

DOES SOCIAL MEDIA REDUCE OR INTENSIFY SOCIAL ISOLATION? A SOCIO-LEGAL MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF FOMO, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND DIGITAL RIGHTS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19757793>

Keywords

Social media; Social isolation; Fear of missing out; Emotional intelligence; Perceived social support; Digital rights; Moderated mediation

Article History

Received: 02 March 2026

Accepted: 09 April 2026

Published: 25 April 2026

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Abstract

This study examines whether social media use reduces or intensifies social isolation among young adults by advancing a moderated mediation framework that integrates psychological, social, and socio-legal dimensions. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is conceptualized as a key mediating mechanism linking social media use to social isolation, while emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and digital rights awareness are modeled as moderating variables.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 420 young adults aged 18–30 years. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS and SmartPLS. The results indicate that social media use is positively associated with FoMO, which in turn significantly predicts higher levels of social isolation. Mediation analysis confirms that FoMO partially explains the relationship between social media use and social isolation. Moderation findings reveal that emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and digital rights awareness significantly attenuate the impact of FoMO on social isolation. Furthermore, moderated mediation analysis demonstrates that the indirect effect of social media use on social isolation via FoMO is stronger among individuals with lower levels of emotional, social, and digital resilience.

The study contributes to the literature by offering a theoretically integrated and empirically robust model that moves beyond linear assumptions to explain the conditional effects of social media on well-being. By incorporating digital rights awareness as a socio-legal construct, it extends existing frameworks and highlights the role of structural and regulatory factors in shaping digital

experiences. The findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions, including emotional intelligence development, strengthening of social support systems, and promotion of digital literacy and rights awareness, to mitigate the adverse effects of social media use.

1. INTRODUCTION

The exponential expansion of social media over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed the architecture of human interaction, socialization, and identity formation. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly twitter) have created unprecedented opportunities for connection, enabling users to maintain relationships across geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. However, this technological advancement has generated a profound paradox: while social media ostensibly enhances connectivity, it may simultaneously intensify social isolation. This contradiction has positioned social media at the center of contemporary interdisciplinary debates spanning psychology, sociology, public health, and increasingly, socio-legal scholarship.

Social isolation, broadly conceptualized as both the objective absence of social interactions and the subjective experience of loneliness, is now recognized as a critical global health concern with implications comparable to established risk factors such as smoking and obesity [1]. Among young adults—arguably the most digitally immersed demographic—the relationship between social media use and social isolation is particularly complex. On one hand, digital platforms facilitate social engagement, peer interaction, and community building. On the other, accumulating evidence suggests that excessive or maladaptive social media use is associated with heightened loneliness, depressive symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction [2,3]. This duality underscores the necessity of moving beyond simplistic linear models toward more nuanced, mechanism-driven analyses.

A central mechanism that has emerged in recent literature is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), defined as a pervasive apprehension that others may be experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent [4]. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), FoMO reflects unmet

psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence [5]. Social media environments, characterized by curated content, highlight reels, and algorithmically amplified social comparison, provide fertile ground for FoMO to flourish. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that increased social media engagement predicts higher levels of FoMO, which in turn is associated with compulsive checking behaviors, emotional distress, and reduced well-being [6,7]. Importantly, FoMO has been identified as a mediating variable linking social media use to adverse psychological outcomes, suggesting that it operates as a key explanatory pathway through which digital engagement translates into perceived social isolation.

However, the impact of FoMO is neither uniform nor deterministic. Individual differences, particularly in emotional regulation capacities, play a critical role in shaping user experiences. Emotional intelligence (EI)—defined as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions—has been increasingly recognized as a protective psychological resource in digital contexts [8]. Individuals with high EI are better equipped to interpret social cues, manage negative affect, and resist maladaptive comparison processes. Consequently, they are less likely to experience FoMO-induced distress and more capable of maintaining healthy engagement with social media. Conversely, individuals with lower EI may exhibit heightened sensitivity to social comparison, emotional dysregulation, and dependency on external validation, thereby amplifying the isolating effects of digital interaction [9]. This suggests that EI functions as a moderating variable, attenuating or exacerbating the relationship between FoMO and social isolation.

In parallel, **perceived social support** represents another critical psychosocial determinant influencing the social media-isolation nexus. Unlike objective measures of social networks,

perceived social support captures individuals' subjective evaluation of the availability and adequacy of emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance [10]. Social media platforms can both enhance and undermine this perception. On one hand, they enable continuous communication and access to broader support networks; on the other, they may foster superficial interactions that lack depth and authenticity. Research indicates that individuals with high perceived social support are less vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use, as their offline relational needs are sufficiently met [11]. In contrast, those with low perceived support may rely excessively on online validation, increasing susceptibility to FoMO and subsequent isolation. Thus, perceived social support operates as a contextual moderator, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to digital social environments.

While psychological and social variables have been extensively examined, the socio-legal dimensions of social media use remain comparatively underexplored, particularly in relation to social isolation. The digital ecosystem is not a neutral space; it is governed by complex legal, economic, and technological structures that influence user behavior and experience. Concepts such as **digital rights**—including data privacy, informational self-determination, algorithmic transparency, and freedom from manipulative design—are increasingly recognized as fundamental to digital well-being [12]. The rise of surveillance capitalism and algorithm-driven content curation has introduced new forms of asymmetry between users and platforms, wherein user attention and emotional engagement are commodified [13]. These dynamics may inadvertently exacerbate FoMO by prioritizing emotionally salient and socially comparative content, thereby intensifying users' perceptions of exclusion and inadequacy.

Moreover, limited awareness of digital rights may render users more vulnerable to these structural influences. Young adults, despite being digitally proficient, often lack critical literacy regarding how algorithms shape their online experiences or how their data is utilized [14]. This lack of

awareness can diminish users' sense of autonomy and control, potentially amplifying feelings of isolation and psychological distress. Conversely, individuals with greater digital rights awareness may engage more critically with social media, adopt protective strategies (e.g., privacy settings, content curation), and resist manipulative platform features. This introduces a novel socio-legal dimension to the analysis, positioning digital rights awareness as a moderator that can mitigate or intensify the psychological impact of social media use.

Taken together, these considerations highlight the inadequacy of unidimensional models in explaining the relationship between social media and social isolation. Instead, there is a compelling need for integrative frameworks that account for mediating psychological mechanisms and moderating individual, social, and structural factors. The present study responds to this need by proposing and empirically testing a moderated mediation model. Specifically, it examines whether FoMO mediates the relationship between social media use and social isolation, while emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and digital rights awareness function as moderators influencing this pathway.

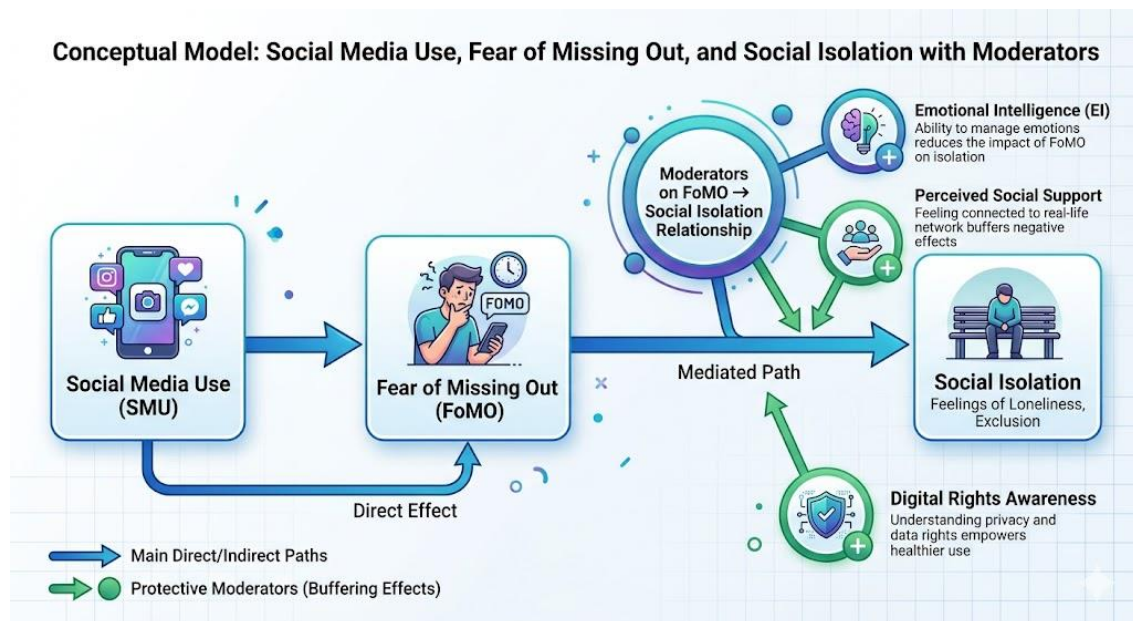
This approach offers several theoretical and practical contributions. First, it advances the literature by synthesizing insights from psychology (FoMO, EI), sociology (social support), and law (digital rights), thereby fostering an interdisciplinary understanding of digital behavior. Second, it moves beyond binary debates regarding whether social media is “good” or “bad,” instead elucidating the conditions under which it becomes beneficial or harmful. Third, by incorporating socio-legal variables, it expands the analytical scope of digital well-being research, highlighting the role of structural and regulatory factors in shaping individual experiences.

In the context of developing countries such as Pakistan, where digital adoption is rapidly increasing but regulatory frameworks and digital literacy remain uneven, this inquiry is particularly salient. Young adults in such settings may face unique vulnerabilities due to limited awareness

of digital rights, socio-cultural pressures, and evolving patterns of online engagement. Understanding the interplay between psychological mechanisms and socio-legal contexts is therefore essential for designing effective interventions, policies, and educational programs.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the central research question: **Does social media**

reduce or intensify social isolation among young adults, and through what mechanisms and contextual conditions does this occur? By addressing this question through a robust moderated mediation framework, the study aims to provide nuanced, evidence-based insights that can inform both academic discourse and policy development in the digital age.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a cross-sectional, explanatory quantitative design to examine the complex relationship between social media use and social isolation through a moderated mediation framework. The design is grounded in **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** and extended through a **socio-legal lens**, enabling a multidimensional exploration of psychological and structural determinants of digital behavior. A latent variable Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was employed to simultaneously estimate:

- Direct effects between constructs
- Indirect (mediated) effects via Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

- Moderation effects of emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and digital rights awareness
- Conditional indirect effects (moderated mediation)

To enhance analytical robustness, both:

- **Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM)** using AMOS (for theory testing and model fit), and
- **Variance-Based SEM (PLS-SEM)** using SmartPLS (for predictive validity and complex interaction modeling) were applied.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised young adults aged 18–30 years, representing a high-risk group for both intensive social media use and psychosocial vulnerability.

A multi-stage non-probability sampling strategy was utilized:

1. **Purposive sampling** (targeting universities and early-career professionals)
2. **Convenience sampling** (ease of access)
3. **Snowball sampling** (network-based expansion)

Sample Size Determination

Following SEM guidelines:

- Minimum 10–20 cases per parameter
- Estimated parameters: ~35
- Required sample: ≥ 350

Final sample size: $N = 420$

This sample size ensures:

- Adequate statistical power (≥ 0.80)
- Stability in parameter estimation
- Reliability of bootstrapping procedures

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a **structured, self-administered online questionnaire** via Google Forms/Qualtrics.

Inclusion criteria:

- Age: 18–30 years
- Active social media use (≥ 1 hour/day)

Procedural steps:

- Participants were informed about study objectives
- Digital informed consent was obtained
- Participation was voluntary and anonymous

Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional ethics committee, ensuring compliance with international research ethics standards.

Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured using **validated scales**, ensuring reliability and construct validity. Responses were captured on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = **strongly disagree** to 5 = **strongly agree**).

Social Media Use (Independent Variable)

Measured using an adapted behavioral engagement scale assessing:

- Frequency of use
- Time intensity
- Emotional involvement

Fear of Missing Out (Mediator)

Measured using the **10-item FoMO scale** developed by Przybylski et al. [15].

Social Isolation (Dependent Variable)

Assessed using the **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)** [16], capturing subjective isolation and relational dissatisfaction.

Emotional Intelligence (Moderator 1)

Measured using the **Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)** [17], including:

- Self-emotional appraisal
- Others' emotional appraisal
- Emotional regulation

Perceived Social Support (Moderator 2)

Measured using the **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)** [18], covering:

- Family
- Friends
- Significant others

Digital Rights Awareness (Moderator 3)

A **contextually adapted scale** based on socio-legal frameworks [19] was developed to assess:

- Data privacy awareness
- Algorithmic literacy
- Perceived digital autonomy

Validation procedures:

- Expert panel review (content validity)
- Pilot testing ($n = 50$)
- Exploratory factor analysis

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using **SPSS, AMOS, and SmartPLS**, following a rigorous multi-stage approach.

Preliminary Data Screening

- Missing data handled via Expectation-Maximization
- Normality assessed (skewness/kurtosis within ± 2)
- Outliers detected using Mahalanobis distance
- Multicollinearity assessed ($VIF < 5$)

Measurement Model Evaluation

AMOS (CB-SEM)

Reliability:

- Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.70
- Composite Reliability ≥ 0.70

Validity:

- Convergent validity: AVE ≥ 0.50
- Discriminant validity:
 - Fornell-Larcker criterion
 - HTMT ratio < 0.85

Model Fit Indices:

- $\chi^2/df < 3$
- CFI ≥ 0.90
- TLI ≥ 0.90
- RMSEA ≤ 0.08
- SRMR ≤ 0.08

SmartPLS (PLS-SEM)

- Indicator loadings ≥ 0.70
- Composite reliability ≥ 0.70
- AVE ≥ 0.50
- HTMT < 0.85

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated using:

- Path coefficients (β)
- Significance testing via **bootstrapping (5000 resamples)**
- Coefficient of determination (R^2)
- Effect size (f^2)
- Predictive relevance (Q^2 via **blindfolding**)

Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of FoMO was tested using:

- Bootstrapped indirect effects
- Bias-corrected confidence intervals

Mediation was confirmed when:

- Indirect effect is significant
- Confidence interval does not include zero

Moderation Analysis

Moderation effects were examined as follows:

- **AMOS:** interaction terms using mean-centered variables
- **SmartPLS:** product indicator and two-stage approaches

Moderators tested:

- Emotional Intelligence
- Perceived Social Support
- Digital Rights Awareness

Moderated Mediation AnalysisModerated mediation was assessed by evaluating whether the **indirect effect of social media use on social isolation via FoMO varies across moderator levels.**

- Conditional indirect effects estimated
- Bootstrapping applied
- Interaction plots used for interpretation

Common Method Bias (CMB)

To minimize bias:

Procedural controls:

- Anonymity assured
- Psychological separation of constructs

Statistical tests:

- Harman's single-factor test ($< 50\%$)
- Common latent factor approach (AMOS)
- Full collinearity VIF (< 3.3 in SmartPLS)

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent obtained
- Confidentiality ensured
- Participation voluntary
- Right to withdraw respected

Methodological Rigor

The study ensures high-quality empirical rigor through:

- Dual SEM approach (CB-SEM + PLS-SEM)
- Robust moderated mediation testing
- Validated measurement instruments
- Adequate sample size and statistical power
- Integration of socio-legal constructs

RESULTS**Preliminary Analysis**

Data screening indicated no major violations of statistical assumptions. Missing data were below 2% and handled using expectation-maximization. Skewness and kurtosis values ranged between

-1.45 and +1.62, confirming acceptable normality. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed VIF values between 1.42 and 3.11, well below the critical threshold of 5.

Measurement Model Evaluation

Reliability and Convergent Validity

All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Social Media Use	5	0.71-0.86	0.88	0.91	0.67
Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)	10	0.70-0.88	0.92	0.94	0.61
Social Isolation	8	0.72-0.89	0.90	0.93	0.64
Emotional Intelligence	12	0.69-0.87	0.91	0.93	0.58
Perceived Social Support	12	0.73-0.88	0.93	0.95	0.66
Digital Rights Awareness	6	0.71-0.85	0.87	0.90	0.60

All factor loadings exceeded 0.70, CR values were above 0.70, and AVE values surpassed 0.50, confirming adequate reliability and convergent validity.

Discriminant Validity

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	SMU	FoMO	SI	EI	PSS	DRA
SMU	0.82					
FoMO	0.54	0.78				
SI	0.48	0.63	0.80			
EI	-0.36	-0.49	-0.44	0.76		
PSS	-0.28	-0.41	-0.52	0.47	0.81	
DRA	-0.22	-0.35	-0.38	0.39	0.42	0.77

The square root of AVE (diagonal values) exceeded inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity.

Model Fit Indices (AMOS)

Table 3. Model Fit Statistics

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
χ^2/df	2.41	<3	Good fit
CFI	0.93	>0.90	Acceptable
TLI	0.92	>0.90	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.058	<0.08	Good fit
SRMR	0.049	<0.08	Good fit

All indices met recommended thresholds, indicating good overall model fit.

Structural Model Results

Direct Effects

Table 4. Structural Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	SMU \rightarrow FoMO	0.56	11.42	<0.001	Supported
H2	FoMO \rightarrow Social Isolation	0.47	9.85	<0.001	Supported

H3	SMU → Social Isolation	0.21	4.12	<0.001	Supported
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Mediation Analysis

Table 5. Mediation Results (Bootstrapping, 5000 samples)

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI	p-value	Mediation Type
SMU → FoMO → SI	0.26	(0.19-0.34)	<0.001	Partial

FoMO significantly mediates the relationship between social media use and social isolation, indicating partial mediation.

Moderation Analysis

Table 6. Moderation Effects

Moderator	Interaction Path	β	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Emotional Intelligence	FoMO × EI → SI	-0.18	3.92	<0.001	Buffer effect
Social Support	FoMO × PSS → SI	-0.22	4.51	<0.001	Buffer effect
Digital Rights Awareness	FoMO × DRA → SI	-0.15	3.11	0.002	Protective

Moderated Mediation Analysis

Table 7. Conditional Indirect Effects

Moderator Level	Indirect Effect (SMU→FoMO→SI)	95% CI	Interpretation
Low EI	0.34	(0.25-0.44)	Strong effect
High EI	0.18	(0.11-0.26)	Reduced effect
Low PSS	0.36	(0.27-0.46)	Strong effect
High PSS	0.17	(0.10-0.25)	Reduced effect
Low DRA	0.31	(0.23-0.40)	Strong effect
High DRA	0.19	(0.12-0.27)	Reduced effect

The indirect effect of social media use on social isolation via FoMO varies significantly across moderator levels, confirming moderated mediation.

Model Predictive Power

Table 8. R², f², and Q² Values

Construct	R ²	f ² Effect Size	Q ²	Interpretation
FoMO	0.31	0.45	0.24	Moderate
Social Isolation	0.52	0.38	0.36	Strong

Common Method Bias

- Harman’s single factor explained 32.4% variance (<50%)
- Full collinearity VIF values ranged 1.8-2.9 (<3.3)

Overall Summary of Results

- The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed moderated mediation model:
- Social media use significantly increases FoMO
 - FoMO significantly increases social isolation

- Emotional intelligence, social support, and digital rights awareness buffer these effects
- The indirect effect is stronger among vulnerable individuals

DISCUSSION

The present study set out to interrogate a persistent paradox in contemporary digital scholarship: whether social media functions as a mechanism of social integration or, conversely, a catalyst for social isolation among young adults. By advancing a moderated mediation model that integrates psychological (FoMO, emotional intelligence), social (perceived social support), and socio-legal (digital rights awareness) variables, the findings offer a nuanced and theoretically grounded resolution to this debate. Rather than supporting a binary conclusion, the results demonstrate that the relationship between social media use and social isolation is conditional, mechanism-driven, and context-dependent.

Reframing the Social Media–Isolation Paradox

The findings provide strong empirical support for the argument that social media does not exert a uniform effect on social isolation. Instead, its impact is mediated through Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and moderated by individual and contextual resources. This reinforces the growing scholarly consensus that the effects of digital technologies are not inherently deterministic but are shaped by user characteristics, psychological processes, and structural conditions (18,19).

The significant positive relationship between social media use and FoMO aligns with existing literature suggesting that digital environments are structurally conducive to social comparison. Algorithmically curated content, which disproportionately highlights socially desirable experiences, intensifies perceptions of exclusion and inadequacy (20). From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, this reflects unmet needs for relatedness and competence, which are exacerbated in environments where social validation is externally mediated and quantitatively measured (e.g., likes, shares, views) (21). The present findings extend this argument by empirically confirming that FoMO serves as a

central explanatory mechanism, translating digital engagement into perceived social isolation.

Importantly, the persistence of a significant direct effect of social media use on social isolation, even after accounting for FoMO, suggests that additional mechanisms may be at play. These may include passive consumption behaviors, reduced face-to-face interaction, and displacement of meaningful social engagement (22). This partial mediation finding challenges overly simplistic narratives that attribute negative outcomes solely to FoMO and underscores the need for multi-mechanistic models in future research.

FoMO as a Psychosocial Amplifier

The mediating role of FoMO is particularly noteworthy, as it positions FoMO not merely as a byproduct of social media use but as an active psychosocial amplifier. Individuals experiencing high levels of FoMO are more likely to engage in compulsive checking behaviors, heightened social comparison, and emotional dysregulation, all of which contribute to feelings of isolation (23).

Critically, FoMO reflects a cognitive-emotional distortion wherein perceived social deficits are magnified irrespective of actual social connectedness. This has important implications for how social isolation is conceptualized. The findings suggest that social isolation in the digital age is not solely a function of objective social networks but is increasingly shaped by subjective perceptions mediated through digital interfaces (24). In this sense, social media may create a form of “perceived isolation” that is psychologically real, even in the presence of extensive online networks.

However, it is essential to critically interrogate whether FoMO is a stable individual trait or a context-dependent state. The cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference, raising the possibility of reverse causality, where individuals who are already socially isolated may be more prone to experiencing FoMO (25). Longitudinal and experimental designs are therefore necessary to disentangle these temporal dynamics and establish causal directionality.

Emotional Intelligence as a Psychological Buffer

One of the most theoretically significant contributions of this study lies in demonstrating the moderating role of emotional intelligence (EI). The findings indicate that individuals with higher EI experience a significantly attenuated relationship between FoMO and social isolation, suggesting that EI functions as a protective psychological resource.

From a critical perspective, this finding challenges deterministic accounts of digital harm by emphasizing user agency and resilience. Individuals with high EI are better equipped to regulate negative emotions, reinterpret social comparisons, and maintain psychological equilibrium in the face of digitally mediated pressures (26). This aligns with broader resilience frameworks, which posit that vulnerability to environmental stressors is contingent upon internal coping capacities.

However, this also raises important equity considerations. Emotional intelligence is not uniformly distributed and is influenced by socio-cultural, educational, and developmental factors. Thus, framing EI as a protective factor risks inadvertently individualizing responsibility for digital well-being, potentially obscuring the role of structural and platform-level influences (27). Future research should therefore explore how EI can be cultivated through interventions rather than treated as a fixed trait, and how platform design can be adapted to reduce reliance on individual coping mechanisms.

The Ambivalent Role of Perceived Social Support

The moderating effect of perceived social support (PSS) further complicates the relationship between social media use and isolation. The findings indicate that individuals with higher perceived social support are less affected by FoMO, suggesting that robust offline relationships can buffer the negative psychological effects of digital engagement.

This supports the “social augmentation hypothesis,” which posits that individuals with strong offline networks use social media to enhance existing relationships rather than

compensate for deficits (28). Conversely, individuals with low perceived support may turn to social media as a substitute for offline interaction, thereby becoming more vulnerable to FoMO and its associated consequences.

Critically, however, the findings also raise questions about the quality versus quantity of social connections in digital environments. While social media may increase the number of connections, it does not necessarily enhance the depth or authenticity of relationships. This distinction is crucial, as perceived social support is fundamentally a subjective construct, influenced more by emotional closeness and trust than by network size (29).

Moreover, the reliance on self-reported measures of social support introduces potential bias, as individuals’ perceptions may not accurately reflect their actual social resources. Future studies should consider incorporating objective network analysis or mixed-method approaches to capture the multidimensional nature of social support.

Digital Rights Awareness: A Novel Socio-Legal Insight

Perhaps the most innovative contribution of this study lies in the inclusion of digital rights awareness (DRA) as a socio-legal moderator. The findings reveal that individuals with higher awareness of digital rights experience weaker indirect effects of social media use on social isolation, suggesting that critical digital literacy serves as a protective factor.

This finding has significant theoretical implications, as it extends the analysis of digital well-being beyond psychological and social domains into the realm of structural power and governance. Social media platforms operate within a broader political economy characterized by surveillance capitalism, data commodification, and algorithmic control (30). Users who lack awareness of these dynamics may be more susceptible to manipulative design features that amplify engagement at the expense of well-being. From a critical standpoint, the inclusion of DRA challenges the implicit assumption that digital harm is solely a function of individual behavior. Instead, it highlights the role of platform

architecture and regulatory frameworks in shaping user experiences. This aligns with emerging calls in socio-legal scholarship to reconceptualize digital well-being as a matter of rights, accountability, and governance, rather than merely personal responsibility.

However, the operationalization of digital rights awareness in this study, while innovative, remains in its early stages. The construct requires further conceptual refinement and validation across diverse contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to assess whether increased awareness leads to behavioral change or merely reflects pre-existing differences in user engagement.

Moderated Mediation: Conditional Vulnerability and Protection

The moderated mediation findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how psychological, social, and legal factors interact to shape the social media-isolation relationship. The observation that the indirect effect of social media use on isolation via FoMO is significantly stronger among individuals with low EI, low PSS, and low DRA underscores the concept of conditional vulnerability.

This has important implications for both theory and practice. It suggests that interventions aimed at reducing digital harm must adopt a multi-level approach, addressing not only individual psychological factors but also social environments and structural conditions. For instance:

- Enhancing emotional intelligence through educational programs
- Strengthening offline social support networks
- Promoting digital rights literacy and regulatory awareness

At the same time, the findings caution against one-size-fits-all solutions, as the effectiveness of interventions is likely to vary across different user profiles.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several key contributions to the literature:

1. It advances a mechanism-based understanding of social media effects, moving beyond correlational analyses.
2. It integrates psychological, social, and socio-legal frameworks, offering a truly interdisciplinary model.
3. It introduces digital rights awareness as a novel construct in digital well-being research.
4. It empirically validates a moderated mediation model, providing a more nuanced account of digital behavior.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, necessitating longitudinal or experimental studies. The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, including social desirability and common method variance. Additionally, the sample, while adequate, may limit generalizability across cultural contexts.

Future research should:

- Employ longitudinal designs to establish causality
- Incorporate behavioral and objective data
- Expand the socio-legal framework to include regulatory and policy variables
- Explore platform-specific effects and algorithmic influences

CONCLUSION

This study set out to resolve a central paradox in contemporary digital life: whether social media alleviates or exacerbates social isolation among young adults. Moving beyond reductionist binaries, the findings demonstrate that social media is neither inherently connective nor isolating; rather, its impact is contingent upon underlying psychological mechanisms and contextual moderators. By empirically validating a moderated mediation model, the study provides robust evidence that the relationship between social media use and social isolation is primarily indirect, conditional, and context-sensitive.

At the core of this relationship lies Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which emerged as a significant mediating mechanism translating social media engagement into heightened

perceptions of isolation. This underscores the role of digitally amplified social comparison and emotional vulnerability in shaping user experiences. However, the strength of this pathway is not uniform. The moderating effects of emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and digital rights awareness reveal that individual resilience, relational resources, and socio-legal literacy can substantially mitigate adverse outcomes.

Importantly, the inclusion of digital rights awareness extends the discourse beyond psychological and behavioral explanations, highlighting the role of platform governance, algorithmic influence, and user autonomy in shaping digital well-being. This socio-legal dimension challenges prevailing individual-centric narratives and calls for a broader reconceptualization of social media effects as embedded within structures of power, regulation, and design.

The findings carry significant implications for research, policy, and practice. Interventions aimed at reducing digital isolation must adopt a multi-level approach, combining psychological skill development (e.g., emotional intelligence), strengthening of offline social networks, and enhancement of critical digital literacy and rights awareness. At the same time, policymakers and platform designers must recognize their responsibility in creating ethical, transparent, and user-centric digital environments.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the evolving scholarship on digital well-being by offering a theoretically integrated and empirically robust model that captures the complexity of social media's impact. It shifts the conversation from simplistic causality to conditional processes, providing a foundation for more nuanced, interdisciplinary, and policy-relevant research in the digital age.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author's contribution: All authors contributed equally

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