

Social Media Addiction and Empathy among Emerging Adults

Aashita Kishor Bhojak¹, Vigraanth Bapu K. G.²

¹Student M.Sc. Psychology, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College Autonomous, Bengaluru

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College Autonomous, Bengaluru

Corresponding author: Aashita Kishor Bhojak

Email – aashitabhojak164@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: The current study aims to find the correlation between social media addiction and empathy among emerging adults ranging from the age 16-24. It also aims to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the empathy and social media addiction with respect to age and gender.

Methodology: The current study aims to find the correlation between social media addiction and empathy among emerging adults ranging from the age 16-24. It also aims to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the empathy and social media addiction with respect to age and gender.

Results: The results suggested that there is no correlation between social media addiction and empathy amongst emerging adults. When empathy was compared between males and females who are addicted to social media, there was a significant difference, but when compared between the age groups of 16-24 years, there was no significant difference. The researcher also found that there was no significant difference in social media addiction with respect to both gender and age.

Conclusion: Out of the five hypotheses of this study, four of them were accepted. No significant correlation between social media addiction and empathy was found. Further studies are needed in this direction.

Keywords: Social media addiction, Empathy, Emerging adulthood, Social Media.

(Paper received – 13th May 2021, Peer review completed – 19th June 2021, Accepted – 28th June 2021)

INTRODUCTION

It is no doubt that a human cannot function without the internet in this age of digitalization and modern technology. The ease at getting whatever information you wish to get, is right in the palm of the person and within fraction of seconds a lot of digital activity is being done right from checking for texts from your loved ones or from work to infinite scrolling on social media and other applications that provide news and the current updates of the world. Research which investigates the relationship between social media and empathy are however, not receiving much scholarly attention [1]. Social media is a platform which is provided to the users where they can stay connected to their friends, families, colleagues and share about their life online.

Social Media and Addiction

A lot of maladaptive and addictive behaviour has come to picture when the topic about social media arises. The extensive online use at the expense of missing school or work, troubled in identifying one's own self, being a bully victim, accessing restricted content, being in a constant mindset of competing with others and the list goes on and on. Addiction is something which has caused the person to get into a state of being where no exposure or very little exposure of a particular phenomenon can provoke or evoke unusual behaviours ranging from being avoidant about it to being very aggressive about not getting enough. Andreassen and Pallesen define Social Media Addiction as *"being overly concerned about Social networking sites while a strong motivation drives them to use social networking sites, and to devote so much time that it impairs other social activities,*

studies/job, interpersonal relationships, and/or psychological health and well-being" [2]. The main reasons of social media addiction was found to be its excessive use and being unable to control the use of it [2].

Empathy

According to Riggio [3], empathic social skills is a key aspect of empathy which denotes one's ability and skills to encode, decode, and regulate communication. Empathy is a fundamental process through which people interact [4] and connect with others [5]. Empathy is like a tool that helps us relate to others [6]. Whereas Aronson believes that empathy is our ability to experience pain after noticing someone else in pain [7]. Social media use has no doubt given emotional support, self-expression, and community building especially in late adulthood and early adolescence, but it does have certain negative effects too [8]. A decreased empathetic tendency brings with itself the disruption of the psycho-social harmony [9]. Though previous researches have conducted studies to find the link between social media addiction and empathy, some studies do suggest that there is a low relationship between empathy and internet addiction [10].

Emerging Adulthood

A relatively new concept of human development known as the Emerging Adulthood, a period from the late teens through the twenties which is between adolescence and young adulthood has been introduced by Arnett [11]. The purpose of doing so was to give more space to the teenagers turning into adults for self-exploration and trying to search self-identity. The advances in social cognition and higher-level moral reasoning development happens during adolescence and emerging adulthood, at a cognitive level. This gives rise to an increasing amount of consideration for multiple perspectives and empathy [12-13]. It has been identified as a time of identity exploration (areas such as love, work, and views of the world), instability (residence changes), feeling in-between (in this conflict of whether to hold the responsibilities of an adult despite of yet being a child), being self-focused, and lastly feeling immense positivity for future possibilities [14-15].

Most of the research find link between internet addiction, smart phone addiction, problematic internet use and empathy, but a consistent and reliable finding about the relationship between social media addiction and empathy is yet to be found. There has also been past research that state the relationship of internet use and cyberbullying and how that affects the empathy among early adolescence and late adulthood.

Considering all this, the researcher has further tried to investigate the association between social media addiction and empathy in emerging adults and how different are this phenomenon with respect to age and gender.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study made use of correlational comparative non-experimental research design with a quantitative approach. It examined the relationship between empathy and social media addiction. Also, the comparison of the variables was done with respect to gender and age.

Objectives

- To study the relationship between social media addiction and empathy in emerging adults.
- To find social media addiction with respect to age and gender.
- To compare the empathy in people who are addicted to the social media with respect to gender and age.

Hypotheses

H₀1: There will be no significant difference in the relationship between social media addiction and empathy in emerging adults.

H₀2a: There will be no significant difference in empathy between males and females who are addicted to social media.

H₀2b: There will be no significant difference in empathy between young emerging adulthood (16-19 years) and late emerging adulthood (20-24 years) who are addicted to social media.

H₀2c: There will be no significant difference in social media addiction between males and females.

H₀2d: There will be no significant difference in social media addiction between young emerging adulthood and late emerging adulthood.

Ethical Consideration

The name of the participants was kept as an option and no participant was forced to participate in this study. For the participants below eighteen, consent was taken from their parents to let them participate in the study. Confidentiality was maintained.

Sampling Procedure

Among the 332 participants, 125 were males and 207 were females. The questionnaire was distributed using google forms and non-probability purposive sampling technique was used since there was a target population of a particular age group from where the information had to be collected.

Inclusion Criteria:

The study consisted of participants of age group of 16-24 years. The participants should be well verse with the English language to fill out the form. Both males and females were included for comparison purposes.

Exclusion Criteria:

After the scoring of the social media addiction scale, the participants were categorized based on their addiction, ones with “not addicted at all” were removed from the sample. Geographical location wasn't taken into consideration.

Tools used for the Study

Social Media Addiction Scale- Student Form [SMAS-SF]: [16] The Social Media Addiction Scale-Student Form (SMAS-SF) measures Social Media Addiction. It has 29 items and 4 subscales which measure different dimensions related to social media addiction. They are Virtual Tolerance, Virtual Communication, Virtual Problem and Virtual Information. It uses a 5 point Likert scale where 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor Disagree, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree. There are no reverse items in this scale. Higher scores indicate that the individual perceives themselves as “social media addicted”. The range of scores are divided into 5 levels which are “Not addicted”, “Low Level Addicted”, “Medium Level Addicted”, “High Level Addicted and “Very High Level Addicted”.

Basic Empathy Scale- BES: The Basic Empathy Scale by Jolliffe and Farrington, is a 5-point Likert scale which was designed to measure the two aspects of empathy- affective and cognitive empathy. The ratings were as follows: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neither agree nor Disagree, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree. The reverse scoring in this tool is for item numbers- 1, 6, 7, 8, 13, 18, 19, 20. The Cronbach's alpha when measured for internal consistency was found to be .716, which is acceptable to be used as a reliable and valid tool for use [17].

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

After the collection of the data, it was entered into SPSS for the purpose of doing the statistical analysis. The descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were performed. A normality test was conducted to check whether the data is normally distributed or not, and after viewing the p-value of the normality test, it was found out that the sample was normally distributed and hence furthermore, parametric tests were conducted to analyse the data.

RESULTS

There were 332 participants and out of those, there were 37.87% male (N=125) participants and 62.12% female (N=205) participants. The age group of 16-19 years consisted of 40.06% (N=133) participants and the age group of 20-24 years consisted of 59.93% (N=199) participants. After the collection of the data, the descriptive statistics was calculated. Furthermore, descriptive and inferential statistics were done to check the hypotheses. The results of the hypotheses are mentioned below.

Relationship between Social Media Addiction and Empathy in Emerging adults (Table 1)

Significance of relationship between Social Media Addiction (SMA) and Empathy

	N	M	SD	r	p
SMA	332	77.37	14.754	-0.25	0.655
Empathy	332	75.10	9.578		

Note: SMA= Social Media Addiction, N= Sample size, M= Mean, S.D= Standard Deviation, r=Pearson correlation coefficient

Table 1 describes the correlation between the two variables. After performing the Pearson correlation test, the r value was found out to be (r =-0.25), and the p value was (p=0.655) which was found to be statistically insignificant, meaning that there is no relationship between social media addiction and empathy in emerging adulthood. Hence, we accept the Null Hypothesis.

Empathy between males and females who are addicted to Social Media (Table 2)

Empathy	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Males	125	72.29	9.439	-4.262**	330	0.01
Females	207	76.80	9.279			

Note: N= Sample size, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, df= Degree of Freedom, *p< 0.05, **p

Table 2 shows the significant difference in empathy among social media addicted emerging adults between males and females. To find the statistical significance of the difference between the two means, a t-test was conducted, and the t value was obtained. The t-value was -4.262 and the p value was found out to be 0.01, which is statistically significant at 0.01 level of significance. This means that there is a significant difference in the empathy with respect who males and females who are addicted to social media. Thus, we reject the Null Hypothesis.

Empathy between Young Emerging Adulthood (YEA) (16-19 years) and Late Emerging Adulthood (LEA) (20-24 years) who are addicted to social media (Table 3).

Empathy	N	M	SD	t	df	p
YEA	133	75.82	9.233	1.120	330	0.263
LEA	199	74.62	9.796			

Note: YEA= Young Emerging Adulthood, LEA= Late Emerging Adulthood, N= Sample Size, M

Table 3 shows the significant difference in empathy of emerging adults who are addicted to the social media between young emerging adulthood (16-19 years) and late emerging adulthood (20-24 years). After conducting the t-test, the obtained t-value was found out to be (t=1.120) and the p value was (p= 0.263) which was found to be statistically insignificant. This means that there is no difference in the empathy of emerging adults with respect to age. And so, we accept the Null Hypothesis.

Social Media Addiction between males and females (Table 3)

SMA	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Males	125	77.70	14.963	0.323	330	0.747
Females	207	77.16	14.658			

Note: SMA= Social Media Addiction, N= Sample Size, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, df= Degree of Freedom.

Table 4 describes the significant difference in social media addiction between males and females. To find the statistical significance of the difference between the two obtained means, a t-test was conducted. The t-value was found to be ($t=0.323$) and the p-value was ($p=0.747$) which was not statistically significant. It is then inferred that there is no significant difference in social media addiction between males and females. Hence, we accept the Null Hypothesis.

Social Media Addiction (SMA) between Young Emerging Adulthood (YEA) & Late Emerging Adulthood (LEA) (Table 4)

SMA	N	M	SD	t	df	p
YEA	133	76.38	14.147	-0.993	330	0.321
LEA	199	78.03	15.145			

Note: SMA=Social Media Addiction, YEA= Young Emerging Adulthood, LEA= Late Emerging Adulthood, N= Sample Size, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, df= Degree of Freedom.

Table 5 displays the significant difference in social media addiction between Young Emerging Adults and Late Emerging Adults. The computed t-value was found out to be ($t= -0.993$) and the p value was ($p= 0.321$) which was found to be statistically insignificant. It means that there is no significant difference in social media addiction between young emerging adults and late emerging adults. Thus, we accept the Null Hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to investigate the correlation between empathy and social media addiction. As a result it was found that there is no significant relationship between social media addiction and empathy. This result is not consistent with any study so far since all the past research state that there is at least some association or relationship between social media addiction and empathy. But there was a study by Alloway and others [18] in which he found that there was no relation between Facebook use and Empathetic concern which was a subscale from IRI, reflecting sympathy. It can be possible that the negative influence of social media or its relationship might not be visible in the sample which was taken for this study, but maybe in some other population.

This research also found that there was a significant difference in empathy with respect to gender, that is, females who are addicted to social media tend to show higher empathy as compared to males who are addicted to the social media. This result disapproved the hypothesis, but are consistent with past research by Derntl and others [19] who found in his study that western females tend to describe themselves as more empathetic than males. It also is consistent with a study done by Davis, where females scored higher than males in empathy subscales, except for perspective-talking [20]. Also Chae along with his colleagues found that females are more likely to use social media as a consequence of experiencing the feelings of emptiness when their social needs are not fully met in real life, which may increase the possibility of Social media addiction [20].

Another finding of this research includes that there is no significant difference in empathy in emerging adults with social media addiction with respect to age. It means that when age groups were compared on empathy, there was no difference found, meaning that empathy is equal among social media addicted emerging adults and there is no change as the age of the group increases. This can be because the researcher hadn't collected any demographic details of the participants other than the age and gender. If demographic variables like

socioeconomic status, geographical location etc. would be taken, it would have been easier to justify why this particular result was obtained.

The research also found that there is no significance difference in the social media addiction with respect to gender. This indicates that social media addiction in males is equal to social media addiction in females. Even this finding isn't consistent with any past research where they have found that there is a difference in social media addiction as compared to males. Research in the past suggest that females generally have a higher tendency for getting addicted to the social media with respect to interpersonal relationship orientations [20]. This might have also happened since the sample size of the current study had more of females and lesser males, due to which equating them would not be possible at a statistical level.

Lastly the research findings indicate that there is no significant difference in social media addiction with respect to age. It means the amount of addiction observed in young emerging adults is equal to the amount of addiction seen in late emerging adults. The researcher believes that this might have happened due to the difference in the population context of the study. Most of the studies done in the past about social media addiction are all western countries based, where factors like insecure attachment styles, narcissism, bullying, casual dating, etc. can be some of the factors which can lead to social media addiction. This study consisted most of the sample from India, which in its own cultural background gives evidence to the importance of family and priorities given to education and career of an individual that the addiction wouldn't be to an extent of harming or hindering one's own well-being. So, the researcher had considered the age 16 and 17 also which isn't the age that isn't included in the emerging adulthood, but the researcher wanted to observe the differences in early teenage and late adulthood. Since it's the early years of involving into a social context in India, therefore the participants of that age might have shown mild addiction. Also, the sample didn't have equal number of participants in each age group, that is, the late emerging adults were more in number as compared to young emerging adults, and so equating them would not have been statistically possible.

Limitations

The researcher had not collected enough demographic details of the participants. This information could have given a base to the research findings obtained, that the source of the particular finding might be possible due to certain demographic details like socio- economic status, geographical location, education qualification etc. Also, the researcher included only the people of age 16-24 which is a limitation in itself, so this makes the study applicable for only those people who are in the age range of 16-24 years. The researcher used convenient sampling due to which the possibility of every individual to be a part of this study was minimal. The study had more females as compared to males.

Implications

The results of this study imply that there is a further need of study in this area of research since social media addiction is something which is emerging and the concerning fact is that most of the individuals are not even aware about it. The social media use of teenagers should be kept under surveillance of the parents to prevent them from getting indulged into the possible addictive patterns. Secondly schools should incorporate programs or workshops related to development of empathetic skills for early adolescents and teenagers so as to educate them about the essence of that particular skill which helps them shape an ideal prosocial behavior which helps bring people close together rather than having impaired social and communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Out of the five hypotheses of this study, four of them were accepted. The results of this research suggest that there is no correlation between social media addiction and empathy. The researcher also found that there is no difference in the social media addiction with respect to age and gender. When empathy was compared in participants addicted to the social media with respect to gender, there was a significant difference whereas when age was taken into consideration there was no significant difference found between the two age groups.

REFERENCES

1. Rosen LD, Cheever NA, Carrier LM. *iDisorder: Understanding our obsession with technology and overcoming its hold on us*. Macmillan Press; 2012.
2. Andreassen CS, Billieux J, Griffiths MD, Kuss DJ, Demetrovics Z, Mazzoni E, et al. The relationship between addictive use of social media and video games and symptoms of psychiatric disorders: A large-scale cross-sectional study. *Psychol Addict Behav*. 2016;30(2):252-7.
3. Riggio RE, Tucker J, Coffaro D. Social skills and empathy. *Personal Individ Differ* 1989;10(1):93-9.
4. Davis MH. The effects of dispositional empathy on emotional reactions and helping: A multidimensional approach. *J Personality* 1983;51(2):167-84.
5. Eisenberg N, Miller PA. The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors. *Psychol Bull* 1987;101(1):91-101.
6. Vossen HG, Valkenburg PM. Do social media foster or curtail adolescents' empathy? A longitudinal study. *Comput Hum Behav* 2016;63:118-24.
7. Aronson E. *Readings about the social animal*. Macmillan Press; 2003.
8. Bányai F, Zsila Á, Király O, Maraz A, Elekes Z, Griffiths MD, Andreassen CS, Demetrovics Z. Problematic social media use: Results from a large-scale nationally representative adolescent sample. *PLoS One* 2017;12(1):e0169839.
9. Kaya A, Siyez DM. Child and adolescent KA-SI empathic tendency scale: Development, validity and reliability study. *Egitim Ve Bilim*. 2010;35(156):110.
10. Dailey SL, Howard K, Roming SM, Ceballos N, Grimes T. A biopsychosocial approach to understanding social media addiction. *Hum Behav Emerg Technol* 2020;2(2):158-67.
11. Arnett JJ. Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *Am Psychol*. 2000;55(5):469-80.
12. Crick NR, Werner NE, Casas JF, O'Brien KM, Nelson DA, Grotpeter JK, Markon K. Childhood aggression and gender: A new look at an old problem. In D. Bernstein (Ed.), *Gender and motivation* (pp. 75-141). University of Nebraska Press: USA; 1999.
13. Eisenberg N, Spinrad TL. Emotion-related regulation: Sharpening the definition. *Child Dev* 2004;75(2):334-9.
14. Reifman A, Arnett JJ, Colwell MJ. Emerging adulthood: Theory, assessment and application. *J Youth Dev* 2007;2(1):37-48.
15. Nelson LJ, Barry CM. Distinguishing features of emerging adulthood: The role of self-classification as an adult. *J Adolesc Res* 2005;20(2):242-62.
16. Sahin C. Social Media Addiction Scale-Student Form: The Reliability and Validity Study. *Turk Online J Educ Technol-TOJET*. 2018;17(1):169-82.
17. Jolliffe D, Farrington DP. Development and validation of the Basic Empathy Scale. *J Adolescence* 2006;29(4):589-611.
18. Alloway T, Runac R, Quershi M, Kemp G. Is Facebook linked to selfishness? Investigating the relationships among social media use, empathy, and narcissism. *Soc Networks* 2014;2014.
19. Derntl B, Finkelmeyer A, Eickhoff S, Kellermann T, Falkenberg DI, Schneider F, et al. Multidimensional assessment of empathic abilities: neural correlates and gender differences. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 2010;35(1):67-82.
19. Davis MH. Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 1983;44(1):113-9.
20. Chae D, Kim H, Kim YA. Sex differences in the factors influencing Korean college students' addictive tendency toward social networking sites. *Int J Ment Health Addict* 2018;16(2):339-50.

Acknowledgements – We like to thank all participants who participated wholeheartedly in the study.

Conflict of Interest – Nil

Funding – Nil