

Social Media Addiction and Experience in Close relationship among Young Adults

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between social media addiction (SMA) and experiences in close relationships among young adults. A sample of 120 university students (60 males and 60 females) aged 18 to 30 years from Kerala University was selected using simple random sampling. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data were collected using the Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS) and the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire to assess SMA and attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, respectively. Results indicated significant positive correlations between SMA and both attachment anxiety ($r = .291, p < .01$) and avoidance ($r = .239, p < .01$). Sex differences emerged, with males scoring higher on attachment anxiety, females on attachment avoidance, and SMA severity. Platform usage influenced outcomes: Instagram users exhibited higher attachment anxiety, while Snapchat users showed greater attachment avoidance and SMA. Relationship status and time spent on social media also significantly differentiated attachment and SMA measures. Findings support theoretical models linking insecure attachment to compulsive social media use and underscore the importance of attachment-informed interventions in digital wellness and relationship counselling.

Keywords: Social media addiction, close relationships, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, young adults, digital behaviour.

Introduction

Over the past decade, social-media platforms have transformed how people connect. As of January 2024, over 5 billion people 62% of the global population used social media (Pehlivanoglu, 2024). Young adults aged 18–29 are the most engaged demographic: 76% use Instagram, 65% Snapchat, and 59% TikTok (Buck et al., 2025), with average global usage around 2 hours 26 minutes (Lim & Tan, 2024), higher in South and Southeast Asia. These platforms reshape identity, friendships, and relationships, but are engineered with variable-ratio reinforcement schedules notifications, likes, algorithmic curation neuropsychologically

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similar to gambling reward mechanisms (Kozyreva et al., 2019).

For some users, these features escalate into compulsive engagement classified as social media addiction (SMA; Griffiths, 2005; van den Eijnden et al., 2016). Griffiths (2005) proposed that any behaviour becomes addictive when it shows salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Andreassen et al. (2016) operationalised this in the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), validated across continents (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2022). Van den Eijnden et al. (2016) adapted DSM-5 Internet Gaming Disorder criteria into the Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS), validated across 44 countries (N = 222,532; Boer et al., 2021).

SMA remains absent from the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 (Zendle & Bowden-Jones, 2019), with critics arguing existing frameworks risk pathologising normative use (Billieux et al., 2015; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2017). Longitudinal evidence shows SMA symptoms are stable over time and linked to psychological distress (Tullett-Prado et al., 2023), though its status as a distinct clinical entity remains unresolved. A meta-analysis of 63 samples (N > 34,000) reported SMA prevalence between 5% and 25% (Cheng et al., 2021).

Three theoretical frameworks explain SMA. Griffiths' (2005) components model grounds SMA in behavioural addiction, underpinning BSMAS and most assessment research. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT; Katz et al., 1973) views users as active agents selecting platforms to meet psychological needs; socialisation needs predict addictive outcomes (Li & Cho, 2022), and reliance on social media for affiliation and validation can create dependency (Kircaburun et al., 2020)—explaining why those with unmet attachment needs are vulnerable to SMA.

The Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model (Brand et al., 2016, updated 2019) offers the most comprehensive account of internet-use disorders, including SMA, through four interacting components: person-level predispositions (including attachment styles), affective/cognitive responses to cues, habitual execution reinforced through reward, and reduced inhibitory control. The model explicitly identifies attachment styles and interpersonal difficulties as vulnerability factors for addictive internet use (Brand et al., 2019, 2025), directly linking close relationship experiences to SMA risk.

Close relationships are central to psychological health and a key developmental task in young adulthood (Pietromonaco et al., 2013; Feeney & Collins, 2014). Relationship satisfaction predicts longevity and well-being (Rusbult et al., 1986); Rusbult's Investment Model ties commitment to satisfaction, alternatives, and investment (VanderDrift et al., 2009), while Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory identifies intimacy, passion, and commitment as core components of relationship quality.

Attachment processes, extended to adult romantic bonds by Hazan and Shaver (1987), and the two dimensions identified by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998)—attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment) and avoidance (discomfort with intimacy)—shape how individuals regulate emotions and seek security. High anxiety triggers hyperactivation (jealousy, reassurance-seeking), while high avoidance prompts deactivation, such as emotional withdrawal (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Both dimensions negatively affect

communication, trust, and satisfaction (Li & Chan, 2012): compromised communication erodes trust, and broken trust hinders openness (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Conflict resolution is similarly attachment-linked—avoidant individuals withdraw, anxious individuals escalate (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Together, satisfaction, attachment, intimacy, commitment, communication, trust, and conflict form the relational architecture potentially disrupted by SMA.

Review of literature

Since 2015, research has linked SMA to adverse relational outcomes. Excessive social networking is associated with partner suspicion, conflict, and pressure (Rainey & Arney, 2024). Bouffard, Giglio, and Zheng (2021) found that increased Instagram use reduces satisfaction and fuels conflict, creating a bidirectional cycle with addictive use. Abbasi and Dibble (2025) found SNS addiction inversely related to satisfaction and positively linked to infidelity-related behaviours—such as digital flirting and contact with ex-partners—which moderate the addiction-satisfaction link. SMA also correlates negatively with commitment, as social media displaces investment in the romantic dyad (Ahmed & Vaghefi, 2021).

Phubbing mediates relational harm from SMA: Karaman and Arslan (2024) showed SMA mediates the link between unmet psychological needs and reduced satisfaction, while phubbing mediates between unmet needs and SMA—a model corroborated across studies (Roberts & David, 2016; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Electronic partner surveillance—monitoring social media for infidelity—predicts lower satisfaction and digital dating abuse (Emond et al., 2023).

Attachment theory grounds these patterns: insecure attachment consistently links to dysfunctional internet use, with FoMO and unmet competence needs as mediators (D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Compensatory Internet Use Theory (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) suggests those with offline relationship deficits use social media to meet connection and validation needs, and Zeng and Huang (2026) confirmed social anxiety mediates this attachment-to-PSMU pathway. Santini et al. (2024) found SMA predicts depression, lower well-being, and social isolation, affecting relationship quality.

Some evidence highlights benefits: social media supports long-distance couples (Billedo et al., 2015) and early relationship development (Coyne et al., 2011), and public displays of affection can correlate positively with satisfaction (Saslow et al., 2013; Coundouris et al., 2021). However, these benefits reflect normative use (Rus & Tiemensma, 2017; Bouffard et al., 2022; Stöven & Herzberg, 2021); once use becomes addictive—marked by salience, conflict, and withdrawal—outcomes turn negative, with validated instruments (BSMAS, SMDS) confirming links between SMA and dissatisfaction, jealousy, conflict, reduced intimacy, and insecure attachment.

These findings reveal theoretical and empirical gaps. The I-PACE model (Brand et al., 2019) positions attachment and interpersonal functioning as SMA vulnerability factors, while CIUT (Kardefelt-Winther, 2013) frames digital engagement as compensatory for relational deficits—together predicting that insecure attachment, low satisfaction, and conflict associate with SMA, which in turn exacerbates these difficulties. Li et al. (2024) supported the

attachment-to-problematic-internet-use pathway, yet few studies use validated SMA instruments alongside multidimensional measures like the ECR-R (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Brenning et al., 2011) in Indian young adults—the gap this study addresses.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between social media addiction and Experiences in Close Relationships among young adults
2. To investigate whether social media addiction and experiences in close relationships differ among young adults with respect to sex, social media platforms used, time spent on social media, and relationship status.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant relationship between social media addiction and experiences in close relationships in young adults.
2. There is a significant difference in social media addiction and experiences in close relationships based on sex.
3. There is a significant difference in social media addiction and experiences in close relationships based on the platform used.
4. There is a significant difference between social media addiction and experiences in close relationships based on the time spent on social media.
5. There is a significant difference in social media addiction and experiences in close relationships based on participants relationship status.

Method

Data Collection and Participants

In this study, individual questionnaires were administered to students at the University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Trivandrum, to collect data. Participants were randomly selected and provided detailed instructions for completing the questionnaire. Researchers assured participants of the confidentiality of their data, which would be used solely for this study. Any questions or concerns from the participants were addressed, and the average completion time for the questionnaire was 15–20 minutes. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 120 were fully completed and included in the final analysis. This study prioritised maintaining the confidentiality of participants' information. The sample comprised 120 young adults aged 18–30 years, with an equal distribution of males and females. Simple random sampling was employed, and participants were drawn from various departments of the Kerala University Campus at Kariavattom. The sample consisted of 60 men and 60 women.

Measures

1. Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS)

The SMDS (van den Eijnden et al., 2016) was developed using the diagnostic framework of

Internet Gaming Disorder from the DSM-5. The 9-item version was used, assessing preoccupation, tolerance, withdrawal, persistence, displacement, problems, deception, escape, and conflict. Responses are coded as yes (1) or no (0), with total scores ranging from 0 to 9; higher scores indicate more severe problematic social media use. The scale demonstrates good structural validity and cross-national applicability.

2. The Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised Questionnaire

The ECR-R (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is a 36-item measure of adult attachment across two subscales: anxiety (Items 1–18) and avoidance (Items 19–36). Responses are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items 9 and 11 are reverse-keyed for anxiety; items 20, 22, 26–31, and 33–36 are reverse-keyed for avoidance. Each subscale score is the mean of its items. The ECR-R has demonstrated strong internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity.

Results

Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient between Experiences in Close Relationships (Anxiety and Avoidance) and social media addiction among young adults (n=120)

	Anxiety	Avoidance
Social media addiction	.291**	.239**

*Note. **p < .01 level*

In table 1, Pearson's correlation revealed significant positive associations between both attachment dimensions and SMA. Attachment anxiety showed a small-to-medium correlation with SMA ($r = .291$, $p < .01$), while avoidance showed a weaker but significant association ($r = .239$, $p < .01$). Per Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, both fall in the small-to-medium range, with anxiety and avoidance explaining approximately 8.5% and 5.7% of SMA variance, respectively. This suggests individuals with greater relational insecurity—whether hyperactivating anxiety or deactivating avoidance—show higher compulsive social media engagement, consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Oldmeadow et al. (2013) similarly found insecurely attached individuals use SNS more compulsively to manage unmet relational needs; Monacis et al. (2017) found both attachment dimensions linked to disordered social media use; and Hart et al. (2015) linked attachment anxiety to fear of missing out.

Table 2 shows Mean, SD and t-value based on sex on Experiences in Close Relationships (Anxiety and Avoidance) and Social media addiction among young adults

Variables	Sex	n	Mean	SD	t values	Sig.
Anxiety	Male	60	51.68	18.352	2.734**	.007
	Female	60	42.82	17.272		

Avoidance	Male	60	49.63	26.30	2.012*	.047
	Female	60	59.30	26.31		
Social Media Addiction	Male	60	2.7807	.55674	3.403**	.001
	Female	60	3.1265	.55674		

Note. ** $p < .01$ level and * $p < .05$ level

In table 2, the independent samples t-test showed significant sex differences across all three variables. Males ($M = 51.68$, $SD = 18.35$) scored significantly higher than females ($M = 42.82$, $SD = 17.27$) on attachment anxiety, $t = 2.734$, $p = .007$, $d \approx 0.49$. Females ($M = 59.30$, $SD = 26.31$) scored significantly higher than males ($M = 49.63$, $SD = 26.30$) on avoidance, $t = 2.012$, $p = .047$, $d \approx 0.37$. For SMA, females ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .557$) scored significantly higher than males ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .557$), $t = 3.403$, $p = .001$, $d \approx 0.63$ —the strongest effect. The divergent attachment patterns may reflect sex-differentiated strategies under environmental stress (Del Giudice, 2011), with higher anxiety among males suggesting preoccupied attachment and higher avoidance among females suggesting learned suppression of relational needs. The higher SMA scores among females align with Andreassen et al. (2016) and Kuss and Griffiths (2011).

Table 3 Mean, SD and t-value based on social media platforms used on social media addiction and Experiences in Close Relationships (Anxiety and Avoidance) among young adults

Variables	Platforms used	n	Mean	SD	t values	Sig.
Anxiety	Snapchat Users	50	43.52	15.035	2.574*	.011
	Instagram users	70	51.91	19.304		
Avoidance	Snapchat Users	50	58.70	15.598	2.462*	.015
	Instagram users	70	50.64	19.835		
Social Media Addiction	Snapchat Users	50	2.9944	.58819	3.933**	.001
	Instagram users	70	2.5504	.63987		

Note. ** $p < .01$ level and * $p < .05$ level

In table 3, Independent samples t-tests comparing Snapchat (n = 50) and Instagram (n = 70) users showed significant differences across all three variables. Instagram users reported higher attachment anxiety (M = 51.91, SD = 19.30) than Snapchat users (M = 43.52, SD = 15.04), $t = 2.574$, $p = .011$, $d \approx 0.49$. Snapchat users reported higher avoidance (M = 58.70, SD = 15.60) than Instagram users (M = 50.64, SD = 19.84), $t = 2.462$, $p = .015$, $d \approx 0.46$. For SMA, Snapchat users (M = 2.99, SD = .588) scored higher than Instagram users (M = 2.55, SD = .640), $t = 3.933$, $p = .001$, $d \approx 0.73$ —the largest effect. Instagram's emphasis on social comparison and validation may attract anxiously attached users (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019), while Snapchat's ephemeral, lower-commitment interactions may appeal to avoidant users. Higher SMA among Snapchat users may reflect compulsive checking driven by disappearing content (Bayer et al., 2016), consistent with variable-ratio reinforcement in behavioural addiction (Griffiths, 2005).

Table 4 shows Mean, SD and f-value based on relationship status on, social media addiction and Experiences in Close Relationships (Anxiety and Avoidance) among young adults

Variables	relationship status	n	Mean	SD	f	Sig.
Anxiety	Single	31	49.26	16.149	2.681*	.048
	In a relationship	41	55.34	16.481		
	Complicated	30	46.67	20.510		
	Married	18	49.67	17.547		
Avoidance	Single	31	52.16	22.452	2.129	.100
	In a relationship	41	68.15	22.208		
	Complicated	30	51.33	20.491		
	Married	18	45.83	18.646		
Social Media Addiction	Single	31	3.1355	.65894	2.793*	.043
	In a relationship	41	2.8873	.53802		
	Complicated	30	2.9663	.67811		
	Married	18	2.7700	.57340		

Note. * $p < .05$ level

In table 4, One-way ANOVA across relationship status groups—single (n = 31), in a relationship (n = 41), complicated (n = 30), and married (n = 18)—showed significant differences in attachment anxiety ($F = 2.681$, $p = .048$) and SMA ($F = 2.793$, $p = .043$), but not avoidance ($F = 2.129$, $p = .100$). For anxiety, the "in a relationship" group scored highest

($M = 55.34$, $SD = 16.48$), followed by married ($M = 49.67$), single ($M = 49.26$), and complicated ($M = 46.67$), suggesting active relational involvement carries the greatest hyperactivating anxiety due to higher interpersonal stakes. For avoidance, though non-significant, the "in a relationship" group again scored highest ($M = 68.15$, $SD = 22.21$) and married participants lowest ($M = 45.83$, $SD = 18.65$), consistent with Mikulincer and Shaver's (2007) view that avoidant discomfort decreases in long-term, securely established partnerships. For SMA, scores declined from single ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .659$) through complicated ($M = 2.97$), in a relationship ($M = 2.89$), to married ($M = 2.77$), suggesting relational commitment is inversely associated with SMA (Hawk et al., 2019; Lup et al., 2015).

Table 5 Mean, SD and *f*-value based on time spend on social media on social media addiction and Experiences in Close Relationships (Anxiety and Avoidance) among young adults

Variables	Time spend on social media	n	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Anxiety	0-2 hours	14	46.00	18.193	3.158*	.028
	3- 4 hours	63	52.53	17.545		
	5 – 6 hours	24	46.36	18.183		
	More than 7 hours	19	60.44	18.171		
Avoidance	0-2 hours	14	55.00	20.298	2.307	.080
	3- 4 hours	63	60.45	17.251		
	5 – 6 hours	24	46.15	17.212		
	More than 7 hours	19	69.00	17.419		
Social Media Addiction	0-2 hours	14	2.7182	.35341	3.901**	.010
	3- 4 hours	63	2.9147	.59916		
	5 – 6 hours	24	3.0270	.67626		
	More than 7 hours	19	3.2560	.59312		

Note. ** $p < .01$ level and * $p < .05$ level

In table 5, One-way ANOVA across time-spent categories—0–2 hours ($n = 14$), 3–4 hours ($n = 63$), 5–6 hours ($n = 24$), and >7 hours ($n = 19$)—yielded significant F-values for attachment

anxiety ($F = 3.158, p = .028$) and SMA ($F = 3.901, p = .010$), while avoidance approached significance ($F = 2.307, p = .080$). Anxiety showed a non-linear pattern: lowest at 0–2 hours ($M = 46.00$), rising at 3–4 hours ($M = 52.53$), dipping at 5–6 hours ($M = 46.36$), and peaking at >7 hours ($M = 60.44$), suggesting extreme use—not moderate use—is associated with heightened anxiety (Vannucci et al., 2017; Elhai et al., 2017). For avoidance, a similar non-linear trend appeared, with the >7 hours group highest ($M = 69.00$), which Caplan (2007) would attribute to avoidant individuals substituting digital for face-to-face interaction as usage intensifies. SMA showed a clear increasing gradient: 0–2 hours ($M = 2.72$), 3–4 hours ($M = 2.91$), 5–6 hours ($M = 3.03$), and >7 hours ($M = 3.26$), consistent with Kuss and Griffiths (2011) and Andreassen et al. (2016), confirming time spent as a significant predictor of addictive use.

Discussion

This study confirms a significant association between social media addiction (SMA) and experiences in close relationships, supporting attachment theory and behavioural addiction models. Both attachment anxiety and avoidance correlated positively with SMA, indicating that insecurely attached individuals are more prone to compulsive use. The stronger anxiety association suggests hyperactivating strategies—proximity-seeking and reassurance needs—drive compulsive online behaviour more than avoidant deactivation, consistent with the I-PACE model's identification of attachment as a person-level vulnerability factor.

Sex differences showed males scoring higher on attachment anxiety and females higher on avoidance and SMA severity, reflecting culturally and evolutionarily informed sex-differentiated attachment strategies. Platform use also diverged: Instagram users reported greater anxiety, consistent with its emphasis on social validation and public identity performance, while Snapchat users showed higher avoidance and SMA, possibly reflecting habitual checking driven by ephemeral content and uncertainty reinforcement.

Relationship status and time spent on social media further differentiated outcomes. Individuals in relationships reported elevated anxiety and avoidance, likely reflecting heightened relational stakes, whereas single participants showed the highest SMA scores, suggesting relational commitment may buffer addictive use. A dose-response pattern emerged between usage time and both anxiety and SMA, with extreme use (>7 hours) associated with the highest scores on both.

These findings extend validated, multidimensional SMA and attachment measures to an understudied Indian young adult cohort, highlighting the bidirectional interplay between relational insecurity and compulsive social media engagement, and underscoring the value of attachment-informed interventions in digital wellness and relationship counselling.

Conclusion

This study confirms a significant positive relationship between social media addiction and insecure attachment dimensions among young adults. Attachment anxiety and avoidance both predict higher SMA severity, with sex, platform preference, relationship status, and

social media usage time further influencing these associations. The findings support theoretical models positioning close relationship experiences as critical factors in SMA development and maintenance. This study advances the understanding of the SMA-close relationship nexus in the Indian context and offers clinically relevant insights for targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

Future suggestion

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify causal pathways between SMA and close relationship experiences. Expanding samples to include diverse cultural and demographic groups across India will enhance generalisability. Investigating additional social-media platforms and emerging digital behaviours will provide a more comprehensive picture of platform-specific addiction risks.

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