

The Relationship Between Parental Attachment and Cyberbullying with the Mediating Role of Social Media Dependency in Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between parental attachment and cyberbullying, considering the mediating role of social media dependency among students. The research employed a descriptive correlational design based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of all male upper secondary school students, from whom 280 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Participants completed the Parental Attachment Questionnaire developed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987), the Cyberbullying Questionnaire by Antoniadou et al. (2016), and the Social Media Dependency Scale developed by Usman and Shahnawaz (2020). Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling based on multivariate regression through SPSS version 18 and AMOS version 23 software. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between parental attachment and cyberbullying, as well as a significant positive relationship between social media dependency and cyberbullying. Furthermore, parental attachment exerted an indirect effect on cyberbullying through social media dependency. Model fit indices supported the adequacy of the proposed structural model, and 34% of the variance in the dependent variable was explained by the model variables. These findings confirm the important role of parent-child relationships and adolescents' level of engagement in social media in preventing cyberbullying behaviors.

Keywords: parental attachment, cyberbullying, social media dependency, students

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and widespread access to the internet have fundamentally transformed adolescents' social interactions, communication patterns, and identity development processes. Contemporary adolescents increasingly construct their social worlds within online environments, particularly through social networking platforms that facilitate continuous interaction, self-presentation, and peer engagement. Recent global reports indicate that social media has become an integral component of adolescents' daily routines, with the vast majority of teenagers maintaining active online profiles and engaging in digital communication multiple times per day (1, 2). While these technological advances have

provided unprecedented opportunities for learning, socialization, and access to information, they have simultaneously introduced new psychosocial risks, among which cyberbullying has emerged as a critical public health and educational concern (3, 4).

Cyberbullying refers to intentional and repeated aggressive behavior conducted through electronic means such as social media, messaging applications, gaming platforms, or online educational environments, where power imbalance and anonymity intensify victimization experiences (5). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, enabling perpetrators to target victims continuously and often anonymously, thereby amplifying psychological harm (6). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that cyberbullying is strongly associated with emotional distress, depression, anxiety, academic difficulties, and social withdrawal among children and adolescents (7, 8). The digital nature of these behaviors allows harmful content to spread rapidly and remain accessible indefinitely, intensifying victimization experiences and increasing long-term psychological consequences (3).

The prevalence of cyberbullying must be understood within the broader developmental context of adolescence, a period characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, identity exploration, and increased reliance on social relationships outside the family. Cross-national research indicates that bullying behaviors, including online forms, are closely linked to adolescents' social adjustment and school experiences (9). Adolescents' online interactions frequently mirror offline relational dynamics, suggesting that cyberbullying is not an isolated digital phenomenon but rather an extension of broader social and developmental processes (10). Consequently, understanding cyberbullying requires examination of both individual and contextual factors, particularly family relationships and patterns of technology use.

One of the most influential developmental frameworks explaining adolescent social behavior is attachment theory, which emphasizes the role of early parent-child relationships in shaping emotional regulation, interpersonal competence, and behavioral adjustment. Secure attachment relationships provide adolescents with emotional security, effective coping strategies, and social competence, reducing the likelihood of involvement in aggressive or maladaptive behaviors (11). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that supportive parenting practices and positive family environments function as protective factors against bullying perpetration and victimization (10, 12). Conversely, insecure attachment patterns may contribute to emotional dysregulation, loneliness, and maladaptive online engagement, increasing vulnerability to cyberbullying behaviors.

Family functioning plays a central role in adolescents' digital behavior regulation. Research indicates that parenting style, parental monitoring, and emotional communication significantly influence adolescents' online conduct and exposure to cyber risks (11). Adolescents who perceive higher parental warmth, trust, and communication tend to demonstrate healthier online habits and lower involvement in cyber aggression (13). In contrast, weak emotional bonds within families may lead adolescents to seek validation and belonging through online environments, increasing dependence on social media platforms and potentially exposing them to harmful digital interactions (14).

Parallel to family influences, the rapid escalation of social media use has introduced new behavioral patterns related to digital dependency. Problematic or excessive internet use has been conceptualized as a behavioral addiction characterized by loss of control, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, and interpersonal conflict (15). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to social media dependency due to

developmental needs for peer approval and social comparison (16). Cross-national studies have shown that patterns of internet use are strongly linked to psychosocial adjustment, academic functioning, and emotional well-being among youth (17).

Social media dependency has been identified as a significant predictor of risky online behaviors, including cyberbullying involvement. Adolescents who spend excessive time online may experience diminished empathy, reduced face-to-face social skills, and increased impulsivity in digital interactions (18). Furthermore, research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that increased online engagement intensified both problematic internet use and cyberbullying incidents, highlighting the interconnected nature of digital dependency and online aggression (19). Socioeconomic and school-related factors also influence problematic internet use, suggesting that cyber behaviors emerge through complex interactions between personal, familial, and environmental conditions (20).

The psychological mechanisms underlying cyberbullying can also be understood through problem behavior theory, which proposes that risk behaviors cluster together and are shaped by interactions between personality traits, family context, and social environments (12). Adolescents experiencing emotional distress or insufficient social support may turn to digital environments for coping or escape, thereby increasing both dependency on online platforms and engagement in maladaptive behaviors (14). Evidence suggests that mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress are closely associated with excessive internet use and cyber aggression, emphasizing the need to examine mediating psychological processes (7).

Importantly, social media environments possess both developmental benefits and risks. While digital platforms enable creativity, information exchange, and social participation, adolescents themselves report ambivalent experiences, acknowledging both positive opportunities and potential harms associated with technology use (21). The dual nature of online environments underscores the importance of identifying protective factors that mitigate risks while preserving developmental advantages. Parenting relationships appear to be one of the most critical buffers in this regard, influencing adolescents' digital literacy, emotional regulation, and ethical online behavior.

Recent international policy and research agendas emphasize cyberbullying prevention as a multidisciplinary priority involving families, schools, and digital platforms (22). Preventive approaches increasingly focus on strengthening interpersonal relationships, promoting responsible technology use, and enhancing adolescents' psychosocial competencies. Systematic reviews highlight that effective prevention requires integrated models that simultaneously consider family attachment, online behavior patterns, and social environments rather than examining these variables independently (6, 23). Despite growing research attention, significant gaps remain regarding the mechanisms linking parental attachment to cyberbullying involvement, particularly the mediating role of social media dependency.

Although previous studies have independently examined parental factors, internet addiction, or cyberbullying outcomes, fewer investigations have integrated these constructs within a comprehensive structural framework. Understanding whether social media dependency serves as a psychological pathway connecting parent-child relationships to cyberbullying behavior can provide valuable insights into prevention strategies and intervention design. Given the increasing digital immersion of adolescents worldwide and the rising concern regarding online aggression, examining these interrelated factors is essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical application in adolescent psychology.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between parental attachment and cyberbullying among students, with social media dependency examined as a mediating variable.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a correlational research design based on structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of male upper secondary school students. Sample size determination was conducted considering the number of observed variables and excluding incomplete questionnaires; consequently, 280 participants were selected through convenience sampling.

Data Collection

Cyberbullying Questionnaire: This instrument was developed by Antoniadou et al. (2016) to assess experiences of cyberbullying perpetration and cybervictimization among adolescents. The questionnaire consists of two factors—cybervictimization and cyberbullying—each comprising 12 items. Findings reported by Antoniadou et al. (2016) indicated acceptable construct validity, and reliability assessed through Cronbach's alpha was reported as .89 for the cyberbullying factor. In a later study, Basharpour and Zardi (2019) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .75, confirming the adequacy of this instrument for assessing cyberbullying behaviors.

Social Media Dependency Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Shahnawaz and Rahman (2020) and includes 21 items distributed across six subscales: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Shahnawaz and Rahman (2020) demonstrated satisfactory validity for the instrument. Convergent validity coefficients were reported as .50 with the Facebook Addiction Scale (Anderson, 2012) and .73 with Davis's Problematic Internet Use Scale (2002), while divergent validity with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, 1985) was reported as $-.15$. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .81 for salience, .79 for mood modification, .78 for tolerance, .86 for withdrawal symptoms, .75 for conflict, and .89 for relapse. Reliability coefficients exceeding .70 were also confirmed in the study conducted by Homayouni and Mirzaei (2025).

Parental Attachment Questionnaire: The Parental Attachment Questionnaire was developed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987) based on Bowlby's attachment theory to measure perceived attachment to parents. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) was designed to assess adolescents' perceptions of positive and negative cognitive–affective dimensions of relationships with parents. The instrument includes 25 items across three subscales: trust, communication, and alienation. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the questionnaire was reported as .79.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using structural regression equation modeling through SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 8 software.

Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated that among the 265 male upper secondary school students included in the study, 144 students (54.3%) were 16 years old and 121 students (45.7%) were 17 years old. Regarding academic field of study, 71 students (26.8%) were enrolled in mathematics, 106 students (40.0%) in experimental sciences, and 88 students (33.2%) in humanities. Overall, the distribution of participants demonstrates relatively balanced representation across age groups and academic disciplines within the total sample.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Parental Attachment Subscales and Social Media Dependency with Cyberbullying

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	25.64	5.78	1												
2	20.04	4.83	.44**	1											
3	13.76	2.42	.71**	.27**	1										
4	59.45	10.66	.90**	.75**	.73**	1									
5	12.14	2.49	-.22**	-.14**	-.20**	-.23**	1								
6	9.74	1.75	-.17**	-.17**	-.12*	-.20**	.52**	1							
7	10.80	1.54	-.13*	-.14**	-.10	-.16**	.75**	.71**	1						
8	11.71	1.56	-.14**	-.12*	-.11*	-.16**	.66**	.86**	.82**	1					
9	10.36	1.43	-.14**	-.13*	-.18**	-.18**	.71**	.77**	.84**	.84**	1				
10	13.37	1.63	-.15**	-.06	-.12*	-.13*	.56**	.72**	.72**	.76**	.73**	1			
11	68.13	9.13	-.19**	-.15**	-.16**	-.21**	.82**	.85**	.91**	.93**	.92**	.84**	1		
12	27.11	7.04	-.27**	-.38**	-.13*	-.35**	.20**	.26**	.22**	.25**	.19**	.16**	.25**	1	
13	23.54	2.82	-.27**	-.34**	-.17**	-.34**	.29**	.29**	.29**	.28**	.24**	.22**	.31**	.89**	1
14	50.64	9.61	-.28**	-.37**	-.14**	-.35**	.23**	.28**	.25**	.27**	.21**	.18**	.27**	.92**	.90**

$p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$.

1. Trust in Parents; 2. Communication with Parents; 3. Parental Alienation; 4. Parental Attachment; 5. Salience; 6. Mood Modification; 7. Tolerance; 8. Withdrawal; 9. Conflict; 10. Relapse; 11. Social Media Dependency; 12. Cybervictimization; 13. Cyberbullying; 14. Cyberbullying (Total)

The results presented in Table 1 indicate a significant negative correlation between parental attachment and cyberbullying, as well as a significant positive correlation between social media dependency and cyberbullying among participants.

Table 2. Model Fit Indices After Two-Step Model Modification

Fit Index	Description	Acceptable Value	Obtained Value
χ^2/df	Relative Chi-Square	< 3	2.668
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	< .10	.036
GFI	Goodness-of-Fit Index	> .90	.999
NFI	Normed Fit Index	> .90	.999
CFI	Comparative Fit Index	> .90	.999
DF	Degrees of Freedom	—	194

The results shown in Table 2 indicate that the RMSEA value equals .036, which is below the threshold of .10, demonstrating an acceptable approximation error and overall model adequacy. Furthermore, the relative chi-square value (2.668) falls within the acceptable range of 1 to 3. The GFI, CFI, and NFI indices are all greater than .90 and approximately equal to one another, confirming that the measurement model of the research variables exhibits satisfactory fit.

Table 3. Direct Effects Estimated Using Maximum Likelihood (ML)

Variable	b	β	R ²	t	p
Parental Attachment → Cyberbullying	-0.378	-0.335	.126	3.796	.01
Social Media Dependency → Cyberbullying	0.288	0.241	.069	3.065	.01

According to Table 3, parental attachment and social media dependency explain .126 and .069 of the shared variance in cyberbullying, respectively.

Table 4. Indirect Effects Estimated Using the Bootstrap Method

Variable	β	R ²	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Significance
Parental Attachment → Cyberbullying (Mediated by Social Media Dependency)	0.401	.345	.361	.553	.01

Based on Table 4, the standardized indirect path coefficient ($\beta = .401$) and the explained variance ($R^2 = .345$) indicate that parental attachment exerts a significant indirect effect on cyberbullying through social media dependency. The bootstrap estimation confirmed the significance of this mediating pathway.

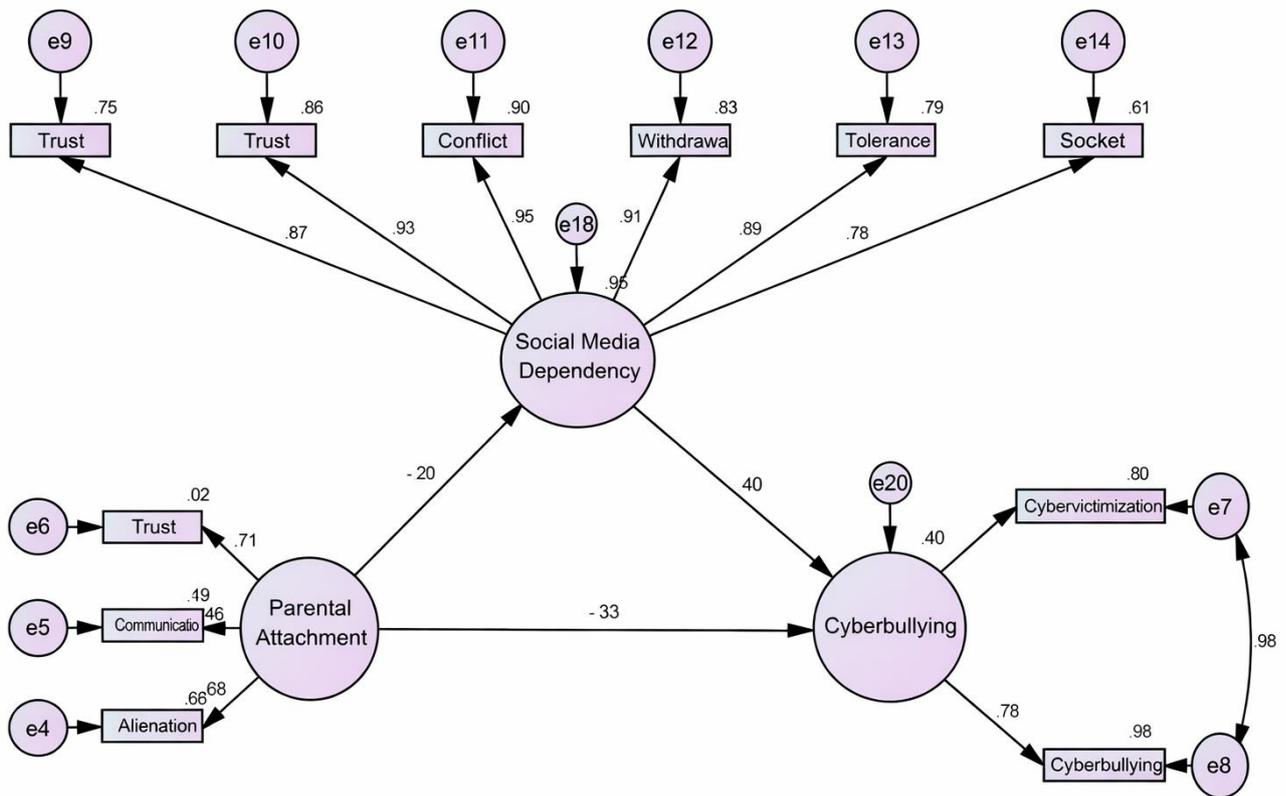


Figure 1. Final tested structural model with standardized predictive coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide important empirical evidence regarding the complex interplay between parental attachment, social media dependency, and cyberbullying among adolescents. Structural equation modeling revealed three principal results. First, parental attachment demonstrated a significant negative relationship with cyberbullying behavior. Second, social media dependency showed a significant

positive association with cyberbullying. Third, social media dependency mediated the relationship between parental attachment and cyberbullying, indicating that adolescents' online behavioral engagement serves as an important psychological pathway linking family relationships to online aggression.

The negative association between parental attachment and cyberbullying supports attachment theory perspectives emphasizing the protective role of secure parent–child relationships in adolescent behavioral adjustment. Adolescents who experience trust, emotional communication, and low levels of alienation within family relationships tend to develop stronger emotional regulation skills and social competence, which reduce the likelihood of aggressive or maladaptive behaviors in both offline and online environments. Previous research has consistently identified parenting style and parental involvement as key determinants of adolescents' digital conduct. For instance, parenting practices characterized by warmth and monitoring significantly decrease adolescents' participation in cyberbullying behaviors (11). Similarly, family environments marked by supportive emotional bonds have been shown to reduce problem behaviors and online aggression through improved interpersonal functioning (12).

The present findings align with earlier studies demonstrating that family functioning plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' internet-related behaviors. Research has shown that adolescents with secure familial relationships display lower levels of internet addiction and better psychological adjustment (13). Conversely, insufficient emotional attachment may lead adolescents to seek emotional compensation through online environments, increasing vulnerability to risky digital behaviors. Gómez-Ortiz (10) reported that parenting practices directly influence adolescents' involvement in bullying and victimization processes, highlighting the family as a primary developmental context influencing social behavior. These results reinforce the idea that cyberbullying should not be viewed solely as a technological issue but rather as a psychosocial phenomenon rooted in relational experiences.

Another important finding was the significant positive relationship between social media dependency and cyberbullying. Adolescents who reported higher levels of dependency on social networking platforms were more likely to engage in cyberbullying behaviors. This result is consistent with theoretical explanations describing problematic internet use as a behavioral addiction involving impulsivity, emotional escape, and diminished self-regulation (15). Excessive online engagement increases exposure to online conflicts, reduces empathy through mediated communication, and encourages disinhibited behavior facilitated by anonymity and physical distance (5). Studies examining adolescent online behavior similarly indicate that heavy social media use is associated with psychological distress, interpersonal conflict, and maladaptive social interactions (16).

Recent empirical evidence further supports this relationship. Eden et al. (19) found that increased online engagement during periods of social isolation was accompanied by higher levels of problematic internet use and cyberbullying involvement. Likewise, large-scale analyses of adolescent digital behavior suggest that excessive social media use intensifies opportunities for online aggression and victimization (3). The positive relationship observed in the current study therefore reflects broader global trends indicating that increased digital immersion may elevate behavioral risks when not moderated by protective psychosocial factors.

The mediating role of social media dependency represents one of the most significant contributions of this study. The results indicate that parental attachment indirectly influences cyberbullying through adolescents' level of dependency on social networking platforms. This finding suggests that secure parental

relationships may reduce cyberbullying partly by limiting excessive or maladaptive digital engagement. Adolescents with strong parental bonds may experience less emotional need to seek validation, belonging, or identity affirmation through online environments, thereby reducing dependency-related risks. Previous research has shown that family and school environments significantly mediate the relationship between psychological distress and internet addiction among adolescents (14). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that social media dependency functions as a behavioral mechanism linking relational experiences within the family to online aggressive behavior.

The results also correspond with developmental models proposing that cyberbullying emerges from interconnected ecological systems rather than isolated individual factors. Problem behavior theory suggests that risk behaviors cluster within broader social and emotional contexts shaped by family dynamics and environmental influences (6). Adolescents who lack emotional security may compensate through increased online interaction, which can gradually evolve into dependency patterns associated with aggressive digital conduct. Studies examining adolescent internet use patterns across countries similarly highlight the role of social environments in shaping digital behavior trajectories (17). Moreover, social skills deficits linked to excessive internet use have been associated with maladaptive online behaviors, including cyber aggression (18).

The strong model fit indices obtained in this study further confirm the theoretical validity of integrating parental attachment and social media dependency within a unified explanatory framework. These findings support prior meta-analytic research demonstrating that cyberbullying is closely linked to emotional, familial, and technological factors operating simultaneously (7). Contemporary digital environments blur traditional boundaries between offline and online relationships, meaning that adolescents' experiences within families significantly influence how they navigate virtual interactions. International reports emphasize that cyberbullying prevention requires collaborative approaches involving parents, educators, and digital platforms (22).

In addition, the findings are consistent with research highlighting both advantages and risks associated with adolescent technology use. Although information and communication technologies offer opportunities for creativity and learning, adolescents themselves recognize potential psychological risks arising from uncontrolled online engagement (21). The results of the present study demonstrate that family attachment can serve as a protective factor, moderating these risks by fostering emotional resilience and responsible digital behavior. Recent global statistics showing the increasing intensity of adolescents' social media engagement underscore the urgency of understanding these protective mechanisms (1, 2).

Furthermore, cyberbullying has increasingly been recognized as a significant component of broader violence prevention frameworks, including gender-based and educational safety initiatives (22). The present findings contribute to this growing body of research by highlighting the psychological pathways through which family relationships shape online aggression. Adolescents who experience strong parental attachment may internalize social norms emphasizing empathy, accountability, and respectful communication, thereby reducing the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying behaviors. This interpretation is supported by longitudinal evidence demonstrating that supportive family environments reduce involvement in both traditional and cyber forms of bullying (9, 23).

Overall, the findings reinforce a multidimensional understanding of cyberbullying that integrates relational, behavioral, and technological perspectives. Rather than viewing cyberbullying solely as a consequence of digital exposure, the results emphasize the importance of underlying emotional bonds and behavioral regulation processes. Adolescents' online experiences are deeply embedded within their developmental ecosystems, and interventions aimed at reducing cyberbullying must therefore address both family dynamics and patterns of social media engagement simultaneously.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the correlational design limits causal interpretation of relationships among variables, preventing definitive conclusions about directionality. Second, data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate self-perception. Third, the sample consisted exclusively of male students, which restricts the generalizability of findings to female adolescents or mixed-gender populations. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling may reduce representativeness of the broader adolescent population. Cultural and contextual factors specific to the study setting may also influence family relationships and technology use patterns, limiting cross-cultural generalization.

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal pathways between parental attachment, digital dependency, and cyberbullying behavior over time. Studies involving diverse age groups and gender compositions are recommended to explore potential developmental and gender differences in cyberbullying dynamics. Researchers may also investigate additional mediating or moderating variables such as emotional regulation, peer relationships, school climate, or digital literacy skills. Cross-cultural comparative studies could further clarify how sociocultural contexts influence adolescents' online behavior. Incorporating qualitative methods may also provide deeper insight into adolescents' lived experiences within digital environments and family relationships.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening parent–child relationships as a central strategy for preventing cyberbullying. Educational programs should encourage parents to maintain open communication, emotional support, and constructive monitoring of adolescents' online activities. Schools can implement digital citizenship and responsible technology use training to help students develop self-regulation skills and ethical online behavior. Mental health professionals and school counselors may design interventions targeting healthy social media use and emotional coping strategies. Collaborative efforts among families, educators, and policymakers are essential to create supportive environments that promote adolescents' psychological well-being while reducing risks associated with excessive social media engagement and cyberbullying behavior.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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