological dependence, mood regulation through social media, withdrawal symptoms, and conflict in life domains. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies suggest that higher general screen exposure or pervasive digital habits are significantly associated with poorer sleep quality, increased psychological distress, and lifestyle disruptions.

Furthermore, problematic social media use among adolescents has been linked to negative eating habits, reduced physical activity, and risk behaviors such as smoking or alcohol use.

In summary, the gateway phenomenon states that pervasive digital habits are not only incidental or neutral features of young people's lives, but potential precursors to more harmful patterns of social media addiction. Understanding this trajectory has clear implications for prevention and education. Interventions aimed at reducing preemptive engagement (e.g., limiting notifications, mindful checking, etc.) and strengthening self-regulation may help interrupt the gateway process toward addictive behavior.

Methodology of the Survey

Given that young individuals represent one of the most active demoFigureic groups on social media platforms, concerns regarding social networking addiction have become increasingly relevant to their developmental processes. The rapid expansion of digital interactions has raised important questions about compulsive usage patterns and their psychological implications, particularly in relation to personal, social, and professional domains. To address these concerns, the study adopted a quantitative, survey-based methodology to examine the extent of social networking addiction among young adults.

The research sample was composed of 246 young adults, aged 18–29, primarily university students in North Macedonia. A convenience sampling method was used due to accessibility and online data collection constraints. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents provided informed consent. Young adulthood represents a formative developmental stage during which individuals actively establish social networks, construct personal and professional identities, and rely extensively on digital media for communication, entertainment, and educational purposes. Investigating social networking addiction within this group, therefore, provides critical insights into its potential effects on mental health and overall well-being.

The primary instrument employed was the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) instrument, which demonstrated high internal consistency. This validated tool, developed by Shahnawaz and Rehman (2020), assesses multiple dimensions of excessive social media use and dependency. Data collection was conducted through an online survey, chosen for its efficiency in reaching a large number of participants while ensuring both accessibility and anonymity. The questionnaire utilized a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", allowing respondents to indicate the degree of their engagement in behaviors associated with social networking. This scaling method enables a systematic analysis of behavioral and emotional patterns characteristic of addiction, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse.

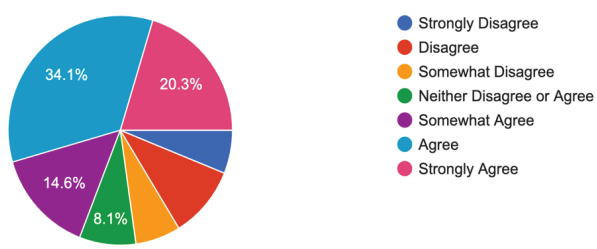
By identifying the prevalence and patterns of addictive social media behaviors, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital behavior and psychological health.

Survey Results

The survey results highlight a strong inclination among respondents to engage with social networking sites at the very start of their day and prior to initiating other activities, suggesting deeply rooted digital habits.

Figure 1.

Summarized results for the statement: I go to social networking sites instantly after waking up in the morning

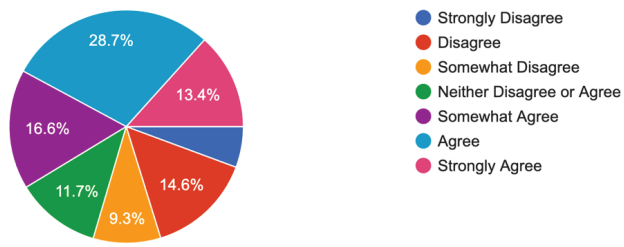


The survey results reveal a strong tendency among respondents to engage with social networking sites immediately upon waking. Out of 246 participants, a significant majority, approximately 69%, reported agreeing to some extent with the statement "I go to social networking sites instantly after waking up in the morning." Specifically, 34.1% agreed, and 20.3% strongly agreed, while an additional 14.6% somewhat agreed. In contrast, only a small fraction of respondents

expressed disagreement, with less than 25% falling into the "somewhat disagree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" categories. These findings suggest that checking social media first thing in the morning is a normalized and potentially habitual behavior for a large portion of the population.

Figure 2.

Summarized results for the statement: I check my social networking account before starting any task or activity



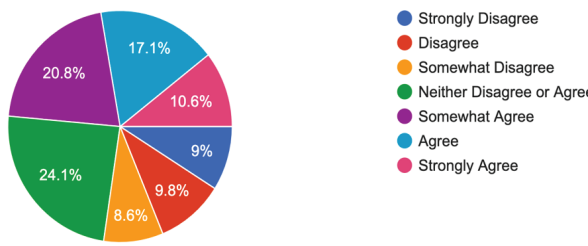
The data from the second survey statement, "I check my social networking account before starting any task or activity", provides further evidence of pervasive digital habits among respondents. Out of 247 individuals, a majority indicated varying levels of agreement with the statement. 28.7% agreed and 13.4% strongly agreed, totaling over 42% of participants who consciously acknowledge engaging with social media prior to beginning any form of task or activity. An additional 16.6% somewhat agreed, reinforcing the notion that a significant portion of users have integrated social media into the initial stages of their daily routine. On the other hand, approximately 24% of respondents expressed disagreement to varying degrees, suggesting a smaller, yet notable segment that resists this behavior. These results suggest that for many individuals, checking social media has become a psychological or behavioral gateway to productivity, possibly a form of digital priming or procrastination. This raises questions about attention management, cognitive dependency, and the psychological impact of pre-task digital engagement, particularly in contexts where focus and discipline are essential.

Combined, these findings suggest a concerning trend of digital dependency. The act of checking social media has, for many, become a default behavior at the start of both the day and new activities. This aligns with recent psychological research on habit formation, cognitive offloading, and the role of dopamine reinforcement in smartphone use. According to Alter (2017), digital platforms exploit psychological

vulnerabilities to form habitual loops, often triggered by cues such as waking up or facing a task. Similarly, Newport (2019) warns of "attention residue" where frequent, low-effort digital engagements degrade focus and deep work capacity. This behavior may reflect a broader societal shift where social validation, digital presence, and algorithmic engagement take precedence over mindful routines. The implications are significant, not only for productivity but also for mental health, self-regulation, and emotional well-being.

Figure 3.

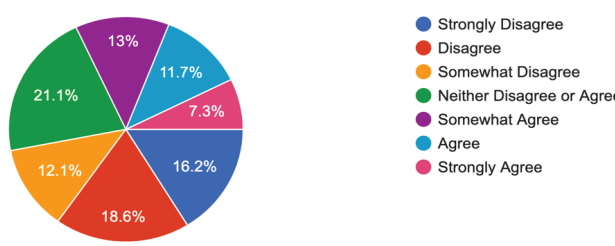
Summarized results for the statement: Social networking helps me lift my mood.



This survey statement indicates a mixed but generally positive sentiment regarding social media's impact on mood. A significant portion of respondents agreed that social networking helps lift their mood, with 20.8% "Somewhat Agree" and 17.1% "Agree," totaling 37.9%. An additional 10.6% "Strongly Agree," bringing the total who agree to some extent to 48.5%. Conversely, a considerable number expressed disagreement: 9.8% "Strongly Disagree," 9% "Disagree," and 8.6% "Somewhat Disagree," for a combined 27.4%. The largest single group of respondents, 24.1%, selected "Neither Disagree nor Agree," indicating a substantial portion of the population holds a neutral stance on this issue.

Figure 4.

Summarized results for the statement: I feel sad when I am unable to log in to social networking sites.

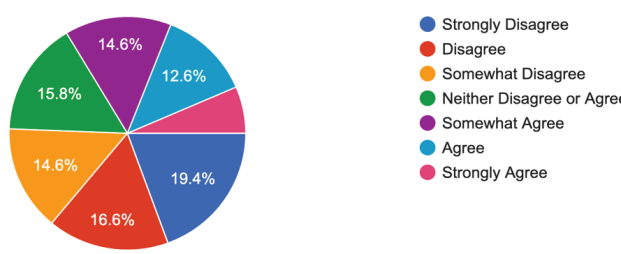


The data from this item indicate that respondents experience mixed emotional responses when disconnected from social media. This particular question explores feelings of sadness when unable to access social networking sites. A notable percentage of respondents indicated some degree of agreement with this statement: 13% "Somewhat Agree," 11.7% "Agree," and 7.3% "Strongly Agree" collectively representing 32% of participants. This suggests that a meaningful segment of the population may experience negative emotional states when disconnected from social media. In contrast, a larger proportion of respondents disagreed, with 16.2% "Strongly Disagree," 18.6% "Disagree," and 12.1% "Somewhat Disagree," totalling 46.9%. Similar to the first survey, a significant number of participants, 21.1%, were neutral, selecting "Neither Disagree or Agree."

The comparative analysis of the two previous charts suggests a nuanced relationship between social networking and user emotion. While a large portion of the population finds social media beneficial for mood enhancement, a smaller but still significant group experiences negative feelings of sadness when access is denied. These findings highlight both the perceived positive benefits and the potential for emotional dependency associated with social networking. Further research could explore the characteristics of individuals within the different response categories to better understand the factors influencing these varied emotional responses.

Figure 5.

Summarized results for the statement: I become irritable whenever I cannot log in to social networking sites.

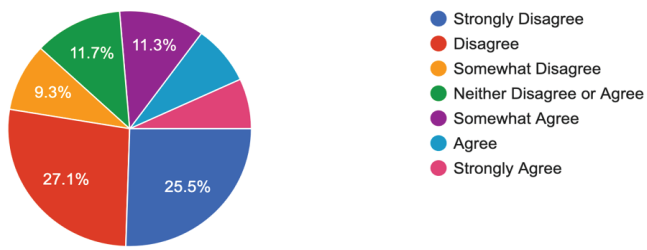


With the statement, "I become irritable whenever I cannot log in to social networking sites," the emotional impact of social media inaccessibility was analyzed. The responses are distributed across a spectrum, with a notable portion of participants expressing a degree of irritability. Specifically, 14.6% "Somewhat Agree," 12.6% "Agree," and 9.4% "Strongly Agree," which collectively represent 36.6% of

the respondents who experience some form of irritation. This indicates that a significant minority of the survey population may be experiencing withdrawal-like symptoms when disconnected from social media. Conversely, a larger proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement: 19.4% "Strongly Disagree," 16.6% "Disagree," and 14.6% "Somewhat Disagree," totaling 50.6%. The remaining 15.8% of respondents took a neutral stance, selecting "Neither Disagree nor Agree."

Figure 6.

Summarized results for the statement: I try to hide the time I spend on social networking sites.

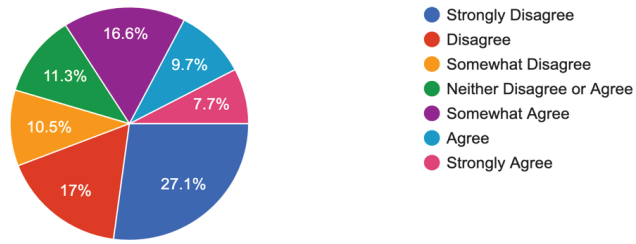


The survey statement, "I try to hide the time I spend on social networking", investigates a behavioral dimension of social media use. The data reveals a strong inclination among respondents not to hide their social media usage. A substantial majority expressed some form of disagreement with the statement: 25.5% "Strongly Disagree," 27.1% "Disagree," and 9.3% "Somewhat Disagree," for a combined total of 61.9%. This suggests that the majority of the population surveyed feels little need to conceal their social media activity. In contrast, a smaller segment of the population indicated that they do attempt to hide their usage: 11.3% "Somewhat Agree," 7.3% "Agree," and 4.9% "Strongly Agree," totalling 23.5%. The remaining 11.7% of respondents maintained a neutral position.

The comparative analysis of the two charts highlights a potential discrepancy between emotional dependency and outward behavior. While over a third of respondents experience some level of irritability when unable to access social media, a much smaller proportion feel the need to hide their usage from others. This could imply that while the emotional attachment to social media is notable for some, it does not necessarily translate into a secretive behavior pattern for the majority of the population. Further academic inquiry could explore the motivations behind this behavior and the demoFigureic factors associated with each response group.

Figure 7.

Summarized results for the statement: I ignore my sleep because I have/want to be on social networking sites.



This statement explored the potential for social media use to interfere with essential life functions, such as sleep. This chart indicates that for a segment of the population, social networking has a negative impact on sleep patterns. The percentage of those who agree with the statement is as follows: 16.6% "Somewhat Agree," 9.7% "Agree," and 7.7% "Strongly Agree," totaling 34%. This suggests that a significant minority of the respondents are prioritizing social media use over sleep. A larger portion of the respondents, however, disagreed with the statement: 27.1% "Strongly Disagree," 17% "Disagree," and 10.5% "Somewhat Disagree," for a combined total of 54.6%. The remaining 11.3% of respondents held a neutral view.

Figure 8.

Summarized results for the statement: I have tried to stop using social networking sites but have failed.

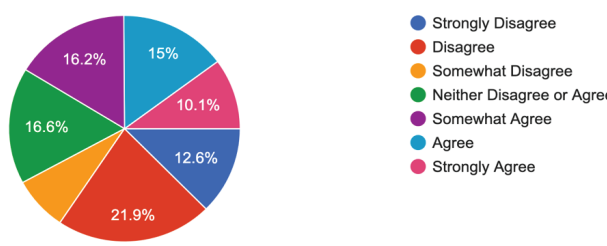


Figure 8 shows the answers to the survey statement, "I have tried to stop using social networking sites but have failed," which examines self-perceived lack of control over social media usage. The data reveals a significant portion of the population

that has attempted and failed to reduce their social media use. The combined percentage of those who agree with this statement is substantial: 16.2% "Somewhat Agree," 15% "Agree," and 10.1% "Strongly Agree," which totals 41.3%. This suggests that a notable segment of the surveyed population may be experiencing difficulties in controlling their social media habits. Conversely, a majority of respondents indicated they have not had this experience, with 12.6% "Strongly Disagree," 21.9% "Disagree," and 13.5% "Somewhat Disagree," combining to 48% who disagree. A smaller proportion, 16.6%, remained neutral, selecting "Neither Disagree nor Agree."

In sum, there is a concerning pattern of social media use for a considerable portion of the surveyed population. While a substantial minority reports an inability to successfully reduce their social media use, a similar percentage also admits to sacrificing sleep for the purpose of being online. These findings point to the existence of a population segment that exhibits signs of compulsive social media use, characterized by failed attempts at cessation and the disruption of a basic biological need.

Figure 9.

Summarized results for the statement: I am unable to cut down the time I spend on social networking sites.

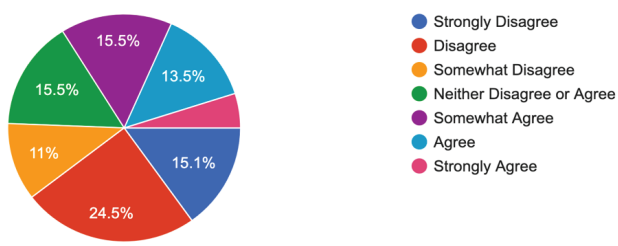
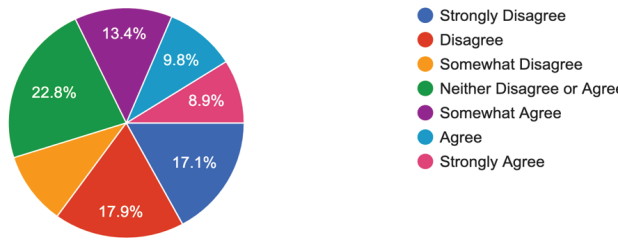


Figure 9 presents a strong indication that a significant portion of the survey group struggles with regulating their social media use. A substantial number of respondents agreed with this statement: 15.5% "Somewhat Agree," 13.5% "Agree," and a smaller 6.4% "Strongly Agree," totalling 35.4%. This suggests that over one-third of the participants perceive themselves as lacking control over their social media consumption. Conversely, a larger portion of the respondents expressed disagreement: 15.1% "Strongly Disagree," 24.5% "Disagree," and 11% "Somewhat Disagree," combining to 50.6%. The remaining 15.5% of respondents held a neutral position.

Figure 10.

Summarized results for the statement: My repeated attempts to reduce the time I spend on social networking sites have failed.



The statement: "My repeated attempts to reduce the time I spend on social networking sites have failed," delved deeper into the behavioral aspect of this struggle. The responses here are more varied, with a large neutral group. Those who agreed with the statement represent a considerable minority: 13.4% "Somewhat Agree," 9.8% "Agree," and 8.9% "Strongly Agree," totalling 32.1%. This figure indicates that nearly one-third of the respondents have a history of unsuccessful attempts to moderate their social media use. A similar-sized group of respondents disagreed with the statement: 17.1% "Strongly Disagree," 17.9% "Disagree," and 10% "Somewhat Disagree," combining to 45%. The largest single group of respondents in this survey, at 22.8%, selected "Neither Disagree or Agree," suggesting that many participants have not yet attempted to reduce their usage or do not feel strongly about the success of their attempts.

In conclusion, a notable segment of the population struggles with controlling their social media usage. The results from the chart, where 35.4% of respondents state an inability to cut down their time, are largely consistent with the 32.1% in the next chart who report failed attempts to do so. The discrepancy lies in the neutral response group of the second chart, which is significantly larger, potentially due to a difference in wording that focuses on "repeated attempts" rather than a general inability. These findings suggest a pattern of compulsive social media use among a considerable portion of the population, characterized by both the desire to reduce usage and the inability to do so effectively.

Key Findings of the Research

Overall, the data demonstrate a consistent pattern of habitual and emotionally charged engagement with social media, with one-third to two-fifths of respondents showing signs of dependency or failed self-regulation attempts.

Despite valuable insights, this study has several limitations, including self-report bias, lack of age segmentation, and reliance on descriptive statistics without inferential analysis. Future research should employ mixed methods or longitudinal designs to strengthen the findings.

The key findings of this research align with recent psychological research on habit formation and cognitive dependency. As Alter (2017) posits, digital platforms are designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, leading to the formation of habitual loops often triggered by common cues like waking up or facing a new task. Furthermore, Newport (2019) warns about "attention residue", where frequent, low-effort digital engagements can degrade focus and deep work capacity. This pattern of immediate and pre-task social media engagement reflects a broader societal shift where "social validation, digital presence, and algorithmic engagement take precedence over mindful routines," impacting productivity, mental health, and self-regulation

The relationship between social networking and user emotion is complex and nuanced, encompassing both perceived positive benefits and the potential for negative emotional dependency. While a larger proportion of respondents do not experience negative emotions, the existence of a substantial group that does underscores the "potential for emotional dependency associated with social networking". These findings suggest that for some, social media access is intertwined with emotional well-being, leading to distress when access is disrupted.

The main findings of this study highlight several key areas of concern regarding social media use:

1. *Pervasive and Habitual Engagement- Social media has become a deeply ingrained habit for many*: A significant majority, approximately 69%, engage with social networking sites immediately after waking up. Over 42% of users also check their accounts before starting any other task or activity, suggesting that for many, social media acts as a "psychological or behavioral gateway" to productivity or a form of procrastination. These habits align with research on digital platforms exploiting psychological vulnerabilities to create habitual loops. It is important to note that while

many respondents exhibit habitual engagement, this does not necessarily equate to clinical addiction. Rather, it indicates a continuum of dependency behaviors that warrant early intervention.

2. *Complex Emotional Dependency- The emotional impact of social media is multifaceted:* A large portion of users (48.5%) feel that social networking helps lift their mood. Despite the mood-enhancing benefits, a significant minority experiences negative emotional states when unable to access social media. Approximately 32% feel sad, and 36.6% become irritable when they cannot log in, indicating withdrawal-like symptoms for a substantial group.

3. *Struggle with Self-Regulation and Control*: A considerable segment of the population demonstrates a lack of control over their social media consumption. 41.3% of respondents reported having tried to stop using social media but failed. Similarly, 32.1% confirmed that their repeated attempts to reduce time spent on these platforms were unsuccessful.

4. *Prioritizing Social Media*: This lack of control extends to disrupting essential life functions. 34% of users admitted that social networking negatively impacts their sleep patterns, prioritizing online engagement over a basic biological need

These findings collectively suggest a concerning pattern of compulsive usage that degrades attention, impacts emotional well-being, and overrides self-regulation mechanisms.

Conclusions

The survey results, when considered alongside established psychological frameworks, give a comprehensive picture of the profound impact of social media on individuals' lives. The habits of checking social media immediately upon waking and before tasks show a deep-seated digital dependency that can degrade focus and hurt mental well-being. While social media offers mood-enhancing benefits for some, a significant portion experiences negative emotional states, including sadness and irritability upon disconnection, indicating potential emotional dependency and withdrawal-like symptoms. Crucially, a considerable segment of the population struggles with self-regulation, exhibiting failed attempts to reduce social media use and prioritizing it over essential functions like sleep

The survey findings, paint a clear picture of the profound and often problematic integration of social media into daily life. A deep-seated digital dependency is

prevalent, characterized by the compulsive checking of social media upon waking and before engaging in other activities. This behavior can degrade mental focus and overall well-being. This aligns with warnings from researchers like Newport (2019) about "attention residue" and Alter (2017) regarding the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities by digital platforms. While social media may offer mood-enhancing benefits, there is a significant potential for emotional dependency. A considerable number of users experience negative emotions such as sadness and irritability when disconnected, which are indicative of withdrawal-like symptoms. For many individuals, social media use has moved beyond mindful interaction to become a compulsive behavior. This is evidenced by a widespread struggle with self-regulation, demonstrated by failed attempts to reduce usage and the prioritization of digital engagement over essential functions like sleep.

These findings suggest that for many, social media engagement has surpassed mindful interaction to become a compulsive behavior, indicative of "early warning signs of social media addiction".

The implications of these trends are significant, extending beyond individual productivity and attention management to broader issues of mental health, self-regulation, and emotional well-being, particularly among young people who are growing up deeply immersed in digital environments. The findings reveal early warning signs of social media addiction for a notable portion of the population and underscore the need for further academic inquiry into user dynamics, with the goal of developing effective strategies that promote healthier and more mindful digital habits.

The findings highlight the urgent need for digital literacy programs and educational initiatives that promote self-regulation and mindfulness in technology use. Institutions should integrate discussions on digital hygiene and attention management into curricula to mitigate the risks of compulsive social media behavior among young people.

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