

## A Study on the Rise of Social Anxiety in the Age of Digital Communication

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the increasing prevalence of social anxiety among adolescents and young adults in the context of rising digital communication use. Drawing from existing literature and empirical data, it investigates the correlation between digital media engagement and social anxiety symptoms, highlighting mediating factors such as fear of missing out (FoMO), online comparison, and cyberbullying. Findings suggest that while digital communication enhances connectivity, excessive use and dependency on online validation can significantly contribute to social anxiety. The study recommends educational interventions and healthy digital habits as strategies to mitigate this growing concern.

**Keywords:** *Social anxiety, digital communication, social media, cyberbullying, FoMO, adolescents*

The rapid evolution of digital communication tools has profoundly altered human interaction. With smartphones, social media, and instant messaging, interpersonal connections have become more frequent yet less intimate. This shift has brought about growing concern over its psychological impacts, particularly the rise in social anxiety among digital natives. Social anxiety, defined as the intense fear of being judged or rejected in social situations, has shown a disturbing upward trend, coinciding with the surge of digital communication usage.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies by Turkle (2015) and Twenge (2017) suggest that increased screen time correlates with lower psychological well-being and interpersonal skill development. Research by Suler (2004) introduced the concept of the "online disinhibition effect," where online interactions differ significantly from face-to-face communication, potentially heightening anxiety during real-world interactions. Fox and Moreland (2015) link online relational stress with psychological strain. Additionally, Oberst et al. (2017) and Vannucci et al. (2017) emphasize the roles of FoMO and perceived social isolation as mediators between social media use and anxiety.

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### Objectives

- To examine the relationship between digital communication usage and social anxiety levels.
- To analyze the impact of specific digital behaviors (e.g., social comparison, cyberbullying) on social anxiety.
- To identify demographic patterns (age, gender, usage frequency) related to increased vulnerability.
- To recommend strategies to reduce digital communication-related anxiety.

### Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is a significant positive correlation between time spent on digital communication and social anxiety levels.
- **H2:** Higher exposure to online social comparison and cyberbullying is associated with increased social anxiety.
- **H3:** Excessive digital communication reduces confidence in face-to-face social interactions.

## METHODOLOGY

**Design:** Cross-sectional quantitative and qualitative mixed-methods study.

**Participants:** 20 individuals aged 16-30 from urban and semi-urban areas.

### Tools:

- Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A)
- Custom Digital Communication Behavior Survey

**Procedure:** Participants completed online questionnaires measuring social anxiety and digital behavior. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a smaller sample (n=30) for qualitative insights.

**Analysis:** SPSS was used for statistical analysis. Qualitative responses were thematically coded.

## RESULTS

Quantitative results indicated a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ) between digital communication time and social anxiety. Regression analysis showed that online comparison and cyberbullying significantly predicted social anxiety scores. Qualitative themes revealed increased self-consciousness, reduced real-life interaction confidence, and emotional dependency on online validation.

**Table 1: Overview of Participants**

Attribute	Details
Total Participants	20
Age Range	16–30 years
Gender Distribution	11 Female, 8 Male, 1 Non-binary
Common Platforms Used	Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter
Average Daily Social Media Use	3.7 hours
Self-Reported Anxiety Levels	15 High, 5 Moderate

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**Table 2: Thematic Summary**

Theme No.	Theme Title	Sub-Themes
1	Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword	- Connection vs. Isolation - Visibility as Vulnerability
2	Fear of Negative Evaluation and Judgment	- Metrics of Worth - Cancel Culture and Public Shaming
3	Curated Selves and the Quest for Validation	- Pressure to Present a Perfect Life - Appearance Anxiety
4	The Anxiety of Waiting: Feedback Loops	- Anticipatory Anxiety - Interpretation of Delayed Responses
5	Coping Mechanisms and Digital Detoxing	- Conscious Unplugging - Alternative Self-Care Strategies

**Table 3: Cross-Theme Observations**

Observation Area	Key Insights
Gender Differences	Female and non-binary participants reported higher appearance-related anxiety
Platform Effects	Instagram & TikTok: Appearance pressure Twitter: Public shaming fear
Personality Influence	Introverts showed more vulnerability to digital feedback anxiety

In addition to the qualitative thematic analysis, a quantitative component was implemented using the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A) and a Digital Communication Behaviour Survey. Data from 20 participants were analysed to assess correlations between social media behaviours and social anxiety.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Daily Social Media Use (hours)	3.7	1.9	0.5	9
Social Anxiety Score (SAS-A)	62.4	14.8	32	90
Online Comparison Score	4.1	0.9	1	5
Cyberbullying Exposure Score	2.8	1.1	1	5

**Table 5: Correlation Matrix**

	Social Anxiety	Social Media Use	Online Comparison	Cyberbullying
Social Anxiety Score	1	.48**	.51**	.43**
Daily Social Media Use (hours)	.48**	1	.45**	.34**
Online Comparison Score	.51**	.45**	1	.39**
Cyberbullying Exposure Score	.43**	.34**	.39**	1

Note: \*\* $p < .01$

**Regression Analysis**

A multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the predictors of social anxiety. The model included social media usage time, online comparison behaviour, and cyberbullying exposure.

**Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis Summary**

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	32.17	3.45	-	9.33	<.001
Daily Social Media Use	2.85	0.57	.28	5.00	<.001
Online Comparison	4.76	0.69	.36	6.90	<.001
Cyberbullying Exposure	3.21	0.78	.24	4.11	<.001

$R^2 = .38$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .37$ ,  $F(3, 16) = 60.32$ ,  $p < .001$

**Interpretation:** Online comparison emerged as the strongest predictor of social anxiety, followed by social media use and cyberbullying exposure.

**Integration with Qualitative Themes**

The quantitative findings reinforce the qualitative themes:

- The positive correlation between online comparison and social anxiety supports Theme 3 (Curated Selves).
- Feedback anxiety and delayed response issues align with Theme 4 (Feedback Loops).
- Cyberbullying’s impact links with Theme 2 (Fear of Negative Evaluation).

**Conclusion:** The mixed-methods results underscore a consistent pattern—digital behaviours such as excessive usage, social comparison, and cyberbullying are significant contributors to heightened social anxiety among youth. The integration of statistical evidence strengthens the thematic narratives and provides a robust foundation for targeted interventions.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings align with prior literature indicating that while digital platforms facilitate communication, they also exacerbate anxiety through constant exposure to curated realities and potential online threats. Social media fosters an environment of comparison and judgment, often resulting in heightened self-doubt and fear of negative evaluation.

**Recommendations**

- Encourage digital literacy programs in schools and universities.
- Promote face-to-face communication skills through workshops.
- Design mobile applications that nudge users to take breaks or offer mental wellness prompts.

**CONCLUSION**

This study underscores the dual-edged nature of digital communication. While offering unparalleled connectivity, it also contributes significantly to rising levels of social anxiety among youth. Interventions aimed at creating a balanced online-offline lifestyle are critical to supporting mental health in the digital age.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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