

Social Media Addiction and Life Satisfaction: The Mediating Effect of Self-Esteem in University Students



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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among university students in Nepal. Specifically, it investigates whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between social media addiction and life satisfaction in the context of increasing digital dependency. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected from 150 university students in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal using validated psychological scales – the Social Media Addiction Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Satisfaction with Life Scale. Structural Equation Modeling using SmartPLS was used to test the direct and indirect relationships among the variables. The results showed that social media addiction had a significant positive effect on self-esteem, likewise self-esteem had a significant positive effect on life satisfaction. However, there was no significant direct effect of social media addiction on life satisfaction. Self-esteem was found to partially mediate the relationship between social media addiction and life satisfaction. The study shows that social media addiction does not directly influence life satisfaction but has an indirect positive effect through self-esteem. This finding highlights self-esteem as an important factor linking social media use with overall well-being. The findings suggest that social media addiction, when managed positively, can enhance self-esteem, likewise it improves life satisfaction among students. This indicates that interventions should prioritize strengthening self-esteem and promoting healthy patterns of social media use. The results also provide theoretical support for understanding how these variables interact within a collectivist cultural context. This is one of the few empirical studies in Nepal that investigates the psychological impacts of social media addiction on university students. It offers new insights into how self-esteem can act as a protective psychological mechanism in the digital age.

Keywords – Life satisfaction, Nepal, Self-esteem, Social media addiction, University students

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1. Introduction

The exponential rise of social media usage among university students globally has introduced new paradigms in communication, identity formation, and leisure, but has also triggered growing concern over its psychological ramifications (Adhikari et al, 2024; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok let people stay connected all the time, express themselves, and get validation from others. However, using them too much, which is often called “social media addiction,” has been linked to bad things like lower self-esteem and less satisfaction with life (Andreassen et al., 2016; Guven, 2019; Koçak et al., 2024). These issues are particularly relevant for university students, who are navigating developmental transitions while simultaneously becoming more digitally immersed.

Social media addiction is characterized by preoccupation, mood modification, withdrawal, and relapse-like symptoms similar to behavioral addictions (Andreassen, 2015; Chaudhary et al, 2025). The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) explains this phenomenon as an outcome of individuals’ attempts to fulfill their social and psychological needs through media. Meanwhile, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) highlights how the curated nature of social media content fosters upward comparisons, often leading to dissatisfaction and self-worth depreciation (Vogel et al., 2014; Tandoc et al., 2015). Further, this phenomenon triggered the vulnerable and marginalized communities in Nepal (Mijar & Giri, 2025). Numerous empirical studies have confirmed the associations between excessive social media use and psychological outcomes like lower self-esteem and reduced life satisfaction (Błachnio et al., 2016; Hawi & Samaha, 2017). However, the nature of these relationships may vary depending on socio-cultural context.

In the context of Nepal, increasing internet accessibility and smartphone penetration among youth have led to significant growth in social media engagement (Chaudhary et al, 2024; NapoleonCat, 2024; Nepal Telecommunications Authority, 2024). Despite these trends, local research on the psychological consequences of social media use remains limited and often lacks focus on the university student demographic. Existing studies in Nepal have primarily concentrated on adolescents or general internet use, often identifying correlations with anxiety, depression, or academic decline (Paudel et al., 2023; Kharel, 2023; Gautam et al., 2024 Adhikari et al, 2025). There remains a gap in understanding how social media addiction impacts core dimensions of psychological well-being specifically self-esteem and life satisfaction among university students in a developing, collectivist society such as Nepal.

This study fills a gap by looking into the direct and indirect links between social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction in Nepalese university students. The study also investigates if self-esteem serves as a moderator between social media addiction and life satisfaction. By contextualizing these relationships within the unique socio-cultural framework of Nepal, the research contributes novel insights into how digital behaviors influence psychological health in non-Western contexts. These findings aim to inform mental health interventions, digital literacy initiatives, and higher education policy, enhancing support systems for student well-being in Nepal.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Social Media Addiction and Self-Esteem

Social media addiction is characterized by excessive, obsessive usage of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, often resulting in psychological distress and disruption of daily life (Andreassen, 2015). According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), users

often compare themselves with idealized portrayals of others on social media, which may reduce self-worth and foster negative self-evaluation. Numerous studies have found a negative association between social media addiction and self-esteem (Güven, 2019; Koçak et al., 2024). For instance, individuals who frequently engage in upward comparisons tend to experience lower self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). In the Nepalese context, students are especially vulnerable due to peer pressure, collectivist social norms, and increasing digital engagement. Based on the literature studied, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

Hypothesis (H1): Social media addiction significantly influences self-esteem among university students

Social Media Addiction and Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction refers to an individual's overall assessment of life quality and personal fulfillment (Diener et al., 1985). Studies indicate that excessive social media use can lower life satisfaction due to digital fatigue, displacement of real-life interactions, and negative emotional states triggered by idealized online content (Tandoc et al., 2015; Andreassen et al., 2016). According to Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), when media fails to meet users' emotional or social needs, it can lead to dissatisfaction. In Nepal, Paudel et al. (2023) found that students heavily engaged in social media were more likely to report emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Based on the literature discussed, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

Hypothesis (H2): Social media addiction significantly influences life satisfaction among university students.

Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction

Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall sense of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965) and is considered a key factor in psychological well-being. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), higher self-esteem fulfills basic psychological needs, thereby enhancing life satisfaction. Individuals with strong self-esteem tend to appraise their lives more positively and experience greater emotional resilience. People with a well-developed self-esteem, spiritual mindset or contemplative practices are more likely to be emotionally involved in the activities and exhibit a sense of value and wellbeing (Maharjan et al., 2024). In collectivist societies like Nepal, where external validation is significant, self-esteem plays an even stronger role in determining life satisfaction. Empirical studies (Hawi & Samaha, 2017) confirm that higher self-esteem leads to higher life satisfaction among students. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis (H3): Self-esteem significantly influences life satisfaction among university students.

Self-Esteem as a Mediator

While social media addiction may influence life satisfaction directly, self-esteem may serve as a key mediating variable. Individuals who engage in excessive social media use may develop distorted self-perceptions, which can in turn reduce their life satisfaction. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that self-esteem supports the basic psychological needs of competence and autonomy, which are essential for overall well-being. Several studies confirm that self-esteem mediates the effect of social media use on life satisfaction (Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Błachnio et al., 2016). Based on the literature discussed, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

Hypothesis (H4): There is a significant mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between social media addiction and life satisfaction among university students.

Based on the theories, this conceptual model has been created. It shows how social media addiction may influence self-esteem and life satisfaction either directly or indirectly.

Figure 1*Research Framework**Source: Hawi and Samaha (2016)*

3. Research Method

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among university students in Nepal. The research adopted a descriptive and causal approach, aiming not only to describe existing psychological patterns but also to test hypothesized associations among the constructs using statistical methods. The target population for this study consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Due to the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame, purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had active social media usage and were relevant to the study objectives. Hair et al. (2016) recommended that the sample size be five times (minimum) or ten times (maximum) bigger than the objects to be tested. The sample size could range between 115 and 230. The study employed a sample size of 150 and underwent statistical analysis. The total number of questionnaires sent was 200, and after controlling for non-respondents and incomplete questionnaires, 150 responses were included for statistical analysis, giving the study a response rate of 75 percent.

Before conducting the phase of data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 30 university students to examine the clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to complete the full survey and provide feedback on the ease of understanding the questions. Based on their feedback, minor changes were made. The reliability analysis showed Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 for all key constructs, indicating acceptable internal consistency and supporting the use of the finalized instrument in the full survey. For analysis, both IBM SPSS version 26 and SmartPLS version 3.0 were used. SPSS was utilized for descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis, while SmartPLS was employed to conduct Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This included path analysis using Bootstrapping 5,000 resamples. Mediation analysis was conducted to test the indirect effect of self-esteem on the relationship between social media addiction and life satisfaction. These procedures ensured the analytical rigor of the study and provided meaningful insights into the psychological dynamics of digital dependency among Nepali university students.

Measurement Instruments

This study used standard and trusted tools to measure the three main variables. Social Media Addiction was measured using the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAQ) by (Andreassen et al., 2016), which includes six questions based on common signs of addiction. Self-Esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) by (Rosenberg, 1965), a well-known 10-item scale that checks how people feel about themselves. Life Satisfaction was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by (Diener et al., 1985), which has five questions about how satisfied a person feels with their life. All items used a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 5 means “strongly agree.” These tools helped collect clear and reliable data for the study.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Media Addiction (SMAQ)	3.05	0.78
Self-Esteem	3.20	0.64
Life Satisfaction	2.76	0.80

This outlines the descriptive statistics for the three central constructs: Social Media Addiction, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction. The mean score for Social Media Addiction was 3.05 (SD = 0.78), suggesting a moderate level of compulsive digital behavior among students. Self-Esteem had a slightly higher mean of 3.20 (SD=0.64), indicating that students generally perceived themselves positively. Life Satisfaction, however, recorded the lowest mean at 2.76 (SD = 0.80), suggesting that a considerable portion of the students were less content with their life circumstances. These baseline values provide an initial understanding of students’ psychological states before exploring inter-variable relationships.

Reliability Analysis

Table 2

Cronbach’s Alpha

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Social Media Addiction	8	0.809
Self-Esteem	10	0.739
Life Satisfaction	5	0.759

Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients were used to determine the internal consistency of the scales employed in this investigation, as indicated in Table 2. All constructions met the approved threshold of 0.70, indicating dependable measurement tools. Specifically, the Social Media Addiction scale demonstrated high reliability with an alpha of 0.809, followed by Life Satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.759$) and Self-Esteem ($\alpha = 0.739$). These results affirm that each scale consistently measures its respective construct within the sample.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 3

Correlation Analysis

Variable	SMAQ	Self-Esteem	Life Satisfaction
Social Media Addiction	1		
Self-Esteem	0.532**	1	
Life Satisfaction	0.090	0.299**	1

Table 3 presents that the Pearson correlation matrix among the three primary variables. A statistically significant and moderately strong positive correlation was found between Social Media Addiction and Self-Esteem ($r = 0.532, p < 0.001$). Similarly, Self-Esteem was positively correlated with Life Satisfaction ($r = 0.299, p < 0.001$), indicating that students with greater self-worth tend to experience higher life satisfaction. Interestingly, the correlation between Social Media Addiction and Life Satisfaction was weak and not statistically significant ($r = 0.090, p = 0.273$), suggesting no direct linear relationship between these variables in the current sample.

Construct Reliability and Validity

Table 4

Reliability and Validity

Construct	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Life Satisfaction	0.840	0.533
Self-Esteem	0.799	0.310
Social Media Addiction	0.854	0.428

This evaluates construct reliability and convergent validity using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All three constructs showed strong composite reliability ($CR > 0.70$), confirming measurement consistency. However, while Life Satisfaction surpassed the AVE threshold (0.533), both Social Media Addiction ($AVE = 0.428$) and Self-Esteem ($AVE = 0.310$) fell slightly short of the ideal 0.50 benchmark. Despite this, the high CR values suggest that the indicators are acceptable, though future research may consider revising or expanding these constructs for better convergent validity.

Discriminant Validity

Table 5

Discriminant Validity

Construct	Life Satisfaction	Self-Esteem	Social Media Addiction
Life Satisfaction	0.730		
Self-Esteem	0.511	0.557	
Social Media Addiction	0.227	0.617	0.654

To assess discriminant validity, Table 5 applies the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The square root of AVE for each construct (diagonal elements) was greater than the inter-construct correlations (off-diagonal elements), thereby satisfying the criterion. For instance, Life Satisfaction's AVE square root (0.730) exceeded its correlation with Self-Esteem (0.511) and Social Media Addiction (0.227). These results confirm that each construct is empirically distinct and does not significantly overlap with others, supporting the structural integrity of the model.

Structural Model and Path Analysis

Table 6

Direct Effects between Constructs

Path	Coefficient (β)	T Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
Self-Esteem \rightarrow Life Satisfaction	0.474	2.523	0.012	Significant positive effect
Social Media Addiction \rightarrow Life Satisfaction	-0.096	0.749	0.454	Not significant
Social Media Addiction \rightarrow Self-Esteem	0.495	4.772	0.000	Significant positive effect

Structural relationships were tested using PLS-SEM, with results shown in Table 6. The analysis revealed that Social Media Addiction had a significant positive effect on Self-Esteem ($\beta = 0.495$, $p < 0.001$), challenging conventional assumptions that addiction diminishes self-worth. Additionally, Self-Esteem significantly predicted Life Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.474$, $p = 0.012$), reinforcing its role as a key determinant of well-being. However, Social Media Addiction did not directly influence Life Satisfaction ($\beta = -0.096$, $p = 0.454$), suggesting the presence of a mediating variable.

Mediation Analysis

Table 7

Indirect Path	Coefficient (β)	T Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
Social Media Addiction \rightarrow Self-Esteem \rightarrow Life Satisfaction	0.234	2.352	0.019	Significant indirect effect

Table 7 presents the results of the mediation analysis. The indirect effect of Social Media Addiction on Life Satisfaction through Self-Esteem was significant ($\beta = 0.234$, $p = 0.019$), confirming partial mediation. This finding implies that while social media use does not directly impact life satisfaction, it indirectly enhances it by improving self-esteem. The presence of this mediating mechanism offers a deeper understanding of how digital behavior interacts with psychological outcomes.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the interrelationships among social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among university students in Nepal, offering novel insights into how digital

behavior shapes psychological well-being in a non-Western context. The results present context-specific deviations from the dominant literature. A key finding was the positive and statistically significant relationship between social media addiction and self-esteem, which contrasts with numerous international studies suggesting that excessive social media use undermines self-worth through mechanisms such as negative social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and online dependency (Andreassen et al., 2016; Adhikari et al., 2024; Koçak et al., 2024). However, in the context of Nepali university students, the result suggests a culturally grounded interpretation: social media may act as a source of social validation and emotional support, enhancing feelings of self-worth. Within collectivist societies like Nepal, where social harmony and peer approval are highly valued, platforms like Instagram and Facebook may facilitate group belonging and personal recognition. These findings support the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which states that individuals actively use media to meet psychological and social needs such as connectedness and self-expression.

Consistent with existing psychological theories and empirical evidence, the study confirmed that self-esteem has a significant and positive relationship with life satisfaction. This result reinforces the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Comparison Theory (SCT), both of which highlight the role of self-perception in achieving psychological well-being. High self-esteem appears to buffer individuals against stress and dissatisfaction, enabling students to evaluate their lives more positively. Likewise, no significant direct relationship was found between social media addiction and life satisfaction. This contradicts a substantial body of literature that portrays social media overuse as detrimental to life satisfaction (Güven, 2019; Paudel et al., 2023). However, the mediation analysis found that self-esteem acts as a significant intermediary, with social media addiction increasing self-esteem and thus life satisfaction. These findings highlight that the psychological impact of social media use is not uniformly negative, but rather varies depending on individual and cultural factors. It also illustrates the indirect pathways through which digital behaviors influence well-being, challenging simplistic or deterministic models of digital harm.

Collectively, these findings advocate for a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the psychological effects of social media. In the Nepalese context, where digital engagement is rising rapidly and still carries novelty, social media use may foster empowerment, inclusion, and social identity among youth, rather than isolation or dissatisfaction. These observations emphasize the need for culturally responsive models in digital psychology that recognize local values, social structures, and user motivations.

6. Conclusion

The current study contributes significant empirical evidence to the field of media psychology by examining the intricate relationship between social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction in a Nepali university setting. Contrary to widely held assumptions, the findings show that social media addiction is not necessarily harmful; in fact, it can positively influence self-esteem, which subsequently enhances life satisfaction. These results underscore the importance of considering self-esteem as a central psychological mechanism and support the view that digital behaviors exert indirect and multidimensional effects on well-being. Furthermore, the study challenges the applicability of Western-centric frameworks that often depict social media use as detrimental to mental health. In doing so, it highlights the cultural relativity of digital experiences, particularly in societies where collective identity and interpersonal connection shape individual well-being.

7. Implications and Direction for Future Research

The study calls for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners to reframe the discourse on social media, shifting the focus from risks to a more balanced view that acknowledges potential benefits, particularly when use is motivated by meaningful social interaction and identity formation. Future research could look into longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and culturally appropriate instruments to investigate the long-term dynamics and generalizability of these findings. As digital engagement continues to evolve in Nepal and beyond, a culturally grounded understanding of its psychological implications is both timely and necessary.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest while preparing this article.

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