

Social Media Use, Emotion Regulation, and Social Anxiety Among Adolescents: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article history

Submitted: 2026/05/01; Revised: 2026/06/11; Accepted: 2026/07/04

Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesises recent evidence (2015–2025) on the interrelations among social media use, emotion regulation, and social anxiety in adolescents, and examines the extent to which emotion regulation operates as a mechanism linking social media use to social anxiety. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guideline, peer-reviewed studies and evidence syntheses were identified through structured searches of major databases and screened against predefined eligibility criteria. The synthesis indicates that the association between the sheer quantity of social media use and social anxiety is generally weak and inconsistent, whereas problematic and appearance-oriented patterns of use show more robust positive associations. Emotion regulation emerges as a consistent thread: maladaptive strategies—expressive suppression, rumination, upward social comparison, and feedback- and reassurance-seeking—appear to mediate or amplify the relationship between social media engagement and social-evaluative anxiety, whereas adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and higher emotional intelligence function as protective factors. The relationship is best characterised as transactional rather than unidirectional. Methodological limitations of the underlying evidence base—dominated by cross-sectional designs and heterogeneous measurement—constrain causal inference. Implications for school counselling, digital-literacy education, and emotion-regulation interventions are discussed, together with a research agenda emphasising longitudinal and intensive-longitudinal designs

Keywords

Social Media Use; Emotion Regulation; Social Anxiety; Adolescents; Systematic Literature Review



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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, spanning roughly the ages of ten to nineteen, is marked by rapid neurobiological maturation, the consolidation of identity, and an intensified orientation toward peers and toward how the self is evaluated by others. It is into this socio-affectively sensitive window that digital social media have become thoroughly

embedded: for contemporary adolescents, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are not an occasional supplement to social life but one of its primary infrastructures, mediating friendship, self-presentation, information seeking, and leisure. Large-scale evidence syntheses confirm that most young people in digitising societies now engage with one or more such platforms on a daily basis (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

The same period has witnessed mounting public and scientific concern about adolescent mental health, and about anxiety in particular. Among the anxiety-related conditions, social anxiety—a marked and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny and negative evaluation—occupies a special place, because the social-evaluative concerns that lie at its core normatively intensify during adolescence. Even at sub-clinical levels, a heightened fear of negative evaluation can constrain participation, learning, and the formation of relationships, and a growing body of work links problematic patterns of digital engagement to elevated social-evaluative distress in young people (Ding et al., 2023).

Much popular discourse has framed the issue in starkly causal and unidirectional terms, asking simply whether social media causes anxiety in the young. The accumulated empirical record, however, resists such simplicity. When evidence is aggregated across many studies, the direct association between the sheer quantity of social media use and indices of anxiety or broader psychological distress is repeatedly found to be weak, inconsistent, and heavily qualified by methodological limitations (Keles et al., 2020). An influential umbrella review of twenty-five prior reviews reached a similar conclusion, reporting that most syntheses characterise these associations as weak or inconsistent rather than substantial (Valkenburg et al., 2022). This pattern suggests that the relationship is conditional: it depends on how and why adolescents use social media, and on the psychological processes they bring to that use. Emotion regulation is a leading candidate for one such process.

Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them. The process model distinguishes a family of strategies deployed at different points in the emotion-generative cycle—situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 2015). A recurrent contrast within this framework is that between cognitive reappraisal, an antecedent-focused strategy that reframes a situation's meaning and is generally linked to healthier outcomes, and expressive suppression, a response-focused strategy that

inhibits outward expression and tends to carry affective and interpersonal costs (Gross, 1998). Individual differences in the habitual use of these strategies are reliably associated with differences in well-being and relationship quality (Gross & John, 2003). Crucially, the systems that support flexible regulation are still maturing throughout adolescence, leaving young people comparatively reliant on less adaptive strategies at the very moment their social-emotional lives become most demanding.

There are strong theoretical grounds for placing emotion regulation at the centre of the relationship between social media use and social anxiety. Social media platforms are simultaneously arenas in which emotion is aroused and tools with which it is managed. They afford the avoidance of face-to-face encounters in favour of mediated contact (situation selection); they offer an almost limitless stream of content into which attention can be deployed or escape sought (attentional deployment); they expose users to continuous, often upward, social comparison that reshapes the meaning of one's own life and appearance (cognitive change); and they invite the careful curation and suppression of self-presentation (response modulation). For socially anxious adolescents, these affordances may furnish short-term relief while reinforcing avoidance and sustaining the very anxiety they were meant to soothe. Behaviours such as technology-based social comparison and feedback-seeking (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), and the disposition captured by emotional intelligence (Piccerillo & Digennaro, 2024), have accordingly attracted growing attention as links between digital engagement and psychological adjustment.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and systematic process of identifying, screening, appraising, and synthesizing evidence (Page et al., 2021). A narrative synthesis approach was chosen because the constructs examined across primary studies were operationalized in diverse ways, and much of the relevant high-level evidence already existed in the form of reviews, making meta-analysis less appropriate. The review was guided by four research questions that shaped the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the data extraction framework, and the thematic synthesis. Literature searches were conducted systematically across major databases in psychology, health, and the social sciences, namely Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed/MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect, and were supplemented by reference-list and forward-citation checks. The publication period was limited to 2015–2025 to capture the development of smartphone-based and image-centered social media platforms relevant to the topic. The search strategy combined conceptual blocks related to social media, emotion

regulation, social anxiety, and adolescence using Boolean operators. Eligible studies were English-language publications focusing on adolescent populations aged approximately 10–19 years, examining social media use as the primary exposure, and reporting psychological outcomes related to social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and/or emotion regulation, including both empirical studies and systematic syntheses. Study selection followed the PRISMA phases of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, beginning with duplicate removal and followed by title, abstract, and full-text screening against the predefined criteria. Data from included studies were extracted systematically, covering the authors, year, country, study design, sample characteristics, measures of social media use, emotion regulation, and social anxiety, as well as the main findings. Methodological quality and risk of bias were assessed using design-appropriate instruments such as the AXIS checklist, Joanna Briggs Institute tools, and AMSTAR-2 considerations for review studies (Cabezas-Klinger et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2024; West et al., 2024). Due to heterogeneity in study design and measurement, the evidence was synthesized narratively and thematically by organizing findings around the four research questions and identifying recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Included Literature

The literature informing this review spans primary empirical studies and a substantial layer of secondary syntheses, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, and an umbrella review. Cross-sectional designs predominate among the primary studies, with longitudinal and experimental work comparatively scarce. Measurement is markedly heterogeneous: social media use is variously captured as self-reported time or frequency, as type or pattern of use, and as problematic or addictive use, while social anxiety and emotion regulation are assessed with a range of instruments of differing scope. The geographic distribution of evidence is uneven, with a concentration of studies from North America, Europe, and parts of East Asia, and comparatively little from the Global South. Table 2 summarises the principal sources synthesised here, their design, focus, and central findings.

Table 2. Summary of the principal sources synthesised in the review

Author (Year)	Type	Focus	Key finding
Keles et al. (2020)	Systematic review (13 studies)	SM use & depression/anxiety/distress	All use-domains correlated with internalising symptoms; cross-sectional caveats.
Valkenburg et al. (2022)	Umbrella review (25 reviews)	SM use & adolescent mental health	Associations mostly interpreted as weak or inconsistent.
Ding et al. (2023)	SR & meta-analysis	Problematic internet use & social anxiety	Significant positive association in adolescents and young adults.
Saleem et al. (2024)	Systematic narrative review (67 studies)	SM use & depression/anxiety	Time/frequency dominate measurement; anxiety assessed in 27 studies.
Cabezas-Klinger et al. (2025)	SR & meta-analysis (24 studies)	SM risk exposure & mental disorders	Significant positive pooled association ($r \approx .22$); high heterogeneity.
Vidal et al. (2020)	Scoping review	SM use & depression	Links to depression alongside anxiety, poor sleep, low self-esteem.

Author (Year)	Type	Focus	Key finding
Azem et al. (2023)	Scoping review (43 studies)	SM use & depression	Connection to depression and co-occurring anxiety/appearance anxiety.
Ulvi et al. (2022)	Narrative / global analysis	SM use & mental health	Both benefit and harm, contingent on the pattern of use.
Acar et al. (2022)	Empirical (cross-sectional)	Emotional problems, SM addiction, self-esteem	Emotional problems and addiction jointly lower self-esteem.
Nesi & Prinstein (2015)	Empirical (longitudinal)	Comparison & feedback-seeking	Predicts depressive symptoms; moderated by gender and popularity.
Piccerillo & Digennaro (2024)	Systematic review (25 studies)	Emotional intelligence & SM use	Lower emotional intelligence linked to more problematic use.
Reynard et al. (2022)	SR & meta-analysis (39 studies)	Digital interventions for emotion regulation	Digital games reduced negative affect, notably in at-risk youth.
Gross (1998)	Theoretical / empirical	Emotion-regulation processes	Reappraisal and suppression diverge

Author (Year)	Type	Focus	Key finding
			in their consequences.
Gross (2015)	Theoretical review	Process & extended process model	Choice of strategy shapes affective and social outcomes.
Gross & John (2003)	Empirical (measure)	Reappraisal vs. suppression (ERQ)	Reappraisal adaptive; habitual suppression carries costs.
Keles- Gordesli et al. (2024)	Empirical (cross-cultural)	Culture as moderator	Cultural context moderates SM- mental-health associations.
Lokajova et al. (2023)	Empirical (cross- sectional)	Health-related SM use & anxiety	Health anxiety moderates the SM- anxiety relationship.
West et al. (2024)	Scoping review (SDT)	SM use & wellbeing via needs	Need satisfaction/frustration helps explain mixed effects.
Martin- Barrado & Gomez- Baya (2025)	Systematic review (17 studies)	Positive youth development & SM	PYD acts as a protective factor against risky online behaviour.
Page et al. (2021)	Methodological guideline	PRISMA 2020 reporting standard	Framework for transparent

Author (Year)	Type	Focus	Key finding
			systematic-review reporting.

Social Media Use and Social Anxiety (RQ1)

The evidence bearing on the first research question converges on an important qualification of the popular narrative. When social media use is indexed simply by the amount of time spent or the frequency of engagement, its association with social anxiety and related internalising outcomes is generally weak and inconsistent. Systematic reviews report that although various domains of use correlate with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, these associations are modest and constrained by the cross-sectional nature of most underlying studies (Keles et al., 2020). The umbrella-level synthesis of prior reviews reaches the same conclusion, characterising the overall associations as weak or inconsistent (Valkenburg et al., 2022). A large systematic narrative review similarly notes that time spent and frequency of use are the most common exposure measures, yet yield no uniform relationship with anxiety, which was itself assessed in only a subset of the included studies (Saleem et al., 2024).

A more consistent and stronger signal emerges, however, when attention shifts from quantity to the quality and character of use. Problematic or addictive patterns of engagement show robust positive associations with social-evaluative distress: a systematic review and meta-analysis found a significant positive association between problematic internet use and social anxiety in adolescents and young adults (Ding et al., 2023), and a recent meta-analysis reported a significant positive pooled association between exposure to social-media risk factors and a range of mental disorders, albeit with substantial heterogeneity across studies (Cabezas-Klinger et al., 2025). Appearance-oriented and comparison-laden uses appear especially salient. Empirical

work links the co-occurrence of emotional problems and social-media addiction to diminished self-esteem (Acar et al., 2022), while scoping reviews document connections between social media use and depression that frequently extend to anxiety, disturbed sleep, and appearance-related concerns (Azem et al., 2023; Vidal et al., 2020). Global analyses reinforce the view that the technology is neither uniformly harmful nor uniformly benign, its psychological consequences being contingent on the pattern of use (Ulvi et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings indicate that what adolescents do on social media, and the psychological orientation they bring to it, matters more for social anxiety than how long they spend there—pointing directly to the regulatory processes examined next (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Piccerillo & Digennaro, 2024).

Emotion Regulation, Social Anxiety, and Social Media (RQ2)

The second research question concerns how emotion regulation relates, on one hand, to social anxiety and, on the other, to social media use. With respect to social anxiety, emotion dysregulation is widely understood as a central feature: a reliance on response-focused strategies such as expressive suppression, together with perseverative cognition in the form of rumination and a relative under-use of cognitive reappraisal, is characteristic of socially anxious functioning (Gross, 2015). Because reappraisal tends to support, and suppression to undermine, affective balance and interpersonal connection, the habitual balance between these strategies is consequential for how social-evaluative situations are experienced and managed (Gross & John, 2003).

With respect to social media, emotion regulation is implicated in both directions. On the vulnerability side, a systematic review found that lower emotional intelligence—the capacity to perceive, understand, and regulate emotion—is associated with more problematic social media use among adolescents (Piccerillo & Digennaro, 2024), and emotional problems combined with addictive use predict poorer self-esteem (Acar et al., 2022). On the supportive side, the digital environment

can also be harnessed to cultivate regulation: a systematic review and meta-analysis of digital interventions for emotion regulation in children and early adolescents found that such tools, and digital games in particular, produced small but meaningful reductions in negative emotional experience, with effects most evident among youth at risk of anxiety (Reynard et al., 2022). Emotion regulation is thus not merely a correlate of social media use but a malleable capacity that digital contexts can either erode or strengthen.

Emotion Regulation as Mediator and Moderator (RQ3)

The third research question addresses the linking role of emotion regulation. The most direct evidence concerns specific regulation-relevant behaviours enacted through social media. Technology-based social comparison and feedback-seeking prospectively predict depressive symptoms among adolescents, and these associations are moderated by gender and by social standing, being particularly pronounced among girls and among adolescents lower in popularity (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Such behaviours can be read as attempts at emotion regulation—efforts to evaluate and shore up the self through online information—that paradoxically intensify negative affect and social-evaluative concern. Conceptually, this supports a mediational account in which social media use elevates social anxiety by way of maladaptive regulatory processes: upward comparison and reassurance-seeking heighten the salience of others' judgements, rumination prolongs distress after online encounters, and suppression of authentic expression sustains a sense of inauthenticity and threat.

Emotion regulation also appears to function as a moderator. Where adaptive capacities are stronger—higher emotional intelligence, a greater readiness to reappraise—the affective impact of potentially threatening online experiences is attenuated; where regulation is weaker, the same experiences are more likely to translate into anxiety. It must be acknowledged, however, that direct empirical tests of the full mediational chain from social media use through emotion regulation to social anxiety specifically remain limited; much of the evidence concerns depression or

general distress as the outcome, or examines components of the chain in isolation. This constitutes an important gap, to which the discussion returns.

Contextual Moderators (RQ4)

The fourth research question concerns the contextual factors that condition these relationships. Gender recurs as a moderator, with comparison-driven pathways more strongly implicated for girls (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Culture is a further and frequently neglected moderator: a cross-cultural comparison study found that cultural differences moderate the association between social media use and mental-health outcomes in adolescents, cautioning against the uncritical generalisation of findings derived largely from Western samples (Keles-Gordesli et al., 2024). The specific content and motive of use also matter; for example, health-related social media use was associated with COVID-19 anxiety particularly among adolescents high in health anxiety, illustrating how a pre-existing disposition can channel a given pattern of use toward distress (Lokajova et al., 2023). A self-determination-theory perspective helps to integrate these observations by framing well-being outcomes in terms of whether use satisfies or frustrates basic psychological needs, which in turn helps to explain the mixed findings in the literature (West et al., 2024). Finally, developmental assets operate protectively: a systematic review found that positive youth development functions as a protective factor against the risk behaviours associated with excessive internet and social media use, pointing toward strengths-based avenues for prevention (Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2025).

DISCUSSION

Synthesised across the four research questions, the evidence supports an integrative and transactional account of how social media use, emotion regulation, and social anxiety are related in adolescence. The headline message is not that social media uniformly generates anxiety, but that its psychological consequences are channelled through emotion-regulatory processes. Where use is bound up with maladaptive

regulation—upward social comparison, rumination, expressive suppression, and reassurance- and feedback-seeking—it is more likely to be associated with social-evaluative anxiety; where use is accompanied by adaptive regulation, or by developmental assets that support it, the same platforms appear comparatively benign or even beneficial.

This account maps naturally onto the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015). Social media engage every stage of that model: they enable situation selection, as mediated contact substitutes for feared face-to-face interaction; they invite attentional deployment, as scrolling affords both distraction and, in its perseverative forms, a vehicle for rumination; they drive cognitive change, as exposure to idealised lives recalibrates the meaning of one's own circumstances through upward comparison; and they intensify response modulation, as users suppress spontaneous expression in favour of carefully managed self-presentation. For an adolescent whose regulatory systems are still maturing, these affordances can be double-edged, offering immediate relief while entrenching the avoidance and self-monitoring that maintain social anxiety over time.

The relationship is therefore best understood as bidirectional. Socially anxious adolescents may gravitate toward online interaction precisely because it feels safer than face-to-face contact—a social-compensation dynamic—so that anxiety shapes use even as use shapes anxiety. The short-term relief that mediated contact provides can negatively reinforce avoidance, helping to sustain the disposition over time. Emotion regulation sits at the heart of this loop, functioning simultaneously as an antecedent that conditions how online experience is processed and as a consequence that online experience can reshape.

These conclusions carry constructive implications. If maladaptive regulation is the mechanism through which social media use translates into anxiety, then regulation is also the most promising point of intervention. Programmes that cultivate cognitive reappraisal and emotional intelligence, build critical digital literacy around

comparison and self-presentation, and strengthen developmental assets all target this mechanism rather than merely restricting screen time. The finding that digital tools can themselves support emotion regulation is encouraging in this respect, suggesting that the same technologies implicated in distress can be repurposed for resilience (Reynard et al., 2022). In educational settings—including the school guidance-and-counselling services well established in many systems—these insights argue for embedding emotion-regulation and digital-literacy components within everyday pastoral and preventive practice, rather than treating adolescent social media use as a problem to be suppressed.

Several limitations temper these conclusions. The dominance of cross-sectional designs means that the direction of effects often cannot be established, and reciprocal causation remains plausible. Measurement is heterogeneous—social media use, emotion regulation, and social anxiety are each operationalised in many ways—complicating comparison and contributing to the high heterogeneity reported in quantitative syntheses (Cabezas-Klinger et al., 2025), and a heavy reliance on self-report introduces shared-method and recall biases. The evidence is also geographically skewed toward Western, high-income contexts, and because culture demonstrably moderates these relationships, this skew is a substantive rather than merely descriptive limitation (Keles-Gordesli et al., 2024). This review is itself bounded: it was restricted to English-language publications within a defined window, so relevant work in other languages or in grey literature may have been missed; because of construct heterogeneity the synthesis was narrative rather than meta-analytic, leaving the strength of associations unquantified; and the corpus includes a substantial proportion of secondary syntheses, which enhances breadth but introduces some overlap in the primary studies ultimately represented.

The agenda for future research follows from these gaps. There is a pressing need for longitudinal and intensive-longitudinal designs—including experience-sampling and daily-diary methods—that can capture the dynamic, within-person interplay of

online experience, momentary emotion regulation, and social anxiety as it unfolds. Studies should test the full mediational chain with social anxiety as the explicit outcome, employ validated and construct-specific measures, and incorporate experimental manipulations of regulatory strategy where feasible. Above all, the literature would benefit from genuinely cross-cultural research, including studies of adolescents in the Global South and in plural, multi-ethnic communities, so that the moderating role of culture can be understood rather than assumed

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to clarify the interrelations among social media use, emotion regulation, and social anxiety in adolescence, and to assess the linking role of emotion regulation. Three conclusions stand out. First, the direct association between the quantity of social media use and social anxiety is weak and inconsistent; it is the character of use—problematic, appearance-oriented, and comparison-laden engagement—that is more reliably linked to social-evaluative distress. Second, emotion regulation is the connective tissue of this relationship: maladaptive strategies such as suppression, rumination, upward comparison, and reassurance-seeking appear to mediate and amplify the path from social media use to anxiety, whereas adaptive strategies such as reappraisal and higher emotional intelligence, together with developmental assets, function protectively. Third, the relationship is transactional and contextually conditioned, moderated by gender, culture, age, and the motive and content of use. These conclusions reframe adolescent social media use from a question of exposure to one of regulation, and they locate the most promising opportunities for prevention and intervention in the cultivation of adaptive emotion regulation and critical digital literacy. Realising this promise will require longitudinal, construct-specific, and cross-cultural research that can move the field from association toward mechanism and, ultimately, toward effective support for young people.

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