

The Clinical Relationship Between Social Anxiety Disorder and Digital Addiction in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT: This study examines changes in social anxiety disorder and digital addiction among adolescents aged 13–18 through a clinical integrative qualitative treatment approach. The research explored multidimensional relationships between adolescents' levels of social anxiety experienced in peer relationships and school settings, and their excessive time spent on digital platforms. The study sample comprised 94 adolescents (52 girls, 42 boys) from the provinces of Ankara, Izmir, Kütahya and Muğla, representing a diverse range of ages, educational levels, peer relationships and screen usage patterns. Data were collected via open-ended questions, semi-structured forms and sentence completion tasks, and were thematically analysed using content analysis. The findings indicate that adolescents with high levels of social anxiety experience digital spaces as a 'safe haven' to escape increasing scepticism about face-to-face communication and performance anxieties; however, this very situation also triggers the emergence of such anxieties. The poem entitled 'Beyond the Screen', which lends a unique and aesthetic dimension to the study, has added a qualitative, clinical depth by symbolically reflecting experiences of loneliness and seeking refuge, which have been virtually gathered in various places.

KEYWORDS: Adolescence, Social Anxiety Disorder, Digital Addiction, Avoidance Behaviour, Peer Relationships.

INTRODUCTION

As a social being, humans, throughout their development, harbour a need to belong to a group, to be accepted and to preserve their values (Howard, 1978). Adolescence in particular (ages 13–18) is a sensitive stage during which the individual continues to construct their identity, peer acceptance takes on critical importance, and sensitivity to social evaluation reaches its peak (Steinberg, 2001). Social anxiety disorder, which may emerge during this period, is characterised by an individual's excessive fear of being negatively judged in unfamiliar settings or within a peer group, avoidance of face-to-face communication, and intense anxiety (Kessler et al., 2012).

With the advancement of technology today, young people in their teenage years are constructing and establishing their social worlds not only in physical spaces but also on digital platforms and social media networks. Excessive and uncontrolled use of technology, and digital addiction, are emerging as rapidly increasing clinical problems during adolescence. (Griffiths, 2005; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The literature suggests that the relationship between social anxiety disorder and digital interactions is largely mediated by 'escape' (as a coping mechanism). Adolescents who fear being hurt or criticised in face-to-face interactions feel safer thanks to the comfort, controllability and accessibility offered by the virtual and digital world.

In this regard, examining the prevalence of social anxiety among adolescents and the role of digital platforms in triggering this process is of great importance from the perspectives of clinical and developmental psychology. The absence or ineffectiveness of supportive factors within the family and school environments leads to increased engagement in the virtual world, resulting in psychosocial distress. This study aims to reveal these clinically relevant findings through adolescents' subjective and emotional—or emotionless—accounts.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design to elucidate the clinical distinction between social anxiety disorder in adolescence and digital engagement. A case study (phenomenological approach) was adopted, focusing on how adolescents' real-life experiences merge with their digital lives, whilst their anxieties become increasingly independent of one another (Creswell, 2013).

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This structured study comprised a total of 94 adolescents aged 13–18 who volunteered to participate from the provinces of Ankara, Izmir, Kütahya and Muğla, which represent Turkey's diverse services and sociocultural dynamics. The demographic composition of the participants comprised 52 girls and 42 boys. In the study, maximum diversity sampling (Patton, 2015) was employed to demonstrate the multidimensional interplay between adolescents' digital relationships and social anxiety disorders across various contexts; this approach enhanced the representativeness of the sample.

Rather than analysing the cost of the divide between clinical anxiety symptoms during adolescence and excessive technology use/digital relationships, a multi-layered data collection method was employed. Data were collected via open-ended questions, sentence completion tests and online forms, which examined peers' acceptance of information, fear of being hurt, motivations for avoiding face-to-face communication, and their perception of a safe space maintained in the virtual world.

Furthermore, to capitalise on the limitations of approaches that address adolescents' internal conflicts and coping strategies from a projective perspective, clinical and qualitative depth were utilised to enhance the analysis. This framework provided a suitable foundation for adolescents to access their feelings regarding digitalised loneliness, virtual disconnection and peer evaluations through their own personal experiences. All these findings clearly demonstrate that the relationship between social anxiety disorder observed during adolescence and digital relationships involves dynamics that mutually trigger and intensify one another.

All information and personal data pertaining to individuals has been stored securely. The data was systematically analysed using content analysis methods, with units of meaning separated and categorised under themes.

Findings: The findings of the study reveal, under four main themes, the motivations of adolescents with high levels of social anxiety to use digital platforms, the online coping strategies currently employed by their peers, and the clinical implications of these findings.

1. Social Anxiety and Avoidance of Face-to-Face Communication The study clearly demonstrates that intense anxiety and a fear of negative outcomes are among the primary psychological problems adolescents face in their social lives during adolescence. A significant proportion of participants report feeling constantly under scrutiny in school corridors, classrooms or crowded social settings; they describe blushing at the slightest provocation, becoming mentally paralysed by the fear of saying something wrong or flawed, and experiencing anxiety about being excluded or rejected by their peer group. These concrete political and aesthetic developments are causing adolescents to rapidly withdraw from face-to-face communication with their peers, to become increasingly withdrawn, and to remain on the periphery of social spaces.

This perception of threat and fear of exclusion arising from face-to-face communication also paves the way for young people to turn to virtual platforms, where they feel more in control and protected by avoiding traditional socialisation. Individuals who avoid real-life confrontations and social risks create a kind of psychological refuge thanks to the access and controllability offered by the digital world. This avoidance behaviour, frequently observed in the participants' experiences, is clearly exemplified by the following account from one of the young people:

"I felt that everyone was looking at me in public, searching for a mistake; so I chose to remain silent all the time."

Such clinical observations reveal that social anxiety disorder observed in adolescents is not merely a temporary shyness; on the contrary, it is a critical mechanism that fundamentally shapes young people's world of communication, renders them dependent on digital environments, and profoundly undermines their psychosocial well-being.

2. Seeking refuge in digital spaces as a 'safe haven'

It has been observed that adolescents with high levels of social anxiety, due to the intense anxiety they experience in face-to-face communication and their fear of negative consequences, attempt to establish peer relationships—which they struggle with in the real world—through digital games and social media platforms. For these individuals, who wish to distance themselves from the risk of tension arising from international and social exposure, digital platforms effectively serve as 'safe havens'. The absence of immediate pressure to respond on these platforms, coupled with the opportunity to think before writing and to edit one's expression, stands out as an effective coping mechanism that alleviates the social anxiety experienced by adolescents.

However, whilst these safe spaces may initially provide a comforting haven, they gradually evolve into a deepening vicious cycle. As adolescents avoid social interactions in real life, the development of their social skills becomes disrupted, leading them to become increasingly attached to the controlled comfort offered by the digital world. This situation results in the initial continuity of screen time gradually spiralling out of control, ultimately leading to clinical-level digital imprisonment. Individuals who cannot satisfy their need for validation and acceptance in the real world shift their entire struggle for existence and belonging to the virtual realm. In fact, the following words, expressed by one of the participating adolescents, summarise this psychological refuge and the fundamental motivation behind digital power in the most concise terms:

"We try to exist by attempting to create posts and use services on social media, as a way of compensating for that fragility—the inability to exist and survive within social interactions in real life."

These clinical observations clearly demonstrate that digital engagement among adolescents is not merely a form of entertainment or a habit to pass the time, but rather a profound psychological process of anxiety stemming from an attempt to cope with social anxiety.

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3. Peer Approval, Fear of Not Being Liked and Clinical Addiction

Peer acceptance and a sense of group solidarity during adolescence are central to this sensitive phase of identity formation and rank among fundamental psychological issues. However, today this quest for social fulfilment has shifted entirely to digital platforms and social media networks, bearing the costs associated with physical spaces. Research clearly demonstrates that adolescents with high levels of social anxiety develop an excessive sense of freedom and dependence when seeking approval from their peers in virtual environments.

Every piece of content, photograph or status update on social media platforms is directly and inextricably linked to the adolescent's sense of self-worth. For young people, the 'likes', 'comments' or digital communication patterns associated with this content have effectively become a means of validating their self-esteem to the outside world. The individual attempts to compensate for the lack of connections and validation they cannot establish face-to-face in real life through these virtual, idealised interactions.

However, the greatest flaws in this situation lie in the extreme volatility and fragility of digital harm. Adolescents experience serious, distressing breakdowns when they fail to receive the expected level of 'likes' or positive comments – that is, when the anticipated acceptance from virtual peer groups is delayed. In moments when approval is not forthcoming or digital feedback is disregarded—leading to feelings of exclusion or rejection—adolescents experience intense anger, a profound sense of worthlessness and clinically significant depressive moods. This hunger for validation leads individuals to be unable to disconnect from their screens, to engage in a constant cycle of malfunction and escape, and ultimately to be drawn into a clinical spiral of digital addiction triggered by social anxiety disorder.

Artistic Reflections and Inner Confrontation: The Concept of 'Beyond the Screen'

In qualitative research conducted within clinical and developmental psychology, it is not always easy to directly analyse adolescents' complex inner worlds and the defence mechanisms that protect them. Particularly in cases where conditions such as social anxiety disorder mask their persistence or create a distance from the outside world, standard data collection tools may prove inadequate. At this point, the use of artistic, literary and symbolic narratives as research methods plays a critical role in helping young people confront their own realities. The thematic narrative 'Beyond the Screen', which was explored within the research process and centres on the bonds adolescents form with the digital world, has created a profound, unsettling and transformative emotional impact on the participants.

This metaphorical universe, presented through narrative, has shattered the tendency to view adolescents' connection with the digital world merely as an external means of entertainment, a way of passing the time or an innocent hobby. For young people with high levels of social anxiety—who are intensely fearful of being criticised, saying the wrong thing or being rejected in face-to-face interactions—their relationship with the screen continues to serve as a psychological refuge and source of protection. Young people mask the social failures, feelings of loneliness and chronic sense of inadequacy they experience in real life with the comfortable and controllable structure offered by digital platforms. However, through the 'Beyond the Screen' approach, the hidden reality of the integrity of this digital realm has been presented to them via a mirror. During the research process, most adolescents expressed for the first time, with remarkable clarity, that whilst they use the virtual world as a means of escape, this escape actually masks their own loneliness, transforming it into a thick and dangerous veil.

Throughout the study, as themes emerged, they identified with their own life stories; they came to realise, to their distress, that the hours spent in front of screens, the validation they sought on social media, and their efforts to gain peer acceptance were by no means innocent pastimes. Many of the adolescents who took part in the study described this intense and inescapable relationship with smartphones and digital platforms as a state of 'captivity' – one they had entered of their own free will but from which they could never quite escape. It has become apparent that the virtual networks they sought refuge in—to escape the psychological pressure caused by excessive social anxiety, to protect themselves from external influences and to create a safe haven—eventually transformed into an invisible prison that ensnared them, socially stunted them and left them entirely cut off from physical reality.

This painful process of self-reflection and internal reckoning has enabled young people to assess their own cycles of withdrawal from an external perspective. By confronting their fears, their forms of escape, and the shackles of the false freedom promised by the digital world, adolescents have come to understand the roots of the psychosocial disruption they experience with much greater clarity. Consequently, this symbolic and narrative intervention has clearly demonstrated just how vital it is to examine the link between social anxiety disorder and digital relationships in adolescents not only through empirical data, but also through the psychological breakdowns within the individual's inner world and their universal expressions.

A Global Perspective: The Continental Distribution and Life Implications of Social Anxiety and Digital Addiction in Adolescents

Current international epidemiological studies and a wide range of meta-analysis data reveal that the interplay between Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and digital relationships among adolescents aged 13–18 has become a critical public health issue worldwide. According to the scientific literature, the global average prevalence of Social Anxiety Disorder during adolescence is approximately **8.3 per cent**. Accordingly, rates of problematic smartphone use and digital addiction vary between **10 per cent and**

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30 per cent worldwide; this clearly demonstrates that the forces of the modern digital ecosystem exert profound psychosocial pressure.

Continental and Regional Distribution Dynamics

The distribution of social anxiety and digital excess across continents, as determined by cultural and economic structures, is characterised by the following distinctions:

- **Asia:** Particularly in East and South Asian countries (China, South Korea, Japan and India), an intense academic competitive environment, family expectations of success and the collective pressure to gain social approval are fuelling social anxiety amongst adolescents. Research indicates that scores for problematic smartphone use in this region are above the global average, with young people using digital platforms as an intensive refuge to escape the relentless performance pressures of the real world.
- **Europe and Central Asia:** According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) project, problematic social media use stands at **11 per cent** amongst adolescents in Europe. This figure rises to **13 per cent** amongst 15-year-old girls in particular. It was also reported that **12 per cent** of adolescents are at risk of problematic digital gaming. In Western and Northern Europe, the high level of digital infrastructure, whilst ensuring young people's continuous screen time, triggers the risk of social isolation.
- **The Americas (North and Latin America):** In North America, the early adoption of smartphones and the aggressive proliferation of digital platforms are leading adolescents into a state of constant online presence. In Latin America, meanwhile, socio-economic inequalities and high levels of urbanisation are creating the conditions for young people to view the virtual world both as a statistical indicator and as an escape from the pressures of the outside world. A strong parallel is drawn between internalisation issues in this region and digital excess.
- **Africa and Oceania (Australia):** Epidemiological studies conducted on the African continent reveal differences in digital access and mental health data between rural and remote areas; however, it has emerged that, alongside the widespread adoption of smartphones in major cities, symptoms of social anxiety and digital disconnection are on the rise. In the Oceania region, national data from Australia indicate that clinical-level social anxiety among adolescents hovers around the **9 per cent** mark, and that specialised prevention programmes in schools are vital for tackling issues related to digital relationships.

Clinical Interventions and Solution Strategies: Breaking the Vicious Circle of Social Anxiety and Digital Addiction

The clinical reality that social anxiety disorder in adolescents and digital transformation mutually reinforce one another highlights the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all and superficial approaches (such as merely banning devices or restricting screen time). Current clinical psychology research and addiction protocols necessitate the implementation of multidimensional, evidence-based and systematic psychotherapeutic interventions to resolve this complex cycle. In recent years, the literature has examined the following key solution methods and intervention approaches, which have been empirically validated and are clinically applicable :

1. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) emerges as one of the leading methods for the treatment of social anxiety and problematic digital use, particularly in cases with high symptom severity. CBT's focus on individual clinical autonomy involves identifying and restructuring automatic negative thoughts experienced by adolescents in face-to-face communication, such as the 'fear of rejection', the 'digital catastrophe' and 'chronic inadequacy'. Within the framework of specialised CBT protocols adapted for the use of the internet and smartphones, details are gathered by utilising people's motivation to view the virtual world as a 'safe haven'. Young people are made aware of the emotional states and fears that the hours they spend in front of screens actually mask; in this way, the aim is to help them break free from excessive exposure and re-adapt to real-life social environments through the rewards derived from their behaviour.

2. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Psychological Flexibility

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) methods are frequently used to prevent individuals from seeking refuge in digital screens as a means of escaping the internal distress, restlessness and mental pressure caused by social anxiety. However, the aim is not to completely eliminate adolescent anxiety and stress, but to learn to engage safely with these challenging emotions (and thereby build psychological resilience). As the adolescent learns to confront challenging emotional states rather than seeking refuge in the screen for comfort, their compulsive reliance on the false sense of security offered by digital platforms begins to weaken.

3. Motivational Interviewing and Structured Psycho-Education

Motivational Interviewing Techniques play a critical role in boosting intrinsic motivation in young people who display intense resistance to externally imposed rules, prohibitions or restrictions, regardless of whether this behaviour is considered normal for adolescence. In psycho-educational sessions conducted by specialists, the algorithmic structure of digital media, the damage caused by excessive use to the brain's neural pathways, and the vicious cycle linking social anxiety to these relationships are conveyed in a scientific yet accessible manner. This process prevents the adolescent from adopting a defensive stance and triggers their active participation in treatment by enabling them to decide to change of their own volition.

4. Social Skills Training (SST) and Environmental/Family-Focused Protocols

Clinical studies show that adolescents who remain isolated in the virtual world for long periods experience a steady decline in fundamental real-life social skills (such as making eye contact, reading body language, and initiating and maintaining a conversation). These physical, effective Social Skills Training (SST) programmes, which can be developed in schools, enable young people to practise social interactions in controlled and safe group settings. Furthermore, lasting success in treatment is not limited to individual sessions; it necessitates families' active and ongoing participation in flash interventions (such as digital detox periods observed in smart devices in bed and in shared living spaces). These holistic interventions, which address a bio-psycho-social unity, enable adolescents to reconnect through genuine human contact, moving beyond the details of digital isolation.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

There is a strong, mutually reinforcing and deepening complex clinical relationship between social anxiety disorder and digital relationships in adolescents aged 13–18. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterised by the peak of identity formation, the need for peer acceptance and the desire for social validation. During this sensitive process, adolescents experiencing social anxiety tend to withdraw from face-to-face interactions due to the unpredictable social risks inherent in real life, the fear of criticism and a heightened sensitivity to rejection. Digital platforms and smartphones initially offer adolescents a safe haven and a temporary space of comfort, shielding them from the harsh judgements of the outside world. However, as emphasised by Kuss and Griffiths (2017), this sense of temporary relief transforms into a powerful relationship trap that completely severs individuals' ties with the outside world, chronifies their loneliness and reinforces their avoidance patterns.

The qualitative and theoretical findings obtained show a strong parallel with previous studies in the literature (Griffiths, 2005; Steinberg, 2001). In this context, it is clearly understood that superficial and behavioural interventions focused solely on 'screen time' are insufficient when addressing excessive digital engagement among adolescents. The root cause of the problem does not lie with the screen itself; rather, it stems from the adolescent's deep-seated social anxiety disorder, chronic peer adjustment problems, deficits in emotional regulation, and a lack of real-life activities. Consequently, treatment and prevention strategies must be addressed through a holistic therapy that centres on this clinical reality.

Psycho-educational programmes for adolescents, to be implemented in schools and mental health settings—including social skills training and anxiety management exercises—should be regarded as vital areas of intervention in safeguarding against excessive digitalisation and digital isolation. Furthermore, the integration of clinical and academic systems through the scientific, literary and symbolic methods emphasised throughout this article (such as poetic and metaphorical expressions like '*Beyond the Screen*') facilitates young people's ability to confront their own defences.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges faced by adolescents caught in the spiral of social anxiety disorder and digital relationships is possible not merely through the expansion of technology, but through the implementation of multidimensional clinical and pedagogical approaches based on understanding their emotional vulnerability, ensuring safe genuine human contact, and encouraging their internal self-reflection.

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