

COGNITION, DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT, AND FUNCTIONING IN EMERGING ADULTS WITH DEPRESSION: EVIDENCE FOR A DEPRESSION-MEDIATED PATHWAY

Hasan Bakay, Ziya Öksüz

Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi, Tıp Fakültesi, Erişkin Ruh Sağlığı ve Hastalıkları Anabilim Dalı, Konya, Türkiye

BACKGROUND AND AIM: Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and intensive digital engagement. Although social media use (SMU) has been linked to psychological distress, its role in shaping cognitive and functional outcomes in clinical populations remains unclear. This study examined the relationships among SMU, cognitive failures, depressive symptoms, and real-life functioning in emerging adults with major depressive disorder (MDD), focusing on mediating mechanisms

METHODS: (Ethics Committee Approval must be obtained and the number should be specified). This cross-sectional study included 56 patients with DSM-5–diagnosed MDD and 56 age- and sex-matched healthy controls (aged 18–35 years). SMU duration was obtained from smartphone application usage logs. Participants completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ), Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), and the Functioning Assessment Short Test (FAST). Ethical approval was obtained from the Necmettin Erbakan University Ethics Committee (IRB: 2025/6069).

RESULTS: Compared with controls, patients showed higher BDI (22.6 ± 12.8 vs. 10.4 ± 6.7 , $p < 0.001$), BAI (23.4 ± 15.8 vs. 8.3 ± 8.7 , $p < 0.001$), CFQ (34.2 ± 14.1 vs. 26.2 ± 11.9 , $p = 0.001$), and FAST scores (25.3 ± 14.6 vs. 11.8 ± 11.8 , $p < 0.001$). Patients spent more time on WhatsApp ($p = 0.012$) and Instagram ($p = 0.035$), but the total SMU did not differ ($p = 0.156$). In the regression analysis, depressive symptoms were the only independent predictor of functionality ($\beta = 0.68$, $p = 0.007$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.26$). Mediation analysis showed a significant indirect effect of cognitive failures on functionality through depression ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), whereas SMU and anxiety were not mediators.

CONCLUSIONS: Functional impairment in emerging adults with MDD may be driven by the severity of depressive symptoms rather than cognitive failures or digital exposure time. Cognitive difficulties indirectly affect daily functioning by intensifying depressive symptoms. Interventions should prioritize emotional and cognitive regulation, alongside guidance for adaptive digital engagement, to enhance functional recovery during this vulnerable developmental period.

Keywords: Cognition, depression, digital engagement, social media