

The role of experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills in predicting social media addiction in high school students

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills in predicting social media addiction in high school students. The participants consist of 721 high school students in Türkiye in the 2023-2024 academic year. 'Demographic Information Form,' 'SMA Scale for Adolescents,' 'Avoidance and Fusion Scale-Youth 8,' and 'SEL Scale for Adolescents' were used to collect data. Hierarchical regression analysis was utilized to analyze the data. The findings indicated that there was a positive moderate-level relationship between social media addiction and experiential avoidance, a negative moderate-level relationship between social media addiction and social emotional learning skills, and a negative low-level significant relationship between experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills. Finally, experiential avoidance, as the strongest predictor, and social emotional learning skills explained approximately 36% of the variance in social media addiction.

Keywords: social media addiction, experiential avoidance, social emotional learning skills, high school students

Main points

- As students' levels of avoidance of unwanted emotions increase, their levels of social media addiction also increase.
- Students with high SEL skills have lower levels of social media addiction.
- Low experiential avoidance and high SEL skills support healthy use of social media.
- The study emphasizes the importance of EA and SEL skills in preventing social media addiction.

Introduction

Nowadays, as a result of the rapid development of technology, the need to use the internet has increased excessively. One of the most widely used areas of the internet in daily life is social media. Social media enables individuals to create content and comment on social media (Çiftçi, 2018), create individual and public profiles (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), communicate and interact (Allen et al., 2014), spend free time and have fun (Solmaz et al., 2013), share information with others (Tutgun-Ünal, 2020), and use web-based services (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The widespread use of mobile devices and improved internet access have increased social media use significantly.

Individuals—particularly adolescents and young adults—spend considerable time on social media platforms (Altınoy, 2021; Çiftçi, 2018) mainly to build and maintain relationships, cope with loneliness, seek entertainment, reduce stress, socialize, and support identity formation (Akyol-Güner et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2014; Çömlekçi & Başol, 2019; Doğrusever, 2021). Adolescence is a period of rapid emotional, cognitive, and social development, during which individuals are especially sensitive to peer influence and social evaluation. This stage is marked by ongoing maturation of self-regulation and coping skills, making adolescents more vulnerable to impulsive behaviors and difficulties in managing negative emotions. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that adolescents are especially vulnerable to social media addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

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Social media addiction (SMA) is a behavioral addiction characterized by excessive and uncontrollable social media use that negatively affects important life areas, such as academic responsibilities (Ndukwu et al., 2020). Studies have linked SMA to various factors, including social skills, impulsivity, emotion regulation, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, social-emotional learning skills, sense of responsibility, distress avoidance, depression, and attention bias (Altınsoy, 2021; Atın, 2022; Ayyıldız et al., 2023; Candemir, 2022; Ekşi, 2019; Özgür, 2023; Sağar, 2022; Xiao et al., 2022).

Individuals with social media addiction (SMA) often use social media to escape negative emotions and life stressors. Such efforts to escape or avoid distressing internal experiences—referred to as experiential avoidance—paradoxically lead to an increase in these unwanted experiences (Harris, 2022; Hayes et al., 1996). Experiential avoidance (EA) is a core concept of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapy approach, and is conceptualized as the individual's reluctance to engage with internal experiences.

The contrary concept of experiential avoidance is psychological flexibility, where individuals accept all emotions and thoughts as they are and open space to experience them all. In the context of Turkish culture, cultural norms emphasizing social desirability can heighten fear of negative evaluation, contributing to tendencies toward avoidance of uncomfortable thoughts and emotions. Taken together, accepting negative emotions may be particularly challenging. Such cultural dynamics can reduce psychological flexibility and promote experiential avoidance, which in turn may contribute to problematic behaviors such as social media addiction.

Although experiential avoidance seems to be a negative method, it may provide a momentary relief for some individuals (Hayes et al., 2004), and avoidance of distressing internal experiences may initially have a relaxing effect. However, excessive avoidance of internal experiences for the purpose of short-term relief can cause an individual's distress to increase in the long term (Hayes et al., 1996). According to Harris (2022), many types of addictions begin with an effort to avoid or get rid of unwanted internal experiences such as boredom, loneliness, guilt, anxiety, anger, and sadness. Likewise, research indicated an association between experiential avoidance and digital addiction and digital tool use (Balci & Kaya-Güler, 2023), problematic smartphone use and gaming (Çelenk, 2021), depression, anxiety and stress (Ekşi, 2019), and significant depression and suicide risk (Chou et al., 2018).

On the other hand, individuals who possess social emotional learning (SEL) skills are better able to spend their lives in responsible, compassionate, and constructive connections rather than avoiding unpleasant internal experiences. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL skills as “the process by which all youth and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes

to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, empathize, build and maintain positive relationships”. SEL skills consist of five basic skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020, p. 1). According to Kabakçı and Korkut (2008), SEL skills can reduce students' risk behaviors and increase protective factors.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills are developed through adolescents' interactions and relationships with their peers (Çiftçi, 2018). These skills, which emerge through reciprocal social experiences, enable adolescents to recognize, regulate, and manage their emotions effectively. When SEL skills are insufficiently developed, adolescents may experience a range of difficulties, including decreased academic achievement, lower self-esteem, increased vulnerability to addiction, heightened psychological distress, and a rise in maladaptive behaviors (Ayyıldız et al., 2023; Candemir, 2022). In this context, adolescents with underdeveloped SEL skills may be more prone to problematic social media use, suggesting that inadequate SEL skills constitute a significant risk factor for the development of social media addiction (SMA). Conversely, well-developed SEL skills can be considered a protective factor that helps prevent the emergence of maladaptive and addictive behaviors. Supporting this view, previous research has demonstrated significant associations between SEL skills and various outcomes, including Facebook addiction (Aftab et al., 2015), internet addiction (Ayyıldız et al., 2023), social media addiction (Altınsoy, 2021; Atın, 2022), and problematic internet use (Chen et al., 2021).

Experiential avoidance, or the tendency to evade or suppress negative internal experiences, may contribute to social media addiction by encouraging individuals to seek immediate relief or distraction online. Individuals with lower social and emotional learning (SEL) skills—such as emotional awareness, self-regulation, and social problem-solving—may be less able to cope adaptively with negative emotions and social stressors, making them more vulnerable to excessive social media use. Theoretically, experiential avoidance and deficits in SEL skills can interact as contributing and distractive factors: those who avoid unpleasant emotions and lack effective social-emotional competencies may turn to social media as a maladaptive coping strategy, reinforcing a cycle of dependence. Thus, social media addiction can be seen as both a consequence of emotional avoidance and a reflection of underdeveloped social and emotional skills, highlighting the interrelated nature of these variables.

Drawing on the aforementioned literature, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills predict social media addiction among high school students. Given the importance of preventing social media addiction during adolescence, elucidating the relationships between social media addiction and adolescents' experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills is expected to make a meaningful contribution to the literature.

Method

This correlational study focuses on examining the predictive role of experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills in social media addiction among high school students. Therefore, it is hypothesized that higher levels of experiential avoidance will be positively associated with social media addiction, higher social-emotional learning skills will be negatively associated with it, and that together, experiential avoidance and social-emotional learning skills will significantly predict social media addiction among high school students.

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 721 high school students, including 439 (60.9%) female students and 282 male students (39.1%) studying in Diyarbakır, Türkiye in the 2023-2024 academic year. The study employed a convenience sampling method, with inclusion criteria specifying high school students and exclusion criteria excluding 12th grade students. The latter were not included because the national university entrance exam was approaching, and most were busy with studying, which could have interfered with the study. Of the students, 269 (37.3%) were in 9th grade, 266 (36.9%) were in 10th grade, and 186 (25.8%) were in 11th grade. Also, 281 (39%) of the students were studying in Anatolian high schools, 170 (23.6%) in science high schools, 115 (16%) in vocational high schools, and 155 (21.5%) in religious high schools. Among the students, 39 (5.4%) had low economic income, 625 (86.7%) had medium economic income, and 57 (7.9%) had high economic income.

Data Collection Tools

In the study, the following data collection tools were used: the demographic information form, which included items on gender, grade level, and perceived income; the 'Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents'; the 'Social Emotional Learning Scale for Adolescents,' and the 'Fusion and Avoidance Scale-Youth 8'.

Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents

Özgenel et al. (2019) developed this scale to measure the social media addiction levels of adolescents in line with the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for gaming addiction. This 5-point Likert-type scale has a unidimensional structure consisting of nine items. There are no reverse-coded items in the scale. A total score can be obtained from the scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as .90 for the 'Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents'. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be .82.

Avoidance and Fusion Scale - Youth 8

This scale was developed by Greco et al. (2008) to assess the levels of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion of young people. The short form of the scale was adapted into Turkish by Büyükoksüz and Erözkan (2019). The short form structure

of the scale makes it practical for use with high school students, and there are a limited number of scales measuring experiential avoidance in adolescents in the Turkish language. This 8-item and a single-dimension scale has a 5-point Likert-type structure. There are no reverse coded items in the scale. In the Turkish adaptation study of the scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported to be .78, and the test-retest reliability coefficient was reported to be .79. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as .80.

Social Emotional Learning Skills Scale for Adolescents

It is a measurement tool developed by Totan (2018) to explore adolescents' SEL skills within the framework of CASEL standards. The scale consists of 23 items and 5 dimensions, namely self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship building skills, and responsible decision-making. There are no reverse-coded items in the scale. A total score can be obtained from the scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale was reported as .92, and in this study, it was calculated as .80.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were first computed. Subsequently, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among the variables. In line with the primary objective of the study, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted after the relevant assumptions had been tested. The procedures for assumption testing were based on Büyükoztürk (2022).

Procedure

With the ethics committee decision dated 22.03.2024 and numbered 53911, the necessary approval was obtained from Hasan Kalyoncu University Ethics Committee. Paper-and-pencil-based informed consent was obtained from the participants and the parents of the participants who agreed to take part in the study. All instruments were administered during class hours after obtaining the necessary permissions from the school principal and the classroom teachers. Completing the instruments took participants approximately 15 minutes.

Results

The descriptive findings and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted before the main findings of the hierarchical regression analysis. Firstly, Table 1 showed the standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis of variables of social media addiction (SMA), experiential avoidance (EA), and social emotional learning (SEL) skills scale total scores. Among 721 participants, SMA scores averaged 20.88 ($SD = 6.96$) with slight positive skewness, EA scores averaged 13.20 ($SD = 7.28$) with a mildly right-skewed distribution, and SEL scores averaged 81.52 ($SD = 11.46$), showing an approximately symmetric distribution close to normal. The skewness and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of SMA, EA, and SEL

Scale	N	Mode	Mean	Median	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
SMA	721	20.00	20.88	20.00	6.96	.45	-.33
EA	721	6.00	13.20	12.04	7.28	.28	-.61
SEL	721	84.00	81.52	82.00	11.46	-.03	-.09

SMA: Social Media Addiction, EA: Experiential Avoidance, SEL: Social Emotional Learning skills

kurtosis coefficients were between -1 and +1. Considered together, the variables showed a normal distribution.

Secondly, Pearson correlation analysis was applied to determine the relationship between SMA and EA and SEL skills of high school students, and the findings were presented in Table 2. The findings indicated that there was a positive moderate significant relationship between SMA and EA ($r=.55, p<.01$); a negative moderate significant relationship between SMA and SEL skills ($r=-.33, p<.01$); and a negative low significant relationship between EA and SEL skills ($r=-.19, p<.01$).

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive role of EA and SEL skills in SMA among high school students. Prior to the analysis, the assumptions of hierarchical regression were evaluated as presented in Table 3. The results indicated no multicollinearity issues: the correlation between variables was below .90 (.55), tolerance values exceeded .20 (.96), VIF values were under 5 (1.04), the largest CI was below 30 (17.93), and the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.78. All values obtained show that there was no multicollinearity.

After testing the assumptions, hierarchical regression analysis was performed to determine whether experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills predict social media addiction. The findings revealed that in Model 1, experiential avoidance significantly predicted social media addiction, explaining 31% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .31, p < .01$). In Model 2, after adding social emotional learning skills, the model explained an additional 5% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .05, p < .01$). In this final model, experiential avoidance remained a significant positive predictor ($B = .49, \beta = .51, p < .01$), while social emotional learning skills had a significant negative contribution ($B = -.14, \beta = -.23, p < .01$). Overall, the findings revealed that experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills collectively accounted for 36% of the variance in social media addiction. These results were in line with the hypotheses that both experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills contributed uniquely to the prediction of social media addiction, with experiential avoidance showing a positive association ($B = .49$) and social emotional learning skills demonstrating a negative relationship ($B = -.14$). Specifically, experiential avoidance alone explained 31% of the variance, emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .51$). However, although the model explained a statistically significant portion of the variance in social media addiction ($R^2 = .36$), this value suggests that additional factors beyond those included in the study may contribute to the complexity of social media addiction and should be considered in future

Table 2. The Pearson correlations between SMA, EA, and SEL

Scale	1	2	3
SMA	1.00	-	-
EA	.55**	1.00	-
SEL	-.33**	-.19**	1.00

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$; SMA: Social Media Addiction, EA: Experiential Avoidance, SEL: Social Emotional Learning

Table 3. Assumptions of hierarchical regression analysis

Scale	Tolerance	VIF	CI	Durbin- Watson
EA	.963	1.039	3.996	1.781
SEL	.963	1.039	17.935	
SMA	-	-	-	

SMA: Social Media Addiction, EA: Experiential Avoidance, SEL: Social Emotional Learning Skills

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis results for the prediction of social media addiction

Model	Predictor	B	SHB	β	ΔR^2
1	Intercept	13.88	.45		.31**
	Experiential Avoidance	.53	.03	.55**	
2	Intercept	26.07	1.64		.05**
	Experiential Avoidance	.49	.03	.51**	
	Social Emotional Learning Skills	-.14	.02	-.23**	

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

research. The detailed results of the hierarchical regression analysis were presented in Table 4.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the role of experiential avoidance and social emotional learning skills in predicting social media addiction in high school students. The findings supported the hypotheses that experiential avoidance and social-emotional learning skills each made a unique contribution to predicting social media addiction. In the following, the implications of these findings will be discussed in relation to previous research, theoretical frameworks, and potential practical applications.

The findings of the present study indicated that experiential avoidance was closely associated with higher levels of social media addiction, a result that aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of avoidance-based coping strategies in maladaptive technology use (Chou et al., 2018; Çelenk, 2021; Sağar, 2022). This pattern suggests that students may turn to social media as a means of distancing themselves from distressing thoughts and emotions. In contrast, social-emotional learning skills appear to function as a protective factor, as students with more developed SEL skills tend to engage with social media in a more regulated and intentional manner. That is, lower SEL competence is associated with more problematic patterns of social media use (Aftab et al., 2015; Agirkan, 2023; Altınoy, 2021; Atın, 2022; Chen et al.,

2021; Xiao et al., 2022). Moreover, the inverse association between SEL skills and experiential avoidance highlights the interconnected nature of emotional awareness, regulation, and psychological flexibility. This finding is supported by previous research indicating that reduced psychological flexibility is linked to greater difficulties in emotion regulation and higher levels of problematic internet use (Savruk, 2023; Yorulmaz et al., 2020). Taken together, these results suggest that enhancing students' SEL skills, particularly among those prone to experiential avoidance, may contribute to healthier and more balanced social media use.

The observed positive association between experiential avoidance and social media addiction indicated that students who were more inclined to avoid unwanted emotional experiences were also more likely to exhibit problematic patterns of social media use. In contrast, the inverse relationship between social-emotional learning skills and social media addiction underscored the protective role of SEL competencies in mitigating maladaptive engagement with social media platforms. From this perspective, lower levels of experiential avoidance combined with more developed SEL skills may facilitate healthier, more regulated social media use among students. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that experiential avoidance plays a significant role in the development of social media addiction and related problematic internet behaviors (Çelenk, 2021; Ekşi, 2019; Kurşuncu et al., 2023; Sağar, 2022). These findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of experiential avoidance are more likely to engage in excessive social media use as a way of distancing themselves from distressing thoughts and emotions. Supporting this view, Cao et al. (2024) emphasized that experiential avoidance may contribute to internet addiction indirectly by intensifying depressive symptoms, suggesting that interventions targeting experiential avoidance could reduce maladaptive technology use. This tendency may be particularly pronounced during adolescence, a developmental period in which emotion regulation skills are still maturing. As a result, social media may be used not only for communication or entertainment but also as a means of emotional escape, increasing the risk of addictive patterns over time.

Research examining the association between social-emotional learning skills and social media addiction consistently indicates that stronger SEL competencies are linked to lower levels of problematic social media use (Agirkan, 2023; Candemir, 2022). Prior studies have shown that as students' SEL skills improve, tendencies toward social media addiction diminish (Atın, 2022), a finding that aligns with the results of the present study. In a similar vein, recent empirical evidence indicates that addictions to video content and live streaming are inversely related to social-emotional learning competencies, underscoring the potential impact of these maladaptive digital behaviors on adolescents' emotional and social development (Ye et al., 2025). The capability of increasing mindful use of social media by means of social emotional learning interventions or trainings is a hopeful mechanism to support adolescents' well-being (Setia et al., 2024). Similarly, evidence suggests that well-developed emotional regulation

skills play a protective role against addictive patterns of social media use among adolescents and young adults (Aftab et al., 2015; Özgür, 2023).

Although social-emotional learning (SEL) abilities significantly predict social media addiction, the relatively modest explained variation shows that SEL represents only one of several contributing factors. Social media addiction may be more heavily impacted by situational emotional states and context-dependent elements, whereas SEL reflects people's overall emotional and social capacities. Furthermore, even among people with strong SEL skills, the protective function of individual competencies may be limited by the addictive design elements of social media sites. Additionally, variance in a particular behavioral outcome, like social media addiction, may not be well captured by the general test of SEL abilities. Lastly, the little variance represented by the direct model may be explained by SEL skills' indirect influence on social media addiction through mediating variables (such as self-regulation or emotional coping).

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of fostering SEL skills while decreasing experiential avoidance during adolescence, as competencies such as psychological flexibility, emotional awareness, emotion regulation, and effective interpersonal communication may enable students to engage with social media in a more intentional and self-regulated manner. Conversely, insufficient SEL development and excessive avoidance among high school students may constitute a risk factor for social media addiction, as these individuals may increasingly rely on social media platforms to meet emotional and relational needs, thereby heightening the likelihood of addictive use patterns. All in all, the present study makes a novel contribution to the literature by jointly examining experiential avoidance, social-emotional learning skills, and social media addiction within a high school sample, thereby offering a valuable framework to inform future research and guide preventive and intervention-oriented practices.

Limitations and Directions/Suggestions for Future Research

This study cannot be considered without its limitations. Firstly, 12th grade students preparing for university entrance exams were not included in the study. Since the study was conducted with 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students, the findings may not be generalizable to all high school students. In addition to the limitations already acknowledged, the use of self-report measures may have introduced response bias, and the regionally limited sample restricts the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents the establishment of causal relationships among the variables.

Based on these limitations, several suggestions for future research are presented. Considering that the age of social media use is decreasing, longitudinal studies examining the effect of age on SMA in elementary and middle school students

can be conducted. Furthermore, as EA has been identified as a contributing factor to addiction, future studies could investigate this relationship in the context of other behavioral addictions (e.g., gambling, online gaming, e-sports, shopping, sexuality, and food addiction). Additionally, although this study focused on behavioral addictions, examining substance-related addictions (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, and drug use) in school settings may provide deeper insights into the nature of addiction and its effects on students. It is recommended to investigate the relationship between SEL skills as a protective factor and other types of addiction and to consider SMA together with other protective factors.

Addition, psychoeducation interventions about social media addiction in schools should be carried out by classroom teachers within the scope of in-class guidance activities. Also, through structured, time-limited programs, individual or group counseling services for social media addiction should be provided by school counselors. For instance, classroom-based guidance activities led by counselors could be delivered in weekly sessions over a period of 6–8 weeks, focusing on increasing awareness of social media addiction and promoting healthy digital habits. In order to prevent social media addiction, seminars, workshops, and intervention programs can be implemented to increase the psychological flexibility of students with high levels of EA. In addition, psychoeducation programs can be organized for students with low SEL skills to gain skills such as recognizing their emotions, communicating effectively, and developing positive relationships. Future studies may employ qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, to obtain a deeper understanding of social media addiction among adolescents.

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Author contributions

Conception and design: S.T., G.A.; Data acquisition: S.T.; Data analysis: S.T.; Data interpretation: S.T., G.A.; Drafting of the manuscript: S.T.; Critical revision of the manuscript: S.T., G.A. All authors reviewed the results, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of this study.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Hasan Kalyoncu University Ethics Committee (Date: March 22, 2024, Decision/Protocol No: 53911). Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that this study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing or preparation of this study.

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