

Research Paper

Digital Media Overuse, Emotional Intelligence and Happiness among Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives, providing opportunities for communication, education, entertainment, and social interaction. However, excessive and problematic digital media use may be associated with difficulties in emotional functioning and reduced well-being. The present study examined the relationship between digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of emotional intelligence. A cross-sectional and comparative research design was adopted. The sample consisted of 360 Class XII students, including 180 boys and 180 girls, selected from rural and urban senior secondary schools in Saran and Siwan districts of Bihar, India. Data were collected using the Smartphone Use Scale (SUS), Emotional Intelligence Scale, and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. Pearson product-moment correlations, independent-samples *t*-tests, and hierarchical linear regression and mediation analyses were conducted. The findings showed that digital media overuse was significantly negatively associated with emotional intelligence ($r = -.276, p < .01$) and happiness ($r = -.147, p < .01$), whereas emotional intelligence was strongly and positively associated with happiness ($r = .659, p < .001$). The mediation analysis showed a significant indirect effect of digital media overuse on happiness through emotional intelligence ($B = -.1485, SE = 0.0288, Z = -5.16, p < .001$). The total effect was significant ($B = -0.1186, SE = 0.0420, Z = -2.83, p < .01$), whereas the direct effect became non-significant after emotional intelligence was included in the model ($B = .0299, SE = 0.0333, Z = .90$). The findings indicate that emotional intelligence plays an important mediating role in the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness among adolescents.

Keywords: *Digital Media Overuse, Smartphone Use, Emotional Intelligence, Happiness, Adolescents, Mediation Analysis*

Digital technology has become a normal part of adolescent life. Smartphones, internet services, social networking platforms, online games, and other digital resources have changed the ways in which young people communicate, study, obtain information, and spend their leisure time. Digital technology can provide considerable

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benefits by supporting education, facilitating communication, providing access to information, and creating opportunities for recreation and social interaction. At the same time, increasing concern has emerged regarding patterns of digital media use that become excessive, difficult to regulate, or disruptive to everyday functioning.

Therefore, the issue is not simply whether adolescents use digital technology, but how they use it, how extensively they engage with it, and whether its use begins to interfere with other areas of life. Howard-Jones (2011) argued that technology should not be regarded as inherently good or bad because its effects depend considerably on how, when, and for what purposes it is used. This distinction is particularly relevant during adolescence, when digital media has become closely connected with academic activities, peer relationships, entertainment, and everyday social interaction. Moderate and purposeful use may provide important developmental opportunities, whereas problematic use may interfere with activities that contribute to healthy psychological development.

Adolescence is a period of substantial psychological, emotional, and social development. During this period, young people gradually develop greater independence, establish stronger peer relationships, encounter increasing academic demands, and learn to understand and regulate complex emotional experiences. Emotional intelligence is particularly relevant to this developmental process. It encompasses capacities related to understanding emotions, managing emotional experiences, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and responding appropriately to emotional situations. Adolescents with stronger emotional competencies may be better able to manage everyday challenges, maintain relationships, and adapt to stressful experiences.

Emotional intelligence has also been considered important for psychological well-being and happiness. Individuals who are able to recognize and regulate their emotions may be better equipped to cope with negative experiences and maintain positive emotional states. In adolescents, these abilities may be especially important because emotional and social experiences are undergoing rapid development. Higher emotional intelligence may therefore contribute to more positive subjective experiences and greater happiness, while difficulties in emotional functioning may be associated with poorer well-being.

The increasing integration of smartphones and other digital technologies into adolescent life has raised questions about their possible relationship with emotional intelligence. Problematic digital media use may reduce opportunities for direct interpersonal interaction and may encourage patterns of avoidance or emotional dependence on digital devices. Mukherjee and Dasgupta (2020) conceptualize problematic smartphone use through dimensions including smartphone use in interpersonal relationships, smartphone as a precious possession, smartphone as a companion, smartphone as a tool for evasion, and smartphone as an instrument of multiple utility. These dimensions suggest that problematic use involves not merely the amount of time spent using a smartphone but also the psychological functions that the device serves.

Previous research has drawn attention to the psychological consequences of excessive digital technology use. Whang et al. (2003) reported that internet over-users showed greater depression, loneliness, and compulsive tendencies than other groups. Echeburúa and de Corral (2010) similarly discussed problematic use of new technologies and online social networking among young people. Kuss and Griffiths (2011) reviewed the psychological

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literature on online social networking and highlighted concerns regarding excessive and problematic engagement. From a broader biopsychosocial perspective, Griffiths (2005) proposed that excessive involvement in rewarding activities may involve characteristics such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Although problematic smartphone use should not automatically be equated with clinical addiction. These perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding why some patterns of digital engagement may become difficult to regulate.

The relationship between digital media overuse and emotional intelligence may be particularly important because emotional intelligence represents an individual psychological resource that can influence how adolescents respond to their environment. Excessive digital engagement may be associated with reduced emotional awareness or difficulties in managing interpersonal experiences, while adolescents with stronger emotional competencies may be better able to regulate their digital behaviour. Thus, the relationship between digital media overuse and emotional intelligence may potentially operate in both directions. Understanding this relationship is important for identifying psychological mechanisms associated with problematic digital-media behaviour.

Happiness represents another important aspect of adolescent well-being. It refers broadly to an individual's subjective experience of positive psychological functioning. Adolescence is an important period for the development of patterns of emotional well-being that may influence later adjustment. Digital media may contribute positively to happiness when it facilitates social connection, recreation, information, and meaningful activities. However, excessive or problematic use may be associated with reduced engagement in offline activities, disrupted routines, social comparison, and difficulties in managing everyday responsibilities. Consequently, the psychological meaning and pattern of digital-media engagement may be more important than digital technology itself.

Emotional intelligence may provide a possible explanation for the relationship between problematic digital media use and happiness. Adolescents who engage excessively with digital media may experience lower emotional intelligence, which in turn may be associated with reduced happiness. Conversely, adolescents with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to manage emotional experiences and interpersonal situations, thereby maintaining greater happiness despite exposure to digital demands. This possibility suggests that emotional intelligence may function as a psychological mechanism through which digital media overuse is related to adolescent happiness.

The Indian context is particularly relevant because access to smartphones and internet services has expanded rapidly among young people. Digital technology is increasingly integrated into education, communication, entertainment, and social relationships. At the same time, adolescents in rural and urban settings may differ in access, patterns of use, family supervision, educational demands, and social experiences. Examining adolescents from both rural and urban areas can therefore contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between digital media use and psychological well-being.

Despite growing interest in problematic digital technology use, the relationship between digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents remains an important area for investigation. In particular, relatively less attention has been given to whether emotional intelligence helps to explain the relationship between problematic digital

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media use and happiness. Examining this mediating role can provide a more comprehensive understanding than examining simple associations alone.

The present study therefore focuses on digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents. It examines whether greater problematic smartphone use is associated with lower emotional intelligence and reduced happiness and whether emotional intelligence is positively related to happiness. More importantly, the study examines whether emotional intelligence statistically mediates the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness among Class XII adolescents from rural and urban senior secondary schools in Bihar.

The study is guided by the assumption that digital media overuse may be associated with poorer emotional functioning, while emotional intelligence may serve as an important psychological resource associated with greater happiness. The mediation framework consequently provides an opportunity to examine whether the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness can be understood partly through differences in emotional intelligence.

Objectives

The present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents and to determine whether emotional intelligence plays a mediating role in the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness.

Hypotheses

On the basis of the objectives of the study and the relevant literature, the following hypotheses were formulated.

1. Digital media over users will have significantly lower emotional intelligence than under users.
2. Digital media over users will have significantly lower happiness than under users.
3. Emotional intelligence would be positively associated with happiness among adolescents.
4. Emotional intelligence would significantly mediate the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness among adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 360 students of Class XII, comprising 180 boys and 180 girls, who were selected from rural and urban senior secondary schools in Saran and Siwan districts of Bihar, India. The sample was selected to examine the relationship between problematic digital media use, emotional intelligence, and happiness during a developmental period characterized by substantial emotional and social changes.

Research Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional correlational research design was employed for the present study. The design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine the magnitude and direction of relationships among digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness and to determine the mediating role of emotional intelligence. A comparative

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component was also used to examine differences between adolescents classified as digital media under users and over users.

The participants were randomly selected from rural and urban senior secondary schools located in Saran and Siwan districts of Bihar. The final sample included 360 adolescents, with equal representation of boys and girls.

Measures

- **Smartphone Use Scale (SUS).** The Smartphone Use Scale developed by Mukherjee and Dasgupta (2020) was used to assess problematic smartphone use. The scale consists of 30 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating “Never,” to 5, indicating “Always.” The scale covers five dimensions including smartphone use and interpersonal relationships, smartphone as a precious possession, smartphone as a companion, smartphone as a tool for evasion, and smartphone as an instrument of multiple utility. The total score was used as an indicator of digital media overuse, with higher scores representing greater problematic smartphone use. The internal consistency reported during the development of the scale was .712.
- **Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS).** Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Emotional Intelligence Scale developed by Hyde, Pethe, and Dhar (2002). The scale consists of 34 items rated on a five-point scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The scale assesses ten dimensions of emotional intelligence, namely self-awareness, empathy, self-motivation, emotional stability, managing relations, integrity, self-development, value orientation, commitment, and altruistic behaviour. The total obtainable score ranges from 34 to 170, with higher scores indicating higher emotional intelligence. The scale does not contain negatively worded items. The reported split-half reliability of the scale is .88.
- **Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ).** Happiness was assessed using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire developed by Hills and Argyle (2002). The questionnaire consists of 29 items and uses a six-point response format ranging from 1, “Strongly Agree,” to 6, “Strongly Disagree.” Negatively worded items were reverse-scored prior to computing the total score so that higher scores indicate greater happiness. The reported reliability of the questionnaire is .91.

Procedure

The participants were approached through the selected senior secondary schools in Saran and Siwan districts. After obtaining the necessary cooperation from the concerned institutions, the purpose and nature of the study were explained to the participants. They were informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes and that confidentiality of the information provided would be maintained. The participants completed the Smartphone Use Scale, Emotional Intelligence Scale, and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. The completed responses were scored according to the respective scoring procedures of the measures and were subsequently entered for statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationships among digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness. Independent-samples *t*-tests were used to compare digital media under users and over users on the major study variables. Hierarchical linear regression was used to examine the contribution of emotional

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intelligence to happiness after accounting for digital media overuse. Finally, mediation analysis was conducted to determine whether emotional intelligence mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness.

RESULTS

Relationship Between Digital Media Overuse, Emotional Intelligence and Happiness

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Correlation Among Digital Media Overuse, Emotional Intelligence and Happiness

Variables	Digital Media Overuse	Emotional Intelligence	Happiness
Digital Media Overuse	-	-.276**	-.147**
Emotional Intelligence	-.276**	-	.659***
Happiness	-.147**	.659***	-

Note. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$.

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that digital media overuse was significantly and negatively correlated with emotional intelligence, $r = -.276$, $p < .01$. This indicates that higher levels of digital media overuse were associated with lower levels of emotional intelligence among adolescents.

Digital media overuse was also significantly and negatively correlated with happiness, $r = -.147$, $p < .01$. Thus, adolescents reporting greater digital media overuse tended to report lower levels of happiness.

In contrast, emotional intelligence was strongly and positively correlated with happiness, $r = .659$, $p < .001$. This finding indicates that adolescents with higher levels of emotional intelligence tended to report substantially higher levels of happiness. The findings provide support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

Comparison of Digital Media Under Users and Over Users

An independent-samples t -test was conducted to determine whether digital media under users and over users differed significantly in emotional intelligence and happiness. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of Emotional Intelligence and Happiness Between Digital Media Under Users and Over Users

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	$t(184)$
Emotional Intelligence	Under User	92	130.59	16.02	5.73***
	Over User	94	116.13	18.29	
Happiness	Under User	92	114.17	21.07	2.56**
	Over User	94	105.95	22.65	

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the Under User group had significantly higher emotional intelligence than the Over User group. The mean emotional intelligence score of

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Under Users was 130.59 ($SD = 16.02$), whereas the mean score of Over Users was 116.13 ($SD = 18.29$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(184) = 5.73, p < .001$.

A significant difference was also found in happiness. Under Users obtained a higher mean happiness score ($M = 114.17, SD = 21.07$) than Over Users ($M = 105.95, SD = 22.65$). The difference was statistically significant, $t(184) = 2.56, p < .011$.

The findings therefore indicate that adolescents with comparatively low digital media use had significantly higher emotional intelligence and happiness than adolescents with comparatively high digital media use. These findings provide stronger evidence for the proposed group differences because the comparison specifically contrasts the lower and upper quartiles of digital media use rather than dividing the entire sample into two groups.

Regression Analysis of Happiness

Hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine whether emotional intelligence contributed significantly to the prediction of happiness after accounting for digital media overuse. In the first model, digital media overuse was entered as the predictor. In the second model, emotional intelligence was added to determine whether it explained additional variance in happiness.

Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Predicting Happiness from Digital Media Overuse and Emotional Intelligence

Model	Predictor	B	SE	t	R ²	ΔR ²
1	SUS Total	-.1186	0.0421	-2.82**	.0217	
2	SUS Total	.0299	.0333	.90	.4351	.4134
2	Emotional Intelligence	.8493	.0525	16.16***		

Note. Model 1: $F(1, 358) = 7.94, p < .01$. Model 2: $F(2, 357) = 137.48, p < .001$.

The first regression model showed that digital media overuse significantly negatively predicted happiness, $B = -.1186, SE = .0421, t = -2.82, p < .01$. Digital media overuse alone explained 2.17% of the variance in happiness ($R^2 = .0217$).

After emotional intelligence was entered into Model 2, the explained variance increased substantially to 43.51% ($R^2 = .4351$). The addition of emotional intelligence resulted in an increase of .4134 in explained variance.

Emotional intelligence emerged as a significant positive predictor of happiness, $B = .8493, SE = .0525, t = 16.16, p < .001$. In contrast, the direct effect of digital media overuse became statistically non-significant after emotional intelligence was included, $B = .0299, SE = .0333, t = .90$.

These findings indicate that emotional intelligence makes a substantial contribution to the prediction of happiness and provide preliminary evidence for its mediating role in the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness.

Mediation Analysis

To examine whether emotional intelligence mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness, a mediation analysis was conducted with digital media overuse as

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the predictor, emotional intelligence as the mediator, and happiness as the outcome variable. The mediation estimates are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Mediation Estimates for the Relationship Between Digital Media Overuse and Happiness

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	%Mediation
Indirect Effect	-.1485	0.0288	-5.16***	83.3
Direct Effect	.0299	0.0333	.90	16.7
Total Effect	-0.1186	0.0420	-2.826**	100

The results presented in Table 4 show that the total effect of digital media overuse on happiness was negative and statistically significant ($B = -0.1186$, $SE = 0.0420$, $p < .01$). The indirect effect through emotional intelligence was also significant and negative ($B = -0.1485$, $SE = 0.0288$, $Z = -5.16$, $p < .001$). After emotional intelligence was included in the model, the direct effect of digital media overuse on happiness became non-significant and positive ($B = 0.0299$, $SE = 0.0333$). This pattern indicates that emotional intelligence fully mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness (inconsistent mediation).

Table 5 Path Estimates of the Mediation Model

Path	Estimate	SE	Z
Digital Media Overuse → Emotional Intelligence	-0.1748	0.0321	-5.44***
Emotional Intelligence → Happiness	0.8493	0.0525	16.16***
Digital Media Overuse → Happiness	.0299	0.0333	.90

The path estimates demonstrate that digital media overuse was significantly and negatively associated with emotional intelligence, $B = -.1748$, $p < .001$. Emotional intelligence was subsequently positively associated with happiness, $B = .8493$, $p < .001$. The direct path from digital media overuse to happiness was not statistically significant after emotional intelligence was included in the model.

The significant indirect effect, together with the non-significant direct effect, indicates that emotional intelligence significantly mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness. *The results therefore support Hypothesis 4.*

Taken together, the findings indicate that emotional intelligence plays a significant mediating role in the association between digital media overuse and happiness among adolescents.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The findings showed that digital media overuse was significantly and negatively associated with emotional intelligence and happiness, whereas emotional intelligence was significantly positively associated with happiness. The mediation analysis further demonstrated that emotional intelligence significantly mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness. These findings provide evidence

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that emotional intelligence is an important psychological factor in understanding the relationship between problematic digital media use and adolescent well-being.

The first finding showed a significant negative relationship between digital media overuse and emotional intelligence ($r = -.276, p < .01$). Adolescents with higher levels of problematic smartphone use tended to report lower levels of emotional intelligence. The comparison between digital media under users and over users further supported this finding, as under users obtained a higher mean emotional intelligence score than over users. This finding suggests that excessive involvement with digital media may be associated with less favourable emotional functioning among adolescents. The finding is consistent with the broader concern that problematic digital technology use may interfere with aspects of social and emotional functioning. At the same time, because the present study was cross-sectional, the direction of this relationship cannot be established. It is possible that problematic digital media use is associated with lower emotional intelligence, but it is also possible that adolescents with comparatively lower emotional competencies may be more likely to engage excessively with digital media.

The second finding indicated that digital media overuse was significantly negatively associated with happiness ($r = -.147, p < .01$). Digital media under users also reported significantly greater happiness than over users. This finding suggests that greater problematic digital media use is associated with lower subjective well-being among adolescents. The result is consistent with the view that excessive engagement with digital technologies may interfere with everyday activities and psychological well-being. Ortega-Navas (2017) similarly highlighted that although digital technologies can contribute positively to quality of life, excessive use may be associated with psychological difficulties and reduced well-being. The present finding therefore supports the importance of distinguishing beneficial digital engagement from problematic or excessive use.

The third major finding concerned the relationship between emotional intelligence and happiness. A strong positive correlation was found between emotional intelligence and happiness ($r = .659, p < .001$). Emotional intelligence also emerged as a highly significant positive predictor of happiness in the regression analysis. When emotional intelligence was added to the regression model after digital media overuse, the explained variance in happiness increased from 2.17% to 43.51%. This substantial increase indicates that emotional intelligence was strongly related to individual differences in happiness in the present sample. The finding is consistent with the conceptualization of emotional intelligence as an important psychological resource that may help adolescents understand, regulate, and appropriately express their emotions and manage interpersonal experiences.

The most important finding of the study was obtained from the mediation analysis. The total effect of digital media overuse on happiness was significant and negative ($B = -0.1186, p < .01$). The indirect effect through emotional intelligence was also significant ($B = -0.1485, p < .01$). However, after emotional intelligence was introduced into the model, the direct effect of digital media overuse on happiness became non-significant ($B = .0299$). This pattern provides evidence of a significant indirect pathway through emotional intelligence.

The path analysis provides a clearer explanation of this finding. Digital media overuse was negatively related to emotional intelligence ($B = -0.1748, p < .01$), whereas emotional intelligence was positively related to happiness ($B = 0.8493, p < .001$). Thus, greater digital

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media overuse was associated with lower emotional intelligence, and lower emotional intelligence was, in turn, associated with lower happiness. The significant indirect effect indicates that emotional intelligence represents an important mechanism linking digital media overuse with happiness in the present sample.

The findings have an important implication for understanding adolescent well-being in the digital era. Simply focusing on reducing the amount of time adolescents spend with digital devices may not fully address the psychological factors associated with problematic use. Emotional competencies may also be relevant. Adolescents who possess stronger abilities to understand and manage their emotional experiences may be better positioned to maintain positive psychological functioning in the context of extensive digital engagement. Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting healthy digital behaviour may benefit from incorporating emotional intelligence development alongside guidance regarding responsible technology use.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the methodological limitations of the study. The cross-sectional nature of the research prevents conclusions regarding temporal or causal relationships among digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness. The measures were based on self-report responses and may therefore be influenced by individual reporting tendencies. In addition, the sample consisted of Class XII adolescents from selected schools in Saran and Siwan districts of Bihar, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to adolescents from other educational, cultural, and geographical contexts. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs and include adolescents from a wider range of settings to examine how digital media use and emotional intelligence change over time.

Overall, the findings indicate that digital media overuse is associated with lower emotional intelligence and lower happiness, while emotional intelligence is strongly associated with greater happiness. More importantly, emotional intelligence significantly mediated the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness. The results highlight the importance of considering emotional competencies when examining adolescent well-being in an increasingly digital social environment.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness among adolescents, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The findings consistently demonstrated that digital media overuse was negatively associated with emotional intelligence and happiness, whereas emotional intelligence showed a strong positive association with happiness.

Adolescents classified as digital media over users reported significantly lower emotional intelligence and happiness than under users. The correlation findings further showed that greater digital media overuse was associated with lower emotional intelligence and lower happiness. In contrast, emotional intelligence demonstrated a strong positive relationship with happiness, indicating that adolescents with higher emotional intelligence tended to experience greater happiness.

The mediation analysis provided the central finding of the study. The indirect effect of digital media overuse on happiness through emotional intelligence was statistically

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significant, while the direct effect became non-significant after emotional intelligence was included in the model. This pattern indicates that emotional intelligence significantly mediates the relationship between digital media overuse and happiness. Thus, the findings suggest that the relationship between problematic digital media use and adolescent happiness may be understood, at least in part, through differences in emotional intelligence.

The findings highlight the importance of emotional development in understanding adolescent well-being in the contemporary digital environment. Promoting emotional awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and healthy patterns of digital media use may be useful components of programmes designed to support adolescent psychological well-being. However, the cross-sectional nature of the present study does not permit causal conclusions. Future longitudinal research may provide stronger evidence regarding the temporal relationship between digital media use, emotional intelligence, and happiness.

Overall, the study demonstrates that digital media overuse, emotional intelligence, and happiness are meaningfully interconnected among adolescents. The significant mediating role of emotional intelligence suggests that strengthening emotional competencies may be an important direction for promoting healthier adjustment and greater happiness among adolescents living in an increasingly digital environment.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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