

Social Media Addiction and Well-Being: The Roles of Body Image States and Psychological Distress among Gen Z

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships among social media addiction, body image states, psychological distress, and life satisfaction among 206 college students in the United States. Guided by Social Comparison Theory, the research also explored demographic differences across gender, ethnicity, and year in college. Results showed no gender or ethnic differences in social media addiction; however, males reported more positive body-image states than females, and juniors reported higher body-image satisfaction than freshmen. Correlational analyses indicated that greater social media addiction was associated with poorer body image, higher psychological distress, and lower life satisfaction. A serial mediation analysis revealed that social media addiction did not directly predict life satisfaction but exerted significant indirect effects through body image and psychological distress. These findings highlight the psychological pathways through which social media addiction undermines well-being and underscore the need for interventions promoting healthy digital habits, body image resilience, and emotional coping among young adults.

Keywords: *Social media addiction, Generation Z, Body Image, Psychological Distress, Life satisfaction*

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1. Introduction

Social media has fundamentally reshaped communication, interaction, and information sharing in contemporary society. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube are now embedded in daily life, particularly among younger generations. Research shows that Millennials spend an average of 3.8 hours per day on social media, while Generation Z (Gen Z) averages nearly 4.5 hours (MSS Media, n.d.). Such extensive engagement highlights social media's role as a primary source of information, entertainment, and social connection for these demographics.

While engagement on social media can foster positive outcomes, such as relationship building, idea sharing, and social support (Liu & Yu, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2017), there are growing concerns regarding its psychological impact on young users. A multitude of studies have found that social media usage is associated with depressive symptoms such as anxiety, loneliness, stress, and low self-esteem (e.g., Dhir 2018; Reer, 2019). Particularly, the pervasive exposure to meticulously curated and filtered images can trigger social comparisons, leading one to feel pressured to conform to unrealistic standards, ultimately undermining self-esteem and overall well-being.

The relationship between media exposure and body image concerns is well established in traditional media studies (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). However, the interactive and ubiquitous nature of

social media introduces new dynamics that warrant closer examination of its effects on body image and psychological health. More recently, with the growing concerns of social media overuse and dependency, scholars have begun to conceptualize social media addiction as a distinct behavioral construct. Addiction, generally understood as an uncontrollable habit or practice, social media addiction has been described as “the excessive use and habitual monitoring of social media, manifested in compulsive usage that comes at the expense of other activities” (Zivnuska et al., 2019, p. 747).

Despite a growing body of literature on social media addiction, empirical research to date yields contradictory cues. Some studies found a negative relationship between social media addiction and an individual's physical and mental health (Andreasen et al., 2017; Marino et al., 2018), while in other studies, no significant relationship emerged (Phu & Gow, 2019). This inconsistency necessitates further investigation of the complexities surrounding social media addiction, moving beyond simple correlations and investigating how varying levels of addiction may shape relationships with psychological outcomes. Given that young individuals, particularly Gen Zs, are more susceptible to developing addictive behaviors (Abbasi, 2019), this demographic is a critical focus for investigation.

Guided by Social Comparison Theory, the purpose of this study is to examine how social media addiction relates to Gen Zs' psychological and

well-being outcomes. Specifically, it investigates whether addiction and body image states differ across demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, or academic year. Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the direct effect of social media addiction on satisfaction with life, as well as its indirect effects through body image states and psychological distress. Finally, this research aims to explore whether body image states and psychological distress function sequentially as mediators in the relationship between social media addiction and satisfaction with life. Through these objectives, the study endeavors to extend current understanding of the complex psychological mechanisms linking social media use to well-being among young adults.

2. Literature Review

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory (SCT), originally developed in the field of social psychology, has been widely applied across multiple disciplines, including human relations (Dakin & Arrowood, 1981; Macke & Genari, 2019), education (Blanton et al., 1999; Dijkstra et al., 2008), organizational behavior (Goodman & Haisley, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007), and consumer behavior (Reid-Partin & Chattaraman, 2023; Zheng et al., 2022). More recently, the emergence of social media has extended the theory into digital contexts (Ahmad et al., 2024; Chrisler et al., 2013; Fardouly et al.,

2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), where social media platforms expose users to an ongoing stream of posts and user-generated content, creating constant and pervasive conditions for social comparison in everyday life (Gerber, 2020; Lim & Yang, 2015).

SCT explains how individuals evaluate their abilities, opinions, and emotions by comparing themselves with others (Wood, 1989). Such comparisons can occur in an upward or downward direction (Wills, 1981). Upward comparisons, directed toward individuals perceived as superior or more successful (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), can inspire motivation and self-improvement but it may also undermine self-esteem. This effect is particularly evident on social media, where people tend to present idealized versions of their lives that lead others to feel inadequate by comparison (Vogel, & Rose, 2016). Conversely, downward comparisons, directed toward those considered less successful, can bolster self-esteem but also evoke feelings of guilt or shame.

Although social comparison processes operate across the lifespan and within diverse mediated environments (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), their implications for Gen Z remain particularly important. As digital natives immersed in highly visual and interactive platforms, Gen Z represents a critical population for investigation. This study addresses this gap by examining body image and psychological well-being in

relation to levels of social media addiction, thereby offering a deeper understanding of how social comparison operates within this generation.

Gen Z and Social Media Addiction

Social media addiction (SMA) has been discussed in the literature under various terms, including problematic, compulsive, and excessive use. While these terms vary, they are often used interchangeably to describe maladaptive patterns of engagement that mirror addiction-like symptoms, particularly diminished self-regulation. SMA is widely conceptualized as a behavioral addiction, characterized by excessive and habitual platform use that disrupts everyday functioning across social, academic, occupational, and health domains (Miller, 2022; Zivnuska et al., 2019). Scholars argue that social media platforms are intentionally designed to foster dependency, raising concerns about their broader psychological and behavioral impact. Features such as notifications, likes, and algorithmically curated feeds stimulate the brain's reward system, triggering dopamine surges comparable to those produced by gambling or substance use (Miller, 2022; Sherman et al., 2016). Short-form platforms, notably TikTok, have been shown to activate neural reward pathways, heightening impulsivity and disrupting emotional regulation and sleep (Wang et al., 2025). Such design mechanisms amplify the risk of dependency, particularly among young users.

Generation Z, broadly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Pew Research Center, 2019), exhibits high vulnerability to social media overuse. As digital natives, they have been immersed in mobile technologies, Wi-Fi access, and social platforms from an early age, embedding these tools into their everyday routines (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Empirical evidence highlights both the prevalence and intensity of Gen Z's use. Rideout and Robb (2018) reported that more than 92% of this cohort use social media, with 70% engaging more than once daily, 38% checking several times an hour, and 16% using it almost continuously. They use social media not only for communication but also for identity development, cultural participation, and self-expression (Twenge, 2017). Given the central role of social media in the lives of Generation Z as they enter the workforce, examining SMA within this population is both relevant and essential.

Demographic differences within this group have further complicated the understanding of SMA, as prior research has produced inconsistent findings. Gender, in particular, has been widely debated. While males are generally more vulnerable to broader forms of internet-related addictions, such as gaming, females often display higher levels of specific forms, including problematic social media or smartphone use (Varchetta et al., 2024). Nevertheless, some studies have found no significant differences (Li et al., 2019; Tateno et al.,

2019), suggesting the need for further investigation. Beyond gender, factors such as ethnicity and year in college play a critical role, as they can shape how students use and experience social media. College experience is not uniform; each academic stage presents distinct developmental and social demands (Liu et al., 2019) that may influence students' reliance on social media and their vulnerability to negative outcomes. Similarly, ethnic background can shape cultural norms, social expectations, and online experiences, impacting both usage patterns and associated risks. Considering these differences, there remains a need for studies that examine SMA and its psychological implications across diverse demographic groups within college-aged Gen Z.

Psychological Well-Being (Body Image, Satisfaction with Life, Depression Anxiety Stress)

Research around the model of psychological well-being focuses on one's purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 2013). In a social media addiction era, the psychological well-being of Gen Z's is of critical concern to practitioners, educators, and advocates in the physical, mental, and social health fields. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that in 2021, suicide and homicide were the second and third leading causes of death among Gen-Z (Curtis & Garnette, 2023). Furthermore, reports from the

US Surgeon General's Advisory about Gen-Z's social media usage and mental health echo some similar concerns. The research showed young people are overwhelmed by social media, but the realization comes after several negative consequences. Some of these consequences involve exposure and susceptibility to body image issues, sleep loss, disordered eating, and harassment online (Murthy, 2023).

The perpetuation of their social media addiction adds a layer of complexity that misrepresents their psychological well-being and profoundly influences their body image perceptions. Social media perverts beauty and attractiveness and provides an unrealistic and unattainable standard for those who follow and adhere to them. According to recent research, social media has a significant impact on body image and mental health. It increases body dissatisfaction, cyber-bullying, and social pressures and decreases self-esteem and self-identity (Emma & Walters, 2025; Liang, 2024; Marino et al., 2018; Sajid et al., 2025). The social pressures from constant bombardment of curated content of "highlight reel," filtered and edited images, and self-objectification have a negative impact on teenagers and young people. It creates the need for social comparison, which leads to feelings of dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem (Emma & Walters, 2025; Liang, 2024; Marino et al., 2018). Most of the research focused on the social and cultural impact of social media

addiction of teenagers and young adults abroad (Marino et al., 2018; Sajid et al., 2025). Therefore, more research about social media impact on the psychological well-being of Gen-Zs, with harm reduction intervention strategies, is needed in the United States.

As true digital natives, Gen-Z are faced with the pressure of being constantly connected to their devices and the social media platforms they utilize. This causes heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress amongst this population. The American Psychological Association (APA) reported that Gen-Z is more stressed than older generations. They are 6 out of 10 times more likely to experience feeling stressed compared to 3.5 times among older adults (Medaris, 2023). They are stressed due to either physical, social, emotional, political, or financial responsibilities. Therefore, they utilize social media to escape and alleviate the negative pressures they experience. However, these maladaptive coping mechanisms exacerbate stress that can cause anxiety and depression among Gen Z. Several international studies indicate that individuals with social media addiction generally experience heightened levels of stress when they are unable to access the social media of their choice (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Marino et al., 2018; Zhao, 2021). The APA classifies depression and anxiety as mental health disorders. Depression is the most common mental disorder and ranges from unhappiness to extreme sadness that

impedes one's daily life. Anxiety is associated with intense apprehension, worry, or fear about impending danger or misfortune. Stress is a physiological or psychological response to personal or environmental stressors. While the research indicated that Gen-Z's knows and can identify mental disorders (Medaris, 2023), the addictive nature of social media usage and its negative psychological health outcomes, require further examination. In light of these concerns, the present study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Social media addiction and body image states differ significantly across a) gender, b) ethnicity, and c) year in college.

Hypothesis 2: Social media addiction has a significant direct negative effect on satisfaction with life.

Hypothesis 3a: Social media addiction has a significant indirect effect on satisfaction with life through body image states.

Hypothesis 3b: Social media addiction has a significant indirect effect on satisfaction with life through psychological distress.

Hypothesis 4a: Body image state mediates the relationship between social media addiction and satisfaction with life.

Hypothesis 4b: Psychological distress mediates the relationship between social media addiction and satisfaction with life.

3. Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Using a convenience sampling method, the study involved 206 college students from a mid-sized university in the United States. The majority of participants identified as White (77.2%) and female (53.9%). The sample included 44.7% freshmen, 20.9% sophomores, 19.9% juniors, and 14.1% seniors, with an average age of 19.30 years ($SD=1.31$). Before completing the survey, participants reviewed and consented to the IRB consent form, affirming their voluntary participation.

Measurement

The survey comprised five main sections: (1) social media addiction, (2) body image, (3) depression, anxiety, and stress, (4) satisfaction with life, and (5) demographic information. It included open-ended questions about participants' social media usage patterns (e.g., favorite platforms, time spent, number of accounts). All scales were adapted from previous studies that have demonstrated sound psychometric properties. The four measurement instruments used were as follows:

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS). To assess social media addiction, six items were adapted and modified from Andreasse-

n et al. (2017), using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Very Rarely" (1) to "Very Often" (7). An example item is "I feel an urge to use social media more and more." The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

Body Image States Scale (BISS). To measure the body image state, six items were adopted from Cash et al. (2002). The six aspects of current body experience included one's overall physical appearance, body size and shape, weight, feelings of physical attractiveness, one's looks relative to how one usually feels, and evaluation of one's appearance relative to how the average person looks. The original 9-point scale was revised to a 7-point scale ranging from "Extremely Dissatisfied" (1) to "Extremely Satisfied" (7). The scale exhibited excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21). To measure the psychological distress, the 21-item DASS was used (Henry & Crawford, 2005; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The scale comprises three subscales (namely depression, anxiety, and stress), rated on a 4-point scale ranging from "Never" (0) to "Almost Always" (3). Example items are "I could not seem to experience any positive feelings at all" (depression), "I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself" (anxiety), and "I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy" (stress).

Although the DASS comprises three distinct subscales, Lovibond (2025) suggests that averaging their scores provides a methodologically sound composite index of negative emotional symptoms. Cronbach's α coefficient was .93, indicating good internal consistency for the scale.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The SWLS is a widely used measure that assesses individuals' cognitive perceptions of their subjective well-being and overall life satisfaction. Adapted from Diener et al. (1985), the scale consists of five items, each rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (7). An example item is "In most ways, I think my life is close to my ideal." The scale showed good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .86.

Data Analysis

The statistical analyses conducted in this study included independent-samples t tests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and conditional process modeling using PROCESS Model 6. Demographic variables (specifically gender, ethnicity, and year in college) were treated as independent variables in t tests and one-way ANOVAs to examine their effects on social media addiction and body image states, which served as dependent variables. When ANOVA results reached statistical significance, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc test was employed to

identify the specific group differences.

Prior to testing the mediation model, Pearson correlations were examined to assess the relationships among social media addiction, body image states, psychological distress, and satisfaction with life, thereby confirming the appropriateness of these variables for subsequent analyses. The hypothesized serial mediation model was then tested using PROCESS Model 6 with bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 resamples) to estimate both direct and indirect effects of social media addiction on life satisfaction, mediated sequentially by body image states and psychological distress. All statistical procedures were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 21 and the PROCESS macro v4.2 (Hayes, 2022). The threshold for statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$.

4. Results

Group Comparisons of Social Media Addiction and Body Image States

Independent-sample t tests were conducted to examine gender differences in social media addiction and body image states. As shown in Table 1, there was no significant difference in social media addiction between female ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.13$) and male participants ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(199) = 1.64$, $p = .10$, indicating comparable levels of social media use across genders. However, a significant gender difference emerged for body image states, $t(200) = -2.91$, $p < .01$, suggesting

Table 1

Results of Independent-Sample t Tests for Gender Differences in Social Media Addiction and Body Image States

IVs	DVs	Groups	Mean	SD	t	p
Gender	Social media addiction	Female	3.08	1.13	1.64	.10
		Male	2.81	1.16		
	Body image states	Female	4.07	1.32	-2.91**	< .01
		Male	4.62	1.36		

Note. ** $p < .01$.

that males ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.36$) reported more positive body-image perceptions than females ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.32$). Although the effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.41$) was modest, the direction of the difference implies that gender may play a meaningful role in body-image evaluation among college students. Overall, these findings partially support H1a.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were subsequently conducted to examine whether ethnicity and year in college were associated with variations in social media addiction and body image states. To address the uneven distribution of participants across ethnic categories, ethnicity was reclassified into three groups to ensure adequate cell sizes and meaningful comparisons: White ($n = 159$), Black ($n = 22$), and Other ($n = 22$; including Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Other). Prior to performing the ANOVA, Levene's tests of homogeneity of variance confirmed that the assumption of equal variances was met for both social media Addiction ($F(2, 199) = 0.45, p = .64$) and body image

states ($F(2, 200) = 2.86, p = .06$). As shown in Table 2, the ANOVA results indicated no significant ethnic differences in either social media addiction ($F(2, 199) = 0.47, p = .63$) or body-image states ($F(2, 200) = 1.94, p = .15$), suggesting consistent patterns of social-media engagement and body-image perception across ethnic backgrounds. Overall, these results do not support H1b.

To evaluate H1c, which proposed that social media addiction and body image states differ significantly across year in college, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated no significant differences in social media addiction across class year, $F(3, 200) = 1.24, p > .05$. In contrast, a significant difference emerged in body image states, $F(3, 201) = 3.74, p < .05$. Post hoc Tukey comparisons revealed that juniors reported significantly higher body-image satisfaction than freshmen, suggesting a developmental trend in which students' body-image perceptions become more positive with academic progression, possibly

Table 2

Results of One-Way ANOVAs for Ethnicity and Year in College on Social Media Addiction and Body Image States

IVs	DVs	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Post hoc
Ethnicity	Social media addiction	Between	1.26	2	0.63		
		Within	267.40	199	1.34	0.47	
		Total	268.66	201			
	Body image states	Between	7.09	2	3.55		
		Within	365.43	200	1.83	1.94	
		Total	372.52	202			
Year in college	Social media addiction	Between	5.07	3	1.69		
		Within	273.78	200	1.37	1.24	
		Total	278.85	203			
	Body image states	Between	19.75	3	6.58		
		Within	353.84	201	1.76	3.74*	(3) > (1)
		Total	373.59	204			

Note. (1) freshman; (2) sophomore; (3) junior; (4) senior.

* $p < .05$.

greater self-acceptance or reduced social comparison over time. Collectively, these findings provide partial support for H1c.

Relationships Among the Research Variables

Prior to testing the hypothesized mediation model, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the bivariate relationships among social media addiction, body image states, psychological distress, and satisfaction with life. As shown in Table 3, social media addiction was negatively correlated with body image states ($r = -.20, p < .01$) and satisfaction with life ($r = -.18,$

$p < .01$), but positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = .39, p < .001$). Body image states were negatively related to psychological distress ($r = -.39, p < .001$) and positively related to satisfaction with life ($r = .54, p < .001$).

Moreover, psychological distress was negatively correlated with satisfaction with life ($r = -.48, p < .001$). These correlations collectively suggested that higher levels of social media addiction were associated with poorer body image, greater psychological distress, and lower life satisfaction, thereby providing preliminary support for the hypothesized mediation model.

Table 3

Intercorrelations among the Research Variables

	1	2	3	4
1. Social media addiction	-	-.20**	.39***	-.18**
2. Body image states		-	-.39***	.54***
3. Psychological distress			-	-.48***
4. Satisfaction with life				-

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Direct Effect of Social Media Addiction on Satisfaction with Life

	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
SMA → SWL	0.02	0.07	0.37	.71	-0.11	0.16

Note. SMA = Social Media Addiction; SWL = Satisfaction with Life.

Table 5

Indirect Effects of Social Media Addiction on Satisfaction with Life via Body Image States and Psychological Distress

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
SMA → BIS → SWL	-0.09	0.03	-0.16	-0.03
SMA → PD → SWL	-0.12	0.03	-0.18	-0.06
SMA → BIS → PD → SWL	-0.02	0.01	-0.05	-0.01
Total indirect effect	-0.23	0.05	-0.34	-0.13

Note. SMA = Social Media Addiction; BIS = Body Image States; PD = Psychological Distress; SWL = Satisfaction with Life.

The hypothesized serial mediation model was tested using PROCESS Model 6 to examine whether the effects of social media addiction on satisfaction with life were mediated sequentially by body image states and psychological distress. As presented in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 1, the direct effect of social media addiction on satisfaction with life was non-significant ($b = 0.02$,

$SE = 0.07$, $t = 0.37$, $p = .71$), indicating that social media addiction did not directly predict life satisfaction after accounting for the mediators (H2 not supported). However, as shown in Table 5, the indirect effects were statistically significant. Specifically, Social media addiction exerted significant negative indirect effects on satisfaction with life through body image states ($b = -0.09$, 95% CI [-

0.16, -0.03]) and through psychological distress ($b = -0.12$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.06]).

model and aligns with the assumptions of Social Comparison Theory, underscoring the indirect

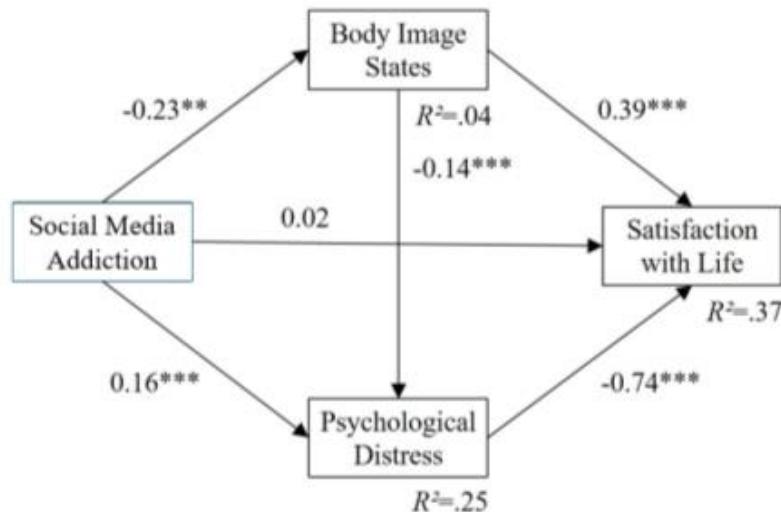


Figure 1. The Serial Mediation Model of the Relationships among Social Media Addiction, Body Image States, Psychological Distress, and Satisfaction with Life

Additionally, the sequential pathway from social media addiction → body image states → psychological distress → satisfaction with life was also significant ($b = -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.05, -0.01]). The total indirect effect was significant ($b = -0.23$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.13]), demonstrating that the influence of social media addiction on life satisfaction was fully mediated by its detrimental impact on body image and psychological distress. These results support Collectively, these findings provide comprehensive support for H3a, H3b, H4a, and H4b, indicating that higher levels of social media addiction are associated with more negative body image and greater psychological distress, which in turn lead to lower satisfaction with life. This supports the proposed serial mediation

pathways through which social media use may undermine well-being among college students.

5. Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among social media addiction, body image states, psychological distress, and life satisfaction in a sample of college students, primarily representing Gen Z, a cohort characterized by constant connectivity and digital immersion. Further investigation was done into the demographic differences across gender, ethnicity, and years in college. The results yield several noteworthy findings that will contribute to the growing literature on social media usage and the well-being of this population.

Regarding the differences between social media addiction and body image states across demographic variables, results indicate no significant differences across gender. However, the analysis found a significant difference in body image states among males and females. The male students reported more positive body image perceptions than their female counterparts. This finding aligns with research from (Fardouly et al, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), which reported that females often experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction is due mainly in part to higher exposure to highlight reels, appearance-related content, and the internalization of beauty ideals and standards promoted on social media platforms. The effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.41$) suggests that gender is seen as a meaningful factor in body image perceptions during the developing adult years.

Across ethnic groups, there were no significant differences in social media addiction or body image state. This aligns with the universal nature of social media experience across diverse populations (Gerber, 2020). With the globalization of digital content, there is also the possibility for the homogenization of appearance across cultures. Nonetheless, higher body-image satisfaction was associated with the years in college, with juniors reporting a more positive body image state than freshmen. This may indicate a trend toward in-

creasing self-acceptance, improved coping mechanisms, and a reduction in social media comparison behavior that leads to an increase in positive body perceptions, as students matriculate through college (Blanton et al, 1999).

Regarding students' social media addiction and satisfaction with life, the data analysis revealed there were no significant direct effects or correlation between the two. Nevertheless, a bivariate correlation between the construct does reveal that low life satisfaction is associated with higher levels of social media addiction, as reported by prior reports (Medaris, 2023; Murthy, 2023). The complexity of the relationship between the constructs is underscored by the absence of the direct effect, which likely functions indirectly through psychological mechanisms.

Further analysis of the data indicates that body image state and psychological distress serve as an intermediary relationship between social media addiction and satisfaction with life. As such, students who reported a more negative perception of their body image and greater psychological distress described higher social media addiction. Both of these are predictors of lower life satisfaction among Gen-Z. The aforementioned findings are consistent with the social comparison theory, and the concerns raised by American Psychology Association (Medaris, 2023) and the U.S. Surgeon Advisory (Murthy, 2023). The theory speculates that frequent engagement with unrealistic body

image standards, highlight reels, and filtered images can intensify social comparison, which induces anxiety and stress (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Wang et al., 2025; Zivnuska et al, 2019). This, in turn, negatively influences overall psychological well-being. Finally, the finding indicates that body image satisfaction and psychological distress operate sequentially as mediators between social media addiction and satisfaction with life. Particularly, a poorer perception of body image that increases psychological distress and leads to reduced life satisfaction was associated with higher social media addiction. Therefore, the notion that social media addiction affects well-being is largely indirect, as emphasized by the pattern identified in this research. The effects are mainly through body image and psychological distress, rather than direct mechanisms. Overall, the results signify the importance of intentionally deliberating on the psychological factors when assessing the impact that social media usage has on the overall life satisfaction of young adults.

6. Implications

This study provides a practical and theoretical understanding of social media addiction's influences on the well-being of college students. From a theoretical perspective, the results support the social cognitive theory. The implication is that social media addiction affects life satisfaction indirectly due to its negative impact on body image

and psychological distress. This pattern further suggests that body image dissatisfaction triggers psychological distress, resulting in lower overall life satisfaction.

Practically, the results underscore the important need to address the psychological factors (cognitive and emotional) in interventions that aim to reduce the adverse effects of excessive social media usage. The mental health professionals, universities and colleges, parents, and those influencing the lives of young adults should promote and encourage digital literacy, body image resilience, emotional coping strategies, and more mindful engagement with social media. There must be early education and intervention on social media usage since the finding indicates that body image improves with academic progression. Overall, in today's digital environment, it is important to foster healthy social media habits and positive self-acceptance. These strategies can play a paramount role in enhancing the psychological well-being and life satisfaction of college students and young adults.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The finding offers some valuable insights into social media usage amongst college students. There are some limitations that exist with the research. There was no established definitive process from social media addiction to body image, distress, and life satisfaction. Future longitudinal

or experiential studies are needed to confirm the connections. The data was also self-reported, which is subject to common bias, social desirability, and self-perception inaccuracies. So, the use of digital tracking data could complement the self-reported data. A larger sample size could have led to a more even distribution across ethnic and gender categories, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of social media's psychological impact. Finally, the generalizability of the finding may be limited to other age groups or non-college populations since the participants were all college students.

As such, future studies should examine a longitudinal design to directly determine the connection between social media addiction, body image, psychological distress, and life satisfaction. A more exhaustive investigation into platform-specific analysis to identify which has a stronger association with body dissatisfaction and distress should also be done. Likewise, a cross-sectional and intersectional study could identify how sociocultural

norms, ethnicity, and gender shape body image and overall well-being in the digital age. Finally, future research can evaluate intervention and prevention programs to foster and promote media literacy, self-comparison, digital detox practices, mitigating negative consequences from excessive social media usage, resilience, positive online behaviors, and other strategies to enhance life satisfaction in light of such pervasive social media engagement.

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