



The Mediating Role of Self-Regulation in the Relationship between Social Media Addiction and Loneliness

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ABSTRACT: The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social networks has significantly influenced students' cognitive processes and social interactions. Although social networks facilitate communication, learning, and information sharing, excessive use may contribute to increased loneliness and diminished self-control. This study examined the mediating role of self-regulation in the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness among Afghan students. A quantitative, correlational design was employed, involving 181 randomly selected students from the Faculty of Special Education. Data were collected using the Shahin Social Media Addiction Questionnaire, the UCLA Loneliness Scale by Daniel Russell, and the Bofard Self-Regulation Questionnaire. Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 and the PROCESS Macro plugin. Descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation, regression, and mediation analysis (Model 4 of PROCESS with the bootstrap method) were utilized. Findings indicated that social media addiction was associated with higher levels of loneliness ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$) and lower self-regulation ($\beta = -0.314$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, self-regulation was negatively associated with loneliness ($\beta = -0.278$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis revealed that self-regulation partially mediated the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness (Effect = 0.049, BootCI [0.018, 0.088]). These results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing self-regulation skills may mitigate the adverse effects of excessive social media use and reduce loneliness among students.

KEYWORDS: Social media addiction, loneliness, self-regulation, mediating analysis, Afghan students.

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in digital technology and increased internet accessibility are essential for people and students. While these platforms support communication, learning, and information exchange, excessive or unregulated use can lead to social media addiction. This behavioral disorder is defined by persistent preoccupation with social media, impaired control over usage, anxiety when access is restricted, and a preference for online rather than in-person interactions (Blachnio et al., 2025). Social media addiction surpasses normative use and negatively impacts multiple domains of functioning. Empirical studies have identified associations with diminished academic performance, reduced concentration, increased procrastination, poor time management, and decreased motivation to learn (Alvia et al., 2024; Wisanggeni et al., 2026). Excessive social media engagement can also disrupt sleep patterns and is frequently associated with mental fatigue, insomnia, and reduced daytime energy. Numerous studies have shown that social media addiction correlates with higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and overall poorer mental health (Albikawi & Abuadas, 2025; Badawi et al., 2024). As a result, social media addiction is increasingly recognized as a significant psychological and educational issue for students and remains a central topic in academic research.

Loneliness has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, particularly among students and young adults. It is defined as a psychological state arising from insufficient or unsatisfying social relationships, rather than solely from physical isolation (Karagöz & Ramkissoon, 2024). Loneliness has a substantial impact on mental health and daily functioning. Empirical studies have demonstrated strong associations between loneliness and mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, elevated stress, and reduced life satisfaction (Guo et al., 2025; Mota & Ferreira, 2025). Individuals with high levels of loneliness often exhibit weaker social connections, reduced academic motivation, and poorer academic performance. Additionally, research indicates that loneliness adversely affects sleep quality and is linked to sleep disturbances and persistent fatigue (Wan & Zhou, 2025). While social networks are intended to facilitate interpersonal connections, evidence indicates that superficial online interactions and excessive engagement in virtual environments frequently do not meet emotional and social needs, which may intensify feelings of isolation and loneliness (Vazquez et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

Self-regulation is a critical factor in understanding the impact of excessive social network use. Defined as the capacity to control



thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve long-term objectives, self-regulation is essential for academic achievement, mental health, and social adaptation (Tsai et al., 2025). Individuals exhibiting strong self-regulation manage time efficiently, control impulses, plan strategically, and adapt to changing circumstances. In contrast, low self-regulation is linked to addictive behaviors and mental health challenges (Manzari et al., 2024). Empirical studies demonstrate that self-regulation enhances academic performance, increases motivation, reduces procrastination, and fosters greater engagement (Felfelian & Jamshidian, 2025; Rahmani et al., 2025). Higher levels of self-regulation are also correlated with improved mental health, including reduced anxiety, stress, and depression. Additionally, research indicates that self-regulation enables individuals to manage online behavior, regulate social media use, and prevent digital addiction (Li et al., 2025; Xu & Tang, 2024). Thus, self-regulation may function as a protective factor against the adverse consequences of excessive social network use.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness. Evidence indicates that individuals who rely more heavily on social media frequently report increased feelings of loneliness (Ahmad et al., 2024; Espinoza-Ponce & Hernández, 2024). Excessive online engagement can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interactions, thereby weakening social relationships (Blachnio et al., 2025). Furthermore, social comparison, the pursuit of approval, and fear of missing out are associated with heightened feelings of isolation and perceived social inadequacy (Wan & Zhou, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Some research suggests that individuals may use social media to compensate for emotional or social deficits, potentially creating a cycle in which loneliness and social media addiction reinforce one another (Yue et al., 2022).

Recent studies indicate that self-regulation is a critical factor in the relationship between social media addiction and mental health outcomes. Excessive social media use can diminish self-regulation, thereby impairing emotional management and social functioning (Liu et al., 2026; Manzari et al., 2024). Reduced self-regulation is associated with increased reliance on online interactions, weakened offline relationships, and heightened feelings of loneliness. Li et al. (2025) demonstrated that self-regulation significantly influences the psychological consequences of problematic social media use. Similarly, Yue et al. (2022) reported that self-control mediates the association between social rejection and smartphone addiction. Haidari et al. (2026) further established that self-regulation can mitigate the adverse effects of social media addiction. Collectively, these findings underscore the pivotal role of self-regulation as a mediating factor between social media addiction and loneliness (Haidari et al., 2026; Yue et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing body of research on social media addiction, significant gaps persist. The majority of studies examine direct associations between variables and often overlook the potential mediating role of self-regulation in the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness. Furthermore, existing research predominantly focuses on Western and East Asian populations, resulting in the underrepresentation of Afghan students. The distinctive cultural, societal, and educational context of Afghanistan may shape students' social media usage and its psychological impact. The present study investigates whether self-regulation mediates the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness among Afghan students, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relevant psychological factors.

Research Hypotheses

- Addiction to social networks is positively and significantly associated with feelings of loneliness.
- Addiction to social networks has a negative and significant relationship with self-regulation.
- Self-regulation has a significant negative relationship with feelings of loneliness.
- Self-regulation mediates the relationship between addiction to social networks and feelings of loneliness.
- Self-regulation moderates the relationship between addiction to social networks and feelings of loneliness.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative, correlational design to examine the relationships among social media addiction, loneliness, and self-regulation in students. Additionally, it investigated whether self-regulation mediates the association between social media addiction and loneliness. Correlation analysis and mediation modeling were utilized to address these research questions.

Statistical population

The statistical population comprised all 250 students from the Department of Special Education. According to Morgan's table, 181 students were selected through simple random sampling using a random number table. This approach ensured that each student had an equal probability of selection and minimized sampling bias.



Data collection tool

Data were collected using three standard instruments: the Social Media Addiction Questionnaire, the Loneliness Feeling Questionnaire, and the Self-Regulation Questionnaire.

Social Media Addiction Questionnaire

The Social Network Addiction Questionnaire, developed by Shahin (2017), was employed to assess social network addiction. This instrument comprises 29 items distributed across four domains: virtual tolerance, communication, problems, and information. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' Higher total scores reflect greater levels of social network addiction. Validation by Shahin (2018) using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that the four factors accounted for 53.16% of the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index was 0.96, and Bartlett's test reached statistical significance, indicating that the sample size and factor structure were appropriate (Shahin, 2018). The primary validation study reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93, and subsequent research has also demonstrated strong reliability (Bakhtyari & Mathur, 2024). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.868, further supporting the questionnaire's reliability.

Loneliness Feeling Questionnaire

The UCLA Loneliness Scale, developed by Daniel Russell (1996), was employed to assess loneliness in this study. This instrument consists of 20 items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'Never' to 'Often.' Higher total scores indicate greater levels of loneliness. Scores of 20 indicate moderate loneliness, scores between 25 and 29 are classified as high, and scores of 30 or above are considered very high. Russell (1996) demonstrated the scale's validity by establishing associations with mental health and social relationships. Reported Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.89 to 0.94, and test-retest reliability is approximately 0.73 (Russell, 1996). Norabuena-Figueroa et al. (2026) further confirmed the scale's validity and reliability among student populations, reporting a Cronbach's alpha of 0.908 (Norabuena-Figueroa et al., 2026). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.765, indicating acceptable reliability.

Self-Regulation Questionnaire

Self-regulation was assessed using the Bouffard Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Thérèse Bouffard, 1995), which consists of 14 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The instrument evaluates both cognitive and metacognitive self-regulation strategies. Total scores indicate self-regulation levels, with 14–28 classified as low, 28–42 as moderate, and scores above 42 as high. Items 5, 13, and 14 are reverse-scored. International research supports the validity and reliability of this questionnaire. For instance, Toering et al. (2012) demonstrated its effectiveness in educational contexts, while Enkavi et al. (2019) confirmed its stability in large-scale studies (Enkavi et al., 2019; Toering et al., 2012). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.752, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data collection method

Following receipt of the necessary permits, questionnaires were distributed to students. The research objectives were explained, confidentiality was assured, and it was emphasized that the results would be used exclusively for scientific purposes. Participation was voluntary. Upon collection, the responses were prepared for statistical analysis.

Data analysis method

The research data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 in conjunction with the PROCESS Macro add-on. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed in the data analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, variance, skewness, and kurtosis, summarized demographic characteristics and research variables.

The normality of the data was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As some variables did not follow a normal distribution, Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine the relationships. Regression and mediation analyses were conducted using Model 4 in the PROCESS Macro to determine whether self-regulation mediates the association between social media addiction and loneliness. The significance of indirect effects was evaluated using the bootstrap method with 5000 resamples. Mediation was considered significant if the bootstrap confidence interval excluded zero.



FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	F	P
Class	One	63	34.8
	Two	64	35.4
	Three	22	12.2
	Four	32	17.7
Age	18–20 years	62	34.3
	21–23 years	103	56.9
	24–26 years	15	8.3
	More than 26 years	1	0.6
Daily Social Media Use	1–2 hours	110	60.8
	3–4 hours	51	28.2
	More than 4 hours	20	11.0

Note. F = Frequency; P = Percentage.

Table 1 indicates that among the 181 participants, the majority were in the second grade (35.4%), followed closely by those in the first grade (34.8%), with the smallest proportion in the third grade (12.2%). Most participants were aged 21 to 23 years (56.9%), while 34.3% were aged 18 to 20 years, 8.3% were aged 24 to 26 years, and 0.6% were older than 26 years. The majority reported using social media for 1 to 2 hours daily (60.8%), 28.2% for 3 to 4 hours, and 11% for more than 4 hours. Overall, the sample primarily consisted of young students who engaged in moderate social media use.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables (N = 181)

Variable	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
GPA	72.38	152.021	-4.146	22.385
Loneliness	2.36	0.137	-0.068	0.444
SMA	2.70	0.409	-0.026	-0.353
R	3.09	0.381	-0.272	-0.448

Note. GPA = Grade Point Average; SMA = Social Media Addiction; R = Self-Regulation.

Descriptive statistics indicated that participants had an average GPA of 72.38, reflecting moderate academic performance. The mean scores were 2.36 for loneliness, 2.70 for social media addiction, and 3.09 for self-regulation. Academic performance exhibited the highest variance, whereas loneliness showed the lowest. Skewness and kurtosis values for loneliness, social media addiction, and self-regulation were within normal ranges, indicating that these variables were approximately normally distributed. In contrast, academic performance demonstrated a strong negative skew and high kurtosis, suggesting a non-normal distribution. Overall, most variables satisfied acceptable statistical criteria.

Table 3: Tests of Normality for Research Variables

Variable	Kolmogorov–Smirnov p Statistic	
Loneliness	0.068	0.038
SMA	0.050	0.200
R	0.085	0.003

Table 3 indicates that the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests identified the social media addiction (SMA) data as normally distributed, with significance levels exceeding 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, the loneliness and self-regulation variables exhibited significance levels below 0.05, indicating non-normal distributions. Given the large sample size ($N = 181$) and the increased sensitivity of normality tests with larger samples, skewness and kurtosis values were also evaluated. The data were determined to approximate normality sufficiently; therefore, parametric tests were applied in this study.

Table 4: Spearman Correlation Matrix among Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. SMA	1		
2. Loneliness	0.371**	1	
3. R	-0.319**	-0.371**	1

Note. SMA = Social Media Addiction; R = Self-Regulation, $p < 0.01$.

Table 4 indicates a significant positive association between social media addiction and loneliness ($r = 0.371, p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of social media addiction correspond with increased loneliness. A significant negative relationship is also observed between social media addiction and self-regulation ($r = -0.319, p < 0.01$), indicating that greater dependence on social media is associated with lower self-regulation. Additionally, self-regulation and loneliness are significantly and negatively correlated ($r = -0.371, p < 0.01$), indicating that higher self-regulation is associated with reduced loneliness. Overall, these results indicate that social media addiction is associated with increased loneliness and decreased self-regulation, whereas self-regulation may mitigate feelings of loneliness.

Table 5: Coefficients of the direct paths in the mediating model

Path	B	SE	β	t	p
SMA → R	-0.303	0.068	-0.314	-4.429	<0.001
R → L	-0.161	0.041	-0.278	-3.963	<0.001
SMA → L	0.159	0.039	0.285	4.061	<0.001

Note: SMA = social media addiction, R = self-regulation; L = feeling of loneliness.

Mediation analysis demonstrated that social media addiction significantly reduces self-regulation ($\beta = -0.314, p < 0.001$). Individuals with higher reliance on social networks display lower levels of self-regulation. Furthermore, greater self-regulation is associated with decreased loneliness ($\beta = -0.278, p < 0.001$). Social network addiction also exerts a direct, positive effect on loneliness ($\beta = 0.285, p < 0.001$), indicating that increased dependence on social networks elevates loneliness. These results indicate that social network addiction contributes to loneliness both directly and indirectly through reduced self-regulation.

Table 6: Total, direct, and indirect effects of the mediating model

Type of work	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
SMA→L	0.208	—	0.132	0.285
SMA→L	0.159	—	0.082	0.237
SMAL→R	0.049	0.018	0.018	0.088

Note: BootLLCI = lower bound of the bootstrap confidence interval; BootULCI = upper bound of the bootstrap confidence interval.

The analysis demonstrated that social network addiction exerts a significant positive effect on loneliness (Effect = 0.208). This association remains significant when self-regulation is included as a variable (direct effect = 0.159). The indirect effect mediated by self-regulation was 0.049, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that did not include zero (BootLLCI = 0.018, BootULCI =



0.088), confirming statistical significance. These findings suggest that self-regulation is a critical mediator in the relationship between social network addiction and loneliness, with reduced self-regulation partially explaining this association.

Table 7: Fit indices of the mediation model

Criterion variable	R	R ²	F	p
R	0.314	0.099	19.619	<0.001
L	0.457	0.209	23.473	<0.001

Social media addiction is a significant predictor of self-regulation, accounting for approximately 9.9% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.099$). The final mediation analysis demonstrates that social media addiction and self-regulation collectively account for 20.9% of the variance in loneliness ($R^2 = 0.209$). The significant F-statistic suggests that the model provides a good fit and that these variables are robust predictors of loneliness.

Mediation analysis indicated that social media addiction directly increases loneliness and also exerts an indirect effect by reducing self-regulation. As both effects reached statistical significance, self-regulation functions as a partial mediator.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that social network addiction is associated with increased loneliness and reduced self-regulation. Students exhibiting higher levels of self-regulation report lower levels of loneliness. Mediation analysis demonstrates that self-regulation partially accounts for the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness. Consequently, social network addiction may contribute to heightened loneliness both directly and indirectly through diminished self-regulation. These findings align with the study's theoretical framework, which incorporates Barry Zimmerman's self-regulation theory and Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh's social compensation theory.

This research aligns with the findings of Anna Blachnio et al. (2025), Ahmad Bakhtawar et al. (2024), and Espinoza-Ponce and Hernández (2024), who identified a positive association between social media addiction and loneliness. Their studies indicate that excessive social media use diminishes real-life interactions and face-to-face relationships, thereby increasing feelings of isolation. Individuals who rely predominantly on online environments tend to invest less in meaningful emotional connections. Consequently, many report that their emotional and social needs remain unmet despite active online engagement, which exacerbates loneliness. Among Afghan student communities, this effect may be intensified due to social restrictions, economic challenges, and limited opportunities for in-person socialization.

Empirical evidence indicates that addiction to social networks impairs self-regulation, consistent with the findings of Manzari et al. (2024), Li. et al. (2025), and Xu J. and Tang (2024). According to self-regulation theory, individuals who have difficulty managing their behavior and time are more susceptible to excessive use of social networks. Excessive engagement with these platforms diminishes concentration, planning, emotional control, and self-discipline, thereby increasing dependence and impulsivity. Within university settings, such patterns are associated with reduced academic focus, increased procrastination, and poorer educational outcomes.

Research has demonstrated a clear association between self-regulation and reduced levels of loneliness. Students exhibiting higher self-regulation typically report lower feelings of loneliness, consistent with findings by Mota and Ferreira (2025) and Guo J. et al. (2025). Individuals with strong self-regulation can manage their emotions, control negative thoughts, and establish healthy social relationships. Furthermore, they are more likely to employ adaptive strategies to address social and emotional challenges, thereby reducing the likelihood of experiencing isolation or loneliness.

The present study demonstrates that self-regulation plays a significant role in the relationship between social media addiction and loneliness. The findings indicate that reduced self-regulation partially mediates the association between social media addiction and loneliness, consistent with the results reported by Yue H. et al. (2022), Li Q. et al. (2025), and Ali Reza Haidari et al. (2026). The evidence further suggests that self-regulation may serve as a protective factor against the adverse psychological consequences of social media addiction. Students exhibiting greater behavioral control and effective management of social media use are less likely to experience loneliness.



CONCLUSION

The results indicate that social network addiction increases feelings of loneliness among students, both directly and indirectly. Students exhibiting higher levels of addiction tend to demonstrate lower self-control, whereas those with greater self-control report reduced loneliness. The analysis suggests that self-control partially mediates the relationship between social network addiction and loneliness. Consequently, students with stronger self-control are less susceptible to the negative effects associated with excessive social network use.

The findings indicate the importance of fostering self-regulation skills among students at both the school and university levels. Enhancing time management, emotional control, self-discipline, and responsible engagement with social networks may reduce reliance on virtual environments and promote mental health. It is recommended that universities and counseling centers implement programs designed to develop self-regulation and support effective social media management.

This study provides valuable insights; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of self-report instruments may have introduced response bias. Due to the correlational design, causal relationships cannot be established. Additionally, the sample was limited to students from the Special Education University, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs and examine additional variables such as social support, social anxiety, resilience, and self-esteem to further elucidate the factors influencing social media addiction and loneliness.

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Cite this Article: Haidari, A.Z., Mohammadi, M.Y., Olumi, M., Haidari, H.A. (2026). *The Mediating Role of Self-Regulation in the Relationship between Social Media Addiction and Loneliness*. *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review*, 9(5), pp. 2921-2929. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i5-64>