

Aşırı Sosyal Medya Kullanımının Üniversite Öğrencilerinde (DASS) Depresyon, Anksiyete ve Stres Arasındaki İlişkisi ve Yalnızlığın Aracılık Rolü: Yapısal Eşitlik Modeli

The Relationship Between Excessive Social Media use and Psychological Disorders (DASS) in University Students and The Mediating Role of Loneliness: A structural Equation Model

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Öz: Bu araştırma, üniversite öğrencilerinin aşırı sosyal medya kullanım düzeyleri ile depresyon, kaygı ve stres (DASS) arasındaki ilişkide yalnızlığın aracı rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Hızlı teknolojik gelişmeler bağlamında, sosyal medya genç yetişkinlerin yaşamlarına derinlemesine yerleşmiştir; ancak aşırı kullanım, hem bireylerin ruh sağlığını hem de sosyal ilişkilerini olumsuz etkileyebilir. Bu dinamikleri incelemek için çalışma, bütünlük bir model kullanmaktadır. Örnekleme, Atatürk Üniversitesi Hemşirelik Fakültesi'nde kayıtlı lisans öğrencilerinden oluşmaktadır. Veriler, UCLA Yalnızlık Ölçeği-6, Bergen Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığı Ölçeği ve Depresyon, Kaygı ve Stres Ölçeği (DASS-21) kullanılarak toplanmıştır. İstatistiksel analizler, IBM AMOS 24'te uygulanan Yapısal Denklem Modellemesi (SEM) ve bootstrap teknikleri kullanılarak yapılmıştır. Bulgular, aşırı sosyal medya kullanımının yalnızlık, depresyon, kaygı ve stresi anlamlı ve pozitif olarak tahmin ettiğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, aracı analizler, yalnızlığın aşırı sosyal medya kullanımı ile psikolojik sıkıntı arasındaki ilişkide kısmi bir aracı görevi gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Buna göre, aşırı sosyal medya kullanımının yüksek seviyeleri, artan yalnızlık duygularıyla ilişkilidir ve bu da psikolojik sorunların artmasına katkıda bulunur. Bu çalışma, bu değişkenleri tek bir yapısal modele entegre ederek, sosyal medya bağımlılığını olumsuz psikolojik sonuçlarla ilişkilendiren mekanizmaların daha kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlayarak literatüre katkıda bulunmayı ve böylece önceki araştırmalardaki önemli bir boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Excessive Social Media Use, Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety, Stress.

Abstract: This research aims to examine the mediating role of loneliness in the relationship between university students' levels of excessive social media use and depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS). In the context of rapid technological advancements, social media has become deeply embedded in the lives of young adults; however, excessive usage may adversely affect both individuals' mental health and their social relationships. To study these dynamics, the study employs an integrated model. The sample comprises undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Nursing. Data were collected using the UCLA Loneliness Scale-6, the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, and the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). Statistical analyses were conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and bootstrap techniques implemented in IBM AMOS 24. The findings indicate that excessive

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social media use significantly and positively predicts loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress. Furthermore, mediation analyses demonstrate that loneliness serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress. Accordingly, higher levels of social media addiction are associated with escalated feelings of loneliness, which, in turn, contribute to elevated levels of psychological issues. By integrating these variables into a single structural model, this paper aims to contribute to the literature by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking social media addiction to adverse psychological outcomes, thereby addressing a notable gap in prior research.

Keywords: Excessive Social Media Use, Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety, Stress.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, students constitute one of the most vulnerable populations concerning mental health issues, as globally 10–20% of children and adolescents experience mental health disorders, with a substantial proportion of these conditions emerging between the ages of 14 and 18 (Keles et al. 2019). Social media usage plays a central role in the formation of personal and social identities during adolescence (Keles et al. 2019), Shannon et al. 2022). Nevertheless, problematic engagement with social media has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes. Beyond its negative implications for academic performance and the quality of face-to-face interactions, such usage patterns have been linked to disruptions in sleep, impairments in cognitive functions such as memory, and various physical health complaints, including neck and back pain (Primack et al., 2017, Wu et al., 2024, Qiu et al., 2025). Concurrently, loneliness has increasingly been characterized as a contemporary “epidemic,” representing a significant threat to students’ overall well-being and psychosocial functioning (Bottaro et al., 2023).

1.1. Excessive social media use

Technological developments cause profound transformations across all fields of life; this shift is particularly evident in the communication sphere (Kuyucu, 2017, Karabulut et al. 2023, Güney et al. 2020). Individuals, particularly young people (Kartal, 2013), increasingly use social media to express their opinions and share experiences (Baz, 2018) follow current events, engage in online shopping, access information, and seek entertainment by reconstructing their identities through a wide platform (Güleryüz et.al. 2020, Solmaz et.al. 2013, Kocaay et al. 2022). The merging of all these functions within a single communication platform, alongside the capacity of social media to enhance interaction by empowering users in the communication process (Başaran, 2010) facilitates information acquisition through experiences of both learning and enjoyment (Kuo, 2013,

Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2012). Moreover, it strengthens individuals' sense of belonging and positions social media as a progressively indispensable component that profoundly penetrates daily life through its constantly evolving applications (Babacan, 2019).

The ease of quick access to social media platforms via mobile devices (Khoury et.al., 2019) contributes to excessive usage, thereby increasing social media addiction (Hou, 2019, Yüksel-Şahin & Öztoprak, 2019). The dopamine-driven feelings of pleasure experienced during social media use can diminish individuals' awareness of time spent on these platforms, leading to progressively greater daily use and the emergence of addictive behaviors that may not be accepted by the individual (Aydın, 2023).

Andreassen and Pallesen define excessive social media use as a pattern in which individuals are driven by a powerful and uncontrollable urge to log into and use social networking sites (Schou & Pallesen, 2014). excessive social media use has been characterized as a pattern in which individuals excessively allocate their time to social media use, driven by a persistent and compelling motivation, while neglecting other essential activities and responsibilities (Pellegrino, 2022). Individuals exhibiting excessive social media use may initially attempt to regulate their engagement with social networking platforms; however, over time, this perceived control often diminishes, giving way to compulsive and externally driven usage patterns. Despite an awareness of the adverse and potentially detrimental consequences, such individuals experience a persistent compulsion to remain engaged, with even the contemplation of disengagement or cessation eliciting heightened levels of anxiety (Hoffman, 2012).

1.2.The mediating role of depression, anxiety, and stress in excessive social media use

The prioritization of certain activities in an individual's life, leading to increased attentional focus, the desire to escape from stressful situations resulting in mood swings, the development of tolerance characterized by the need for prolonged engagement, and the emergence of withdrawal symptoms when the activity is discontinued, alongside relapse and subsequent psychological distress even after cessation (Aydın, 2023) constitute key criteria that contribute to the

development of excessive social media use, which is conceptualized as a form of behavioral addiction.

Addictive use of social media leads to cognitive preoccupation and a heightened inclination toward these platforms, as individuals increasingly rely on them to alleviate negative emotions and psychological unease. Furthermore, symptoms such as a progressive increment in use to maintain the pleasure derived from the activity, a feeling of deprivation when discontinuing use, neglect of other essential responsibilities due to persistent engagement, and repeated unsuccessful attempts to control excessive use have been occurring (Andreassen, 2017; Griffiths, 2005).

The more excessive social media use increases, the more anxiety and depression levels of individuals escalate (Demirci, 2019). A review of the current literature indicates that recent studies consistently demonstrate a significant association between levels of depression and social media addiction. Particularly, studies focusing on university students demonstrate a direct correlation between social media addiction and the symptoms exhibited by individuals with addictive patterns of use (Dilmen, 2021; Karadağ & Akçınar, 2019; Kircaburun, 2016; Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013; Tang et.al., 2016; Doğan, 2021). Moreover, adverse effects regarding overall welfare are being observed, as the mood fluctuations and compulsive symptoms associated with social media use can exacerbate underlying mechanisms of anxiety and depression (Kaplan, 2010; Marina, 2018).

1.3.The Mediating role of loneliness

A reciprocal understanding between individuals, along with the expression of love, respect, and trust, and the ability to establish effective communication, has been recognized as a fundamental human need (Maslow & Lewis, 1987; Riva et.al., 2016). However, loneliness has been characterized as one of the key challenges emerging in modern life, shaped by contemporary living and technology. Loneliness is widely recognized as a negative emotional state that can lead to social isolation and is often associated with feelings of anger, anxiety, and sadness (Mert, 2018). The number of individuals who are unable to form close relationships or maintain reliable social connections has been increasing day by day (Özodaşık, 2001; Karababa & Dilmaç, 2016) and consequently, loneliness is emerging as a significant social problem (Yılmaz et.al., 2008; Kılınç et. al., 2005).

The lack of social relationships and a decline in the experience of pleasure are considered fundamental components of loneliness (Uygun, 2004). Contrary to widespread assumptions, empirical research indicates that loneliness is more prevalent among young people than older adults (Çeçen, 2008, Barreto et al., 2021; Surkalim et.al., 2022; Ellard et al., 2023; Wodika et al., 2025). The feeling of loneliness, which is particularly prevailing among university students (Hamamcı & Duy, 2005) is reinforced by several contextual factors, including relocation to a new city, separation from family, adaptation to an unfamiliar social environment, and concerns regarding future academic and career trajectories (Sertbaş et al., 2004). The inherent need for social connection and belonging among young people leads to the excessive use of social media (O’Keeffe et al., 2011). Kuss et al., research concluded that individuals who are not engaged in a personal relationship are more prone to developing addictive social media use (Kuss et al., 2015). The rewards and gratification mechanisms embedded within social media may foster the neglect of offline relationships and the erosion of face-to-face communication skills, thereby reinforcing a vicious cycle of addiction (Kuss et al., 2017).

1.4.Current study and hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the present study:

- H1: Excessive social media use (DASS) exerts a significant effect on levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.
- H2: Excessive social media use affects the level of loneliness notably.
- H3: Loneliness (DASS) exerts a significant positive effect on depression, anxiety, and stress.
- H4: Loneliness functions as a mediating variable in the relationship between excessive social media use and depression, anxiety, and stress.

The proposed model, designed to examine excessive social media use and its consequences, was empirically tested, offering several notable contributions to the present study. Firstly, it facilitates a comprehensive analysis of the underlying mechanisms linking excessive social media use to depression, stress, and anxiety. Secondly, this study represents one of the early attempts in the existing literature to conceptualize loneliness as a mediating variable in the relationship between excessive social media use and key indicators of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and stress. Moreover, despite excessive social media use,

loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress variables being interrelated in the literature, studies that address these variables simultaneously within a single integrated model remain extremely limited. The present literature predominantly focuses on either the indirect effects of social media addiction on loneliness or its direct effects on depression and anxiety. Nevertheless, the psychological consequences (depression, anxiety, stress) triggered by increased feelings of loneliness due to an individual's social media use remain insufficiently addressed in the current literature. This research aims to reveal the multifaceted effects of excessive social media use on individuals' mental health by examining these variables in an integrated manner; thereby, it seeks to address a significant theoretical and empirical gap in the existing literature.

Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the relevant unit under document number E.88656144-000-2300148513. After the necessary ethical approvals were obtained, detailed information regarding the study's purpose and procedures was provided to undergraduate students enrolled at the relevant faculty. Subsequently, the data collection process began using a random sampling technique. The study sample consisted of 393 participants who voluntarily agreed to participate and completed the survey. Regarding the participants' demographic characteristics, 302 were female (76.8%) and 91 were male (23.2%). In terms of age distribution, 85 participants were in the 17–20 age group, 302 were in the 21–24 age group, 5 were in the 25–28 age group, and 1 was 29 years of age or older.

2.2. Statistical analysis

To test the study's hypotheses, mediation analysis was conducted within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework using the IBM AMOS 24 program.

Given that the data exhibited a normal distribution, the analyses were conducted using the Maximum Likelihood estimation method. The mediating effects were assessed through bootstrap analysis with 2,000 resamples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (Collier, 2020). Initially, the measurement model, comprising excessive social media use loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress, was evaluated. During this process, one item (S11) from the excessive social media use (SMB) scale and two items (S17–S18) from the loneliness scale were excluded due to low standardized factor loadings. Following these modifications, the analysis was re-estimated (Hair et al., 2010; Gürbüz, 2024). The fit indices obtained from the revised model indicated an acceptable level of model–data fit. Ultimately, the results of the bootstrap analysis were examined to determine the significance and magnitude of the mediating effects within the model.

2.3. Measurements

2.3.1. UCLA loneliness measurement-6 (UCLA LM-6)

The short form of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Sarıçam, 2023) comprises a total of 6 questions and 4 different options. The response options are: (1) Not appropriate at all, (2) Not appropriate, (3) Appropriate, and (4) Completely appropriate. Each option corresponds to 1, 2, 3, and 4 points, respectively. Higher scores on the scale indicate greater levels of perceived loneliness. Sample items include statements such as “I need friendship” and “I feel like I am part of a group of friends.” The internal consistency reliability of the scale was determined to be acceptable, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .763$.

2.3.2. Bergen social media addiction scale

Demirci (2019) adapted the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale as a six-item instrument measured on a five-point Likert-type scale, yielding a total score range between 6 and 30. The scale does not include any reverse-coded items. Although no definitive cutoff score has been established, a more flexible criterion suggests that scoring 3 or higher on at least four of the six items may indicate a high level of social media addiction, whereas a more stringent criterion requires a score of 3 or higher on all items. Example items include statements such as “Did you feel an increasing desire to use social media?” and “Did excessive social media use negatively affect your work/studies?” The scale demonstrates acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .773$.

2.3.3. Depression, anxiety and stress scale (DASS-21)

The 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Abdullah Yıldırım, Murat Boysan, & Mehmet Celal Kefeli, 2018) was employed to assess levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The instrument comprises three subscales, each consisting of 7 items: the depression, anxiety, and stress subscales. Illustrative items include statements such as "I noticed my mouth was dry," "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to," and "I found myself feeling uneasy." The internal consistency reliability coefficients for the subscales were found to be high, with Cronbach's alpha values of $\alpha = .904$ for depression, $\alpha = .872$ for anxiety, and $\alpha = .912$ for stress, respectively.

Finding

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Examination of the direct effects among the study variables revealed that Social Media Addiction (SMB) significantly and positively predicted Loneliness ($\beta = .281, p < .001$). Furthermore, SMB was found to significantly and positively predict Anxiety ($\beta = .307, p < .001$), Depression ($\beta = .272, p < .001$), and Stress ($\beta = .391, p < .001$). Additionally, Loneliness emerged as a significant positive predictor of Anxiety ($\beta = .281, p < .001$), Depression ($\beta = .325, p < .001$), and Stress ($\beta = .186, p < .001$).

3.2. Reliability analysis

To assess the reliability of the scales, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each scale was examined. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70 indicates that a scale has a high level of reliability (Field, 2018). Accordingly, it was determined that all scales used in the study had high levels of reliability. The reliability analyses of the scales used in the study are as follows: Social Media Addiction 0.773, Loneliness 0.763, Anxiety 0.872, Depression 0.904, and Stress 0.912.

3.3. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables in terms of their mean values and standard deviations. The results of the correlation analysis indicated that all variables included in the study were significantly and positively correlated with one another ($p < .001$).

Table 1

Correlation table between scale scores

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social Media Addiction	-				
2. Loneliness	.180***	-			
3. Anxiety	.314***	.281***	-		
4. Depression	.292***	.308***	.578***	-	
5. Stress	.370***	.225***	.649***	.692***	-
Mean (M)	16.930	9.936	13.877	15.319	15.580
Standard deviation (SD)	5.185	3.316	5.232	5.938	5.918

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ **3.4. Mediation model testing****3.4.1. Measurement model testing**

To test hypotheses H1-H2-H3-H4 of the study, mediation analysis has been conducted within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework using the IBM AMOS 24 software. Given that the data have been normally distributed, parameter estimation has been performed using the Maximum Likelihood (ML) method. The significance of the mediating effects was assessed using a bootstrap analysis with 2,000 resamples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval, yielding robust estimates of indirect effects (Collier, 2020).

Firstly, the measurement model comprising the study constructs (excessive social media use, Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress) was evaluated. During this stage, one item (S11) from the excessive social media use (ESMU) scale and two items (S17–S18) from the Loneliness scale were excluded from the model due to low standardized factor loadings. Following these modifications, the analysis was re-estimated (Hair et al., 2010; Gürbüz, 2024). The fit indices obtained from the revised measurement model indicated an acceptable level of model–data fit, demonstrating that the measurement model adequately represented the observed

data (CMIN [395, N = 393] = 790.942; $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.002$; CFI = .934; SRMR = .048; RMSEA = .051).

3.4.2. Structural model testing

After validating the measurement model, the structural model was examined to test the hypothesized mediating relationships. The results indicated that the fit indices of the structural model were within acceptable threshold values, suggesting that the proposed mediation model demonstrated a satisfactory level of fit and was consistent with the observed data (CMIN [395, N = 393] = 790.942; $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.002$; CFI = .934; SRMR = .048; RMSEA = .051).

Examination of the direct effects among the variables revealed that excessive social media use (ESMU) significantly and positively predicted Loneliness ($\beta = .281$, $p < .001$). ESMU also significantly and positively predicted Anxiety ($\beta = .307$, $p < .001$), Depression ($\beta = .272$, $p < .001$), and Stress ($\beta = .391$, $p < .001$). Loneliness, on the other hand, significantly and positively predicted Anxiety ($\beta = .281$, $p < .001$), Depression ($\beta = .325$, $p < .001$), and Stress ($\beta = .186$, $p < .001$).

Examination of the explained variance values indicated that excessive social media use (ESMU) accounted for 7.9% of the variance in Loneliness. In addition, ESMU and Loneliness jointly explained 22.2% of the variance in Anxiety, 22.9% of the variance in Depression, and 22.8% of the variance in Stress.

Ultimately, the results of the bootstrap analysis were examined to determine the mediating effects within the model. The findings indicated that the indirect effect of excessive social media use (ESMU) on Anxiety through Loneliness was statistically significant and positive ($B = 0.051$, 95% CI [0.025, 0.096], $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of ESMU are associated with increased Loneliness, which in turn contributes to higher Anxiety levels. Similarly, the indirect effect of ESMU on Depression through Loneliness was also statistically significant and positive ($B = 0.090$, 95% CI [0.048, 0.154], $p = .001$), indicating that increases in ESMU are associated with higher Loneliness, which subsequently leads to elevated Depression levels. Finally, the indirect effect of ESMU on Stress through Loneliness was found to be statistically significant and positive ($B = 0.048$, 95% CI [0.015, 0.095], $p = .003$), demonstrating that higher ESMU is linked to greater Loneliness, which in turn increases Stress levels. Given that both direct and indirect effects were statistically significant, the results indicate that Loneliness partially mediates the relationships

between excessive social media use and the three outcome variables (Anxiety, Depression, and Stress), thereby suggesting a pattern of partial mediation.

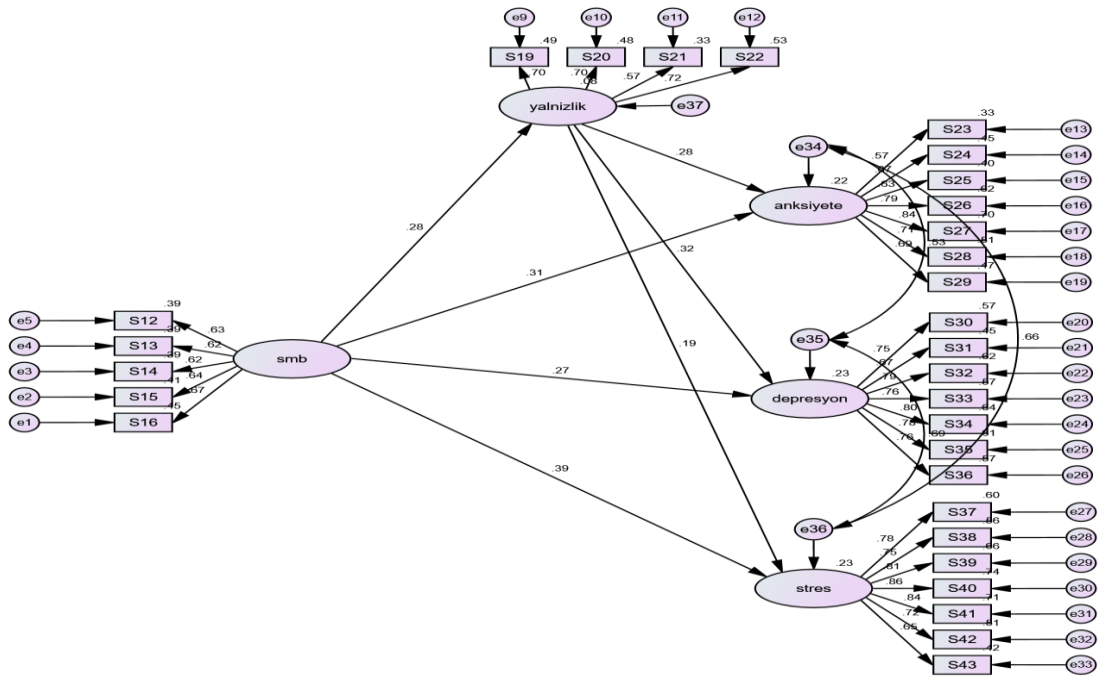


Fig. 1. Mediated structural model generated with Amos

Based on the empirical findings, all hypotheses (H1-H2-H3-H4) have been statistically supported. The proposed structural equation model (SEM), along with the detailed estimates of the mediation effects, is presented in Figure 2 and Table 3. Furthermore, a graphical abstract illustrating the main results of the study, developed with the assistance of artificial intelligence, is provided in Figure 3.

Discussion

This research analysed the relationships and underlying mechanisms among excessive social media usage, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress. The findings indicate a positive correlation between excessive social media use and depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness, thereby providing full support for Hypotheses H1 and H2.

Furthermore, loneliness was found to exert a statistically significant and positive effect on depression, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, excessive social media use was identified as a mediating variable in the relationships among these

constructs, thereby supporting Hypothesis H3. Ultimately, the observed association between excessive social media use and DASS (Depression Anxiety Stress Scales) further confirms Hypothesis H4.

Table 2

Results of mediation analysis using structural equation modeling

Independent	Dependent	β	SE	t	p
ESMU →	Loneliness	.281	0.050	4.168	< .001
ESMU →	Anxiety	.307	0.043	4.619	< .001
ESMU →	Depression	.272	0.061	4.373	< .001
ESMU →	Stress	.391	0.059	6.010	< .001
Loneliness →	Anxiety	.281	0.056	4.335	< .001
Loneliness →	Depression	.325	0.083	5.180	< .001
Loneliness →	Stress	.186	0.073	3.133	.002
Indirect Effects (Mediating Effects)	Total Effect	Bootstrap dence (Lower/Upper)	Confi- Range	p	Mediating Effect Type
ESMU → Loneliness → Anxiety	0.051	0.025 / 0.096		< .001	Partial
ESMU → Loneliness → Depres- sion	0.090	0.048 / 0.154		.001	Partial
ESMU → Loneliness → Stress	0.048	0.015 / 0.095		.003	Partial
CMIN [395, N = 393] = 790.942; p < .001; χ^2/df = 2.002; CFI = .934; SRMR = .048; RMSEA = .051					

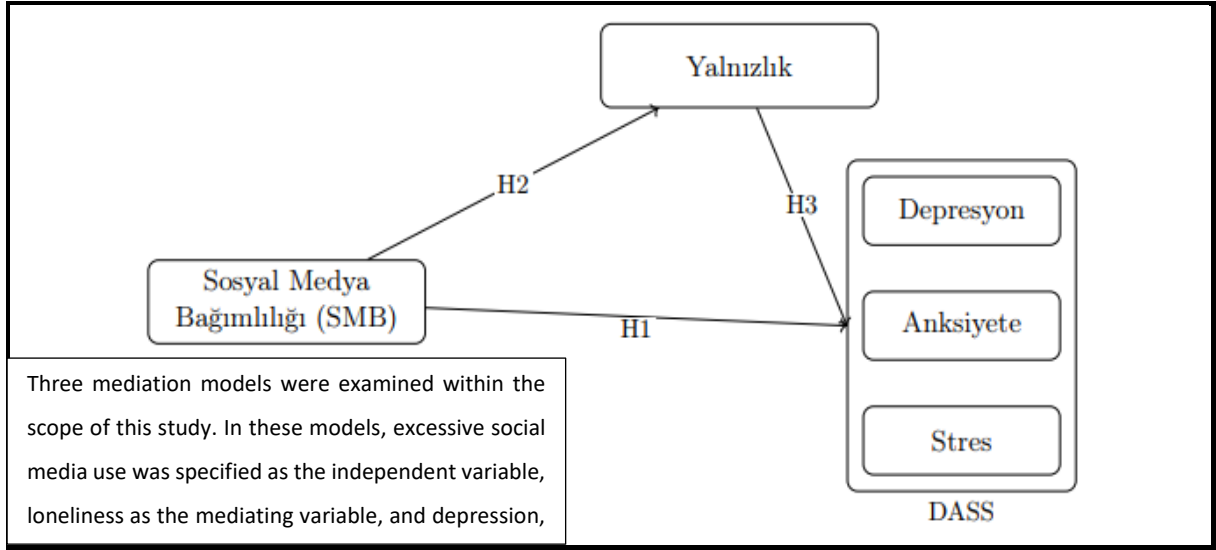


Fig. 2. Theoretical model of the research: The direct effect of compulsive social media usage on DASS dimensions and the mediating role of loneliness.

An examination of the explained variance within the model revealed that intensive social media use and loneliness jointly accounted for 22.2% of the variance in anxiety, 22.9% in depression, and 22.8% in stress. These findings indicate a moderate level of explanatory power, underscoring the importance of considering both problematic social media use and social isolation processes concurrently. In this regard, the findings highlight the necessity of adopting an integrated approach that addresses these interrelated factors to more effectively promote and safeguard the mental health of university students.

This paper is among the first to identify loneliness as a mediating variable in the relationship between uncontrolled social media usage and depression, anxiety, and stress. Furthermore, despite prior research establishing associations among the overuse of social media, loneliness, and mental health indicators, studies that examine these variables simultaneously within a single, integrated model remain notably scarce. From a general perspective, the model indicates that excessive social media usage exerts a significant positive effect on depression, anxiety, and stress, consistent with prior empirical findings (Lin et al., 2017; Keles et al., 2020; Shensa et al., 2018; Qiu et al., 2025; Zárte et al., 2023; Gómez et al., 2024). Similarly, excessive social media use was found to be positively associated with elevated

levels of loneliness. These findings are consistent with the existing body of literature, thereby lending further support to the robustness of the proposed model and enhancing its external validity (Kuss et al., 2011; Primack et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Aygar et al., 2021). Recent evidence suggests a global decline in the mental health of young people across nearly all regions (Potrebny et al., 2025). Transitional life stages such as leaving the parental home, entering university, and relocating to a new city are often associated with heightened feelings of loneliness. This sense of loneliness has been identified as a significant contributing factor to the development of social media addiction (Jing et al., 2025). Moreover, it has been reported that the global prevalence of social media dependency is approximately 24 % (Cheng et al., 2020), indicating that nearly one in five individuals worldwide may be at stake. Secondly, it can be asserted that feelings of loneliness contribute to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Hughes et al., 2004; Russell, 1996; Bottaro et al., 2023), thereby supporting the hypothesized mediating role of loneliness in the relationship between excessive social media usage and mental health disorders (Van den Eijnden et al., 2016; Seabrook et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2025). Despite the role of age in the overusing of social media remaining contested, empirical evidence suggests that younger users tend to experience more severe negative mental health issues compared to older individuals (Tsitsika et al., 2014). Nowadays, individuals, particularly adolescents and university students, frequently prefer to spend even their limited leisure time in online environments, reflecting the increasing centrality of digital engagement in daily life. Higher levels of internet addiction have been consistently associated with stronger feelings of loneliness (Czechowska-Bieluga et al., 2023). Therefore, loneliness can be conceptualized as a distressing emotional state that both contributes to and is reinforced by intensive social media use (Jing et al., 2025). This reciprocal dynamic highlights how persistent online engagement has become normalized, shaping a new pattern of everyday life for many individuals (Aydın, 2023).

The findings of the present research indicate that overuse of social media exerts both direct and indirect effects on the psychological well-being of university students. A recent study reported a linear increase in levels of loneliness over the period from 1976 to 2019 (Buecker et al., 2021), highlighting loneliness as a growing public health concern. Despite loneliness being increasingly recognized as a

societal issue, it appears to be experienced more acutely among younger populations and has received considerable attention in the literature (World Health Organization, 2025; Twenge & Spitzberg, 2021; Qualter et al., 2015; Bertelsmann, 2024; Mental Health Foundation, 2023; Smith, 2025). Particularly, social media usage as a coping mechanism for entertainment and alleviation of loneliness has been associated with poorer mental health consequences (Thygesen et al., 2022). According to these research findings, excessive social media use significantly and positively predicts loneliness, anxiety, depression, and stress. Overall, these outcomes align with existing empirical evidence and further confirm that higher levels of excessive social media usage are associated with elevated psychological distress among individuals.

The most notable finding of the study is that loneliness functions as a partial mediator in the correlation between the overuse of social media and psychological symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and stress. This suggests that social media addiction contributes to escalated feelings of loneliness, which in turn exacerbates negative psychological outcomes. The virtual gratification offered by social media may undermine face-to-face communication skills, thereby weakening individuals' offline relationships and leading to a "continuity cycle". Particularly, university students who frequently experience separation from their families and encounter challenges in adapting to new social environments may be especially vulnerable to elevated reliance on social media as a coping mechanism for loneliness.

Research findings indicate that the impact of excessive social media use on students' psychological health is not solely a direct pathway of harm but also operates through a critical mediating mechanism involving loneliness (Liu et al., 2025). The evidence of partial mediation suggests that overuse of social media not only directly contributes to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS), but also intensifies these adverse psychological consequences indirectly by strengthening individuals' subjective experiences of loneliness (Keles et al., 2019; Qiu et al., 2025).

In line with the "social displacement" hypothesis in the literature, students may turn to digital platforms in an attempt to compensate for unmet real-life social needs or to escape negative emotional states. Nevertheless, rather than fostering a genuine sense of belonging, such virtual interactions may inadvertently reinforce

individuals' perceptions of social isolation (Wu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). This dynamic supports the notion of a "vicious cycle," whereby social media addiction and loneliness mutually reinforce one another, ultimately contributing to a psychological stalemate among students (Wu et al., 2024; Seabrook et al., 2016). Accordingly, the findings suggest that intervention strategies aimed at improving students' mental well-being should not be limited to restricting or reducing digital media use (Liu et al., 2025). Since loneliness functions as a central mediating mechanism in this correlation, the enhancement of face-to-face social skills and the strengthening of reality-based social support networks are significantly effective in mitigating the depressive and anxiety-related symptoms associated with the compulsive social media use (Wu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025)

5. Limitations and recommendations

This study has two important limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research employed a cross-sectional design conducted within a specific time frame; therefore, causal conclusions cannot be established. Accordingly, future research should adopt more comprehensive longitudinal designs. Secondly, the sample was limited to university students, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should include broader populations, such as adolescents and adults, to enable more comprehensive comparisons and interpretations across different age groups. In terms of future research directions, incorporating additional constructs such as "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) may provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying social media addiction. This would contribute to a more robust explanatory model of problematic social media use. Furthermore, university psychological counseling services may consider implementing group-based interventions or social skills training programs for students experiencing social media addiction to reduce feelings of loneliness. Moreover, psychoeducational seminars focusing on the psychological risks of excessive social media use, including addiction mechanisms linked to dopamine reinforcement, may be particularly beneficial for Generation Z, who are highly embedded in digital environments. Such initiatives are likely to become increasingly important in contemporary and future mental health practice.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, all proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4) were supported by the empirical findings of this study. The findings demonstrate that excessive social media usage functions not only as a direct risk factor for psychological distress but also indirectly exacerbates mental health issues by intensifying feelings of loneliness, which in turn increases levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The data revealed that social media addiction explained 7.9% of the variance in loneliness. Moreover, excessive social media use was found to be associated not only with loneliness but also with broader mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and stress. Overall, research findings suggest that addressing excessive social media usage, and strengthening individuals' real-life social connections play a crucial role in enhancing psychological well-being and reducing their psychological symptoms among young people. The study accentuates the importance of resolving the deficit of connectedness, which is a fundamental psychological need, such as loneliness, to achieve wholesome success in combating excessive social media usage.

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