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Motives for social media use in adults: associations with platform-specific use, psychological distress, and problematic engagement

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Highlights:

- Habitual use and emotional regulation motives emerged as the strongest predictors of problematic social media use and psychological distress, while loneliness was tied to seeking new online connections.
- Platform-specific patterns showed that TikTok and Instagram engagement was driven by entertainment and algorithmic recommendations, whereas Facebook use was linked to self-presentation and information sharing.

Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, particularly among young adults, yet the psychological motives driving social media engagement remain underexplored. This study examines the motivations underlying social media use and their associations with key psychological and behavioral outcomes, including problematic social media use, mental health, and loneliness. Using a survey design, 1,015 participants aged 16 and older who enrolled in courses at Swedish universities were assessed through validated measures of social media motives, problematic use, distress, and perceived loneliness. Factor analysis identified four additional motivational dimensions beyond traditional frameworks: algorithmic recommendations, habitual use and boredom, feedback-driven engagement, and seeking new social connections. Results indicated that habitual use and mood management were the strongest predictors of problematic social media use. At the same time, socialization and entertainment motives were more prevalent but less associated with adverse outcomes. Psychological distress was most strongly linked to social media use for emotional regulation, whereas loneliness was associated with attempts to form new social connections online. Platform-specific analyses revealed that TikTok and Instagram were more strongly associated with entertainment and algorithm-driven engagement, while Facebook was more linked to self-presentation and information sharing. These findings highlight the evolving role of social media platforms in shaping user engagement and underscore the potential risks of compulsive usage driven by algorithms and passive consumption. Understanding these motivations is essential for developing targeted interventions to promote healthier digital habits and mitigate the adverse psychological effects of excessive social media use.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms has redefined the landscape of human interaction, communication, and information sharing, creating both opportunities and challenges. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook provide users with tools to connect, share, and curate their experiences in real time, fostering a digitally mediated social environment. These platforms have become central to the lives of young adults, who use them not only to stay connected but also to navigate complex social landscapes, seek entertainment, and build their identities (Ellison et al., 2007; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Usage statistics highlight the widespread use of social media among young adults: over 90% of individuals aged 18–30 interact with social media platforms daily, with an average usage time of more than two hours per day (Datareportal, 2023). This demographic's engagement with social media is shaped not only by their social and developmental needs but also by the features of these platforms, including algorithms, interactive design, and feedback loops that incentivize extended use (Hilty et al., 2023). These design elements often blur the line between voluntary and compulsive use, raising important questions about the psychological and behavioral implications of social media engagement (Bucher, 2018).

Social media's influence extends beyond individual behavior to broader societal norms, creating a digital culture where constant connectivity and virtual interactions are normalized. For young adults, this digital culture intersects with key life transitions, such as entering higher education or the workforce, further amplifying the role of social media in shaping identity, relationships, and aspirations. The centrality of these platforms underscores the importance of understanding why individuals use social media and how these motivations influence their well-being.

Motivations for social media use are also shaped by cultural context. For example, research suggests that in individualistic cultures, users often emphasize self-presentation and feedback-seeking, whereas in collectivistic cultures, social media is more commonly used to maintain group belonging and relational harmony (Jackson & Wang, 2013; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Such differences suggest that findings from one cultural setting may not be fully generalizable to others, underscoring the importance of interpreting results within their specific cultural context.

1.1. Motives for social media use

Motivations for social media use constitute a critical area of inquiry for understanding the reasons behind individuals' engagement with these platforms. Grounded in the theoretical framework of the uses and gratifications theory (UGT; Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1973), which emphasizes that individuals actively seek media to satisfy distinct psychological, social, and emotional needs, research has consistently highlighted a core set of motivations. These motivations align with the multifaceted affordances of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, which allow users to maintain relationships, access entertainment, seek information, and curate their identities in ways that were not possible with earlier media forms.

Socialization remains a fundamental motivation for using social media, reflecting the human need for connection and a sense of belonging. Platforms enable users to maintain interpersonal relationships, cultivate new connections, and engage with communities that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. Young adults, who often experience significant life transitions such as entering higher education or starting careers, find social media particularly useful for fostering and maintaining both strong and weak social ties. Ellison et al. (2007) highlighted the role of social media in sustaining these connections, noting that it serves as a bridge between offline and online interactions.

Entertainment and escapism are also prominent motives that have garnered substantial academic attention. Social media platforms offer an endless stream of entertaining content, ranging from humorous videos to immersive challenges and personalized feeds, which satisfy users' desire for leisure and enjoyment. Escapism, defined as the use of social media to avoid stressors or negative emotions, plays a particularly important role during periods of heightened anxiety or uncertainty. Seidman (2013) observed that escapism motives are closely tied to emotional regulation, as individuals turn to platforms to distract themselves or alleviate feelings of distress. Cuadrado et al. (2022) reinforced this perspective, finding that escapism was a key driver of social media use during lockdowns, when many individuals sought solace in digital environments to cope with isolation and uncertainty. These findings underline the dual role of social media as both a source of entertainment and a mechanism for emotional relief. Thus, the reliance on social media for emotional regulation suggests that young adults may turn to these platforms not just for entertainment and socialization but also as a coping mechanism to manage stress and anxiety (Nesin et al., 2025). This aligns with recent research on

social-emotional learning, which highlights the role of digital engagement in self-regulation and identity formation (Parent, 2023).

In addition to providing entertainment, connection, and coping, social media has become a primary source of information for many users. The ability to access real-time updates, news, and educational content has transformed how individuals consume information, with algorithmic curation playing a significant role in this process (Morris et al., 2023). Sundar and Limperos (2012) argued that algorithmic personalization enhances the efficiency and appeal of information-seeking on social media, tailoring content to individual preferences and ensuring its relevance. Cuadrado et al. (2022) further demonstrated that during the pandemic, the need for reliable information was a significant motivator for social media use, highlighting the platform's utility as a tool for staying informed in dynamic and uncertain environments. Hence, social media is increasingly being used as a source of information. However, this also raises concerns about the spread of misinformation. Recent studies highlight how social media platforms have become a key tool for science communication, yet they also facilitate the dissemination of misleading content (Steen & Weinberg, 2024).

Self-presentation and feedback-seeking behaviors are additional dimensions that underscore the unique affordances of social media platforms. The ability to craft and share curated representations of one's life provides users with opportunities for identity expression and social validation (Cataldo et al., 2021). Feedback mechanisms, such as likes, comments, and shares, reinforce these behaviors by offering immediate rewards and social recognition. Toma and Hancock (2013) emphasized the psychological impact of these mechanisms, noting that they create cycles of validation that encourage continued engagement. Vogel et al. (2014) extended this discussion, highlighting that individuals who frequently engage in self-presentation are particularly susceptible to social comparison, which can either bolster or diminish self-esteem depending on the nature of the feedback received.

The study by Cuadrado et al. (2022) made significant strides in formalizing these motivations through the development of the Social Networks Motives Scale (SN-MotiveS). This validated measure captures a range of motivations, including socialization, escapism, prosocial behavior, and self-presentation, providing a robust tool for assessing why individuals engage with social media. Moreover, the study revealed that escapism and self-presentation motives significantly mediated the relationship between frequency of use and problematic behaviors, indicating that specific motivations may predispose users to maladaptive patterns of engagement. These findings underscore the importance of examining motives in relation to broader behavioral and psychological outcomes, particularly in the context of social media addiction.

However, while Cuadrado et al. (2022) offered a comprehensive framework for understanding traditional motives for social media use, their approach did not fully capture emerging drivers that are increasingly relevant in contemporary digital environments. For example, algorithmic recommendations, which are central to the functionality of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, were not explicitly addressed. These algorithms shape user behavior by curating personalized content feeds, encouraging prolonged engagement, and fostering a sense of novelty that keeps users returning to the platform (Bucher, 2018). The psychological impact of these algorithm-driven interactions, particularly their role in promoting compulsive use, remains an important area of further study. The increasing role of artificial intelligence in personalizing user experiences has been a major driver of prolonged social media engagement. Recent research suggests that algorithmic curation is not only shaping user preferences but also reinforcing habitual engagement through automated recommendations (Parsonage, 2024).

Similarly, feedback-driven motives are insufficiently represented in the SN-MotiveS. While self-presentation is included, the specific behaviors associated with monitoring likes, comments, and other reactions are not fully captured. These feedback-driven motives are particularly salient for users seeking validation, as they create a dependency on external recognition that can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or anxiety when expectations are not met (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Emotional triggers, such as boredom and feelings of emptiness, also warrant greater attention. Kardefelt-Winther (2014) argued that these emotional states often drive compulsive social media use, as individuals turn to platforms to fill voids in their offline lives. Such motives are distinct from escapism, as they reflect an intrinsic desire to combat feelings of purposelessness rather than an active attempt to avoid stress.

Additionally, habitual and time-passing behaviors, which reflect the integration of social media into daily routines, remain underexplored. Masur et al. (2014) noted that many users engage with social media as a default activity during idle moments, such as waiting in line or commuting. This habitual use may contribute to compulsive patterns over time, as individuals become accustomed to turning to social media without deliberate intent or purpose.

Building on the foundation established by Cuadrado et al. (2022), this study aims to integrate these missing dimensions into a broader framework for understanding social media motivations. By categorizing algorithmic, feedback-driven, and emotional triggers as distinct motivational factors, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of why adults engage with social media. Furthermore, it explores how these motivations relate to key outcomes such as mental health, loneliness, and problematic use. This expanded framework acknowledges the evolving nature of social media platforms and their increasingly personalized and interactive features, offering valuable insights into contemporary digital behavior and its implications for well-being.

1.2. Social media use, mental health, loneliness, and quality of life

The psychological impact of social media use is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses both positive and negative outcomes, making it essential to understand the motivations underlying social media engagement. By examining these motives, researchers can gain insight into how social media influences mental health, loneliness, and quality of life, highlighting its dual role in supporting well-being while also potentially exacerbating distress and dissatisfaction.

The relationship between social media use and mental health is particularly complex, functioning as both a facilitator of emotional support and a potential driver of psychological distress. On the positive side, social media platforms provide users with opportunities for emotional expression and connection, especially for individuals experiencing isolation or mental health challenges. Naslund et al. (2016) noted that platforms allow users to share their struggles, seek advice, and build supportive networks, which can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and foster a sense of belonging. These benefits are particularly salient for marginalized groups who may find it challenging to access similar support offline. However, this positive potential is counterbalanced by the risks associated with maladaptive or excessive use. Studies have consistently linked problematic social media behaviors to adverse mental health outcomes, including heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Wolgast et al., 2023; Hunt et al., 2018). In addition, social cognition plays a crucial role in how individuals interpret and respond to digital interactions, with recent studies highlighting that frequent social media use may impact users' ability to process emotional and social cues (Morellini, Ceroni, Rossi, & Zerboni, 2022). This suggests that the cognitive load of digital interactions could have long-term effects on users' emotional well-being. Moreover, social media's influence extends beyond personal relationships, with work-related and academic pressures also contributing to digital stress. For example, research has shown that the increased use of digital communication platforms in remote work settings has raised concerns about employee well-being and mental health (Van Dick et al., 2024).

Loneliness, another critical dimension of social media's impact, is similarly shaped by the motives underlying its use. While social media has the capacity to reduce loneliness by fostering virtual connections and providing users with a sense of community, it can also contribute to feelings of isolation when online interactions fail to meet emotional needs or replace meaningful offline relationships. Twenge et al. (2019) highlighted the paradoxical nature of social media's role in loneliness, observing that while platforms facilitate frequent interactions, these engagements may lack the depth and intimacy required to alleviate loneliness effectively. Motives such as socialization and prosocial behavior are generally associated with reductions in loneliness, as they promote positive interactions and foster a sense of belonging. However, escapism and feedback-driven motives may exacerbate loneliness by encouraging users to engage in shallow comparisons or idealized portrayals of their lives, which can heighten feelings of inadequacy and disconnection (Braghieri et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2018). This dual dynamic underscores the importance of examining not just the frequency of social media use but also the underlying reasons driving engagement.

Quality of life, encompassing emotional, physical, and social dimensions, is another domain significantly influenced by social media use. Positive interactions facilitated by social media can enhance well-being by enabling self-expression, promoting inclusion, and providing avenues for social support. Masur et al. (2014) observed that social media users who engage in meaningful exchanges often report higher levels of life satisfaction, as these interactions contribute to a sense of purpose and connection. However, the potential for positive outcomes is often undermined by problematic use patterns characterized by compulsivity and time displacement. When social media use begins to interfere with offline activities, relationships, and responsibilities, it can lead to declines in life satisfaction and overall quality of life. For example, individuals who rely on social media for escapism or mood regulation may neglect real-world opportunities for growth and fulfillment, ultimately compromising their well-being. The integration of social media into everyday routines further complicates its impact, as habitual use can blur the line between healthy engagement and overdependence.

By examining the motivations behind social media use, researchers can gain a clearer understanding of how different engagement patterns affect mental health, loneliness, and quality of life. These relationships are dynamic and influenced by the interaction of user motives, platform design, and broader social factors. Recognizing the dual effects of social media is crucial for developing interventions that maximize its benefits for well-being while mitigating its risks.

1.3 Problematic social media use

Problematic social media use (PSMU) refers to excessive, compulsive engagement with social media that disrupts daily functioning and resembles behavioral addiction. It is characterized by a loss of control, prioritization of social media over essential activities, and persistent use despite adverse outcomes. This aligns with Griffiths' (2005) "components" model of addiction, which identifies six defining features: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse.

Salience reflects the dominance of social media in users' thoughts and behaviors, often displacing academic, professional, or relational responsibilities. *Mood modification* involves using platforms to manage emotions, offering temporary relief from boredom or distress, but promoting dependency. *Tolerance* develops as users need more engagement to achieve the same psychological effects, paralleling patterns in substance use. *Withdrawal* is marked by irritability, anxiety, or low mood when access is restricted. *Conflict* arises when social media use impairs personal, academic, or occupational functioning, accompanied by internal struggles like guilt or frustration. *Relapse* refers to returning to problematic patterns after attempts to reduce use, often triggered by stress or emotional discomfort.

Motivations such as escapism and feedback-seeking are central to PSMU. Escapism enables users to avoid real-life stressors, while feedback-seeking fosters preoccupation with likes and comments, reinforcing engagement and vulnerability to negative self-appraisal. Technological features, including algorithmic feeds, infinite scroll, autoplay, and notifications, exacerbate PSMU by reducing self-regulation and exploiting cognitive biases such as the fear of missing out (FOMO).

In sum, PSMU is shaped by psychological, motivational, and platform-related factors. Griffiths' addiction model provides a valuable framework for understanding its mechanisms and informing interventions to mitigate its harmful effects.

1.4 Purpose and research questions

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the motivations underlying social media use among young adults and examine how these motives relate to key psychological and behavioral outcomes. While prior research has extensively documented traditional motives such as socialization, escapism, and self-presentation (Cuadrado et al., 2022), contemporary social media platforms introduce new affordances that may shape user engagement in novel ways. This study extends existing frameworks by incorporating additional motivational dimensions, including algorithmic influences, feedback-driven behaviors, and emotional triggers. Given the increasing personalization of social media experiences through algorithmic content curation and the role of instant feedback in reinforcing platform use, investigating these factors is essential to understanding the evolving digital landscape.

In addition to identifying prevalent motives for social media use, this study aims to explore how these motives relate to mental health, loneliness, quality of life, and problematic social media use (PSMU). While prior studies suggest that certain motives, such as escapism and feedback-seeking, may be associated with compulsive engagement and poorer well-being outcomes (Keles et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2014), it remains unclear whether the same patterns hold for emerging motivational drivers, including algorithmic recommendations and boredom-driven use. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate whether the motivations for social media use, as well as their associations with psychological and behavioral variables, differ across various social media platforms. Given the diverse affordances and engagement styles of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, it is plausible that users engage with these platforms for different reasons, which in turn may influence their well-being in distinct ways.

To address these gaps, the study is guided by the following exploratory research questions:

1. What are the most common motivations for social media use among young adults, and how do these motivations align with existing theoretical frameworks?
2. How do motivations for social media use relate to mental health, loneliness, and problematic social media use?
3. To what extent do social media motivations differ across platforms?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the motivational landscape of social media use and its implications for well-being. Findings may inform future research on digital media engagement, contribute to theoretical models of social media behavior, and offer insights for policymakers, mental health professionals, and platform designers seeking to promote healthier digital interactions.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The present study employed a cross-sectional, correlational survey design to investigate the associations between self-reported motives for social media use and measures of problematic social networking site (SNS) use, psychological distress, and loneliness among young adults. This design was chosen for its suitability in capturing patterns of association between psychological constructs and behavioral tendencies within a defined population at a single point in time.

2.2. Participants, Procedure, and Ethical Considerations

Participants in the study were aged 16 years or older and were recruited via email invitations sent to students enrolled at Malmö University and Dalarna University. The email outreach reached a total of 5180 individuals.

Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any point before submitting their survey responses. They were also informed that the survey was completely anonymous and that their responses could not be linked to them as individuals. They were also allowed to contact the principal investigator at the Department of Psychology via e-mail if they had any questions or concerns about the survey.

A total of 1107 responses were received when the survey closed. After excluding incomplete or invalid responses, 1015 responses remained, representing a response rate of 19.6%. Demographic information was collected on participants' age, gender, primary occupation, and highest level of completed education. If no value was provided for gender, the response was categorized as Other/Prefer not to say. The mean age of participants was 36 years, with a standard deviation of 12.6 years. The youngest participant was 17 years old, and the oldest was 78 years old. Descriptive statistics for gender, primary occupation, and highest completed education are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for demographic variables.

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Woman	729	71.8
	Man	269	26.5
	Nonbinary	9	0.9
	Other/do not want to say	8	0.8
Occupation	Employed	479	47.2
	Student	463	45.6
	Retired	24	2.4
	Unemployed	19	1.9
	Parental leave	12	1.2
	Sick leave	8	0.8
	Other	9	0.9
	Secondary school	267	26.3
Highest completed education	Vocational college or equivalent	44	4.3
	University education, ≤ three years	266	26.2
	University education, > three years	436	43

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Total Use of Social Media Platforms

Participants were asked to estimate the approximate number of hours they spend daily using various social media platforms. The list of platforms presented to participants was derived from the Internet Foundation's survey on the most used social media platforms among the Swedish population (Internet

Foundation, 2023). The study included the 12 most frequently used platforms. However, it excluded Flashback, as it is a discussion forum and does not meet all the criteria for social media as defined by Obar and Wildman (2015).

2.3.2 Motives for Social Media Use

To assess the motivational factors driving participants' social media use, the Social Networks Motives Scale (SN-MotiveS) developed by Cuadrado et al. (2022) was utilized. SN-MotiveS is designed to measure the key motives underlying social media use. The scale consists of 18 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Very rarely") to 5 ("Very often"). Since an official Swedish translation of the scale is not yet available, I translated the scale into Swedish for use in this study. The SN-MotiveS includes four primary motivational factors, two of which have subfactors (Cuadrado et al., 2022). The four primary factors are Escapism (with the subfactors Mood management and Entertainment), Prosocial behavior (with the subfactors Information sharing and helping), Socialization, and Self-presentation. The scales have demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α .83 – .92) and correlate as expected with other measures related to the constructs it aims to assess (Cuadrado et al., 2022).

2.3.3 Problematic Social Media Use

To measure participants' levels of problematic SNS use, the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) developed by Shahnawaz and Usama (2020) was used. The SNAS consists of 21 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Not at all" and 7 represents "Completely." These items are grouped into six categories that correspond to the six components of Griffiths' (2005) model of addiction: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. The scale yields a total score ranging from 21 to 147 points, with scores above 84 indicating problematic social media use (Shahnawaz & Usama, 2020). Factor analysis of the SNAS has confirmed the presence of six distinct factors, corresponding to the six addiction components outlined in Griffiths' model. The SNAS has demonstrated good test-retest reliability and positive correlations with related constructs, such as problematic Facebook use and problematic internet use. Its outcomes also correlate positively with total internet use and perceived loneliness and negatively with perceived life satisfaction (Shahnawaz & Usama, 2020).

2.3.4 Psychological Distress

Participants' general levels of psychological distress were assessed using the Kessler-6 (K6). The K6 was developed as a brief screening tool for non-specific psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002). The scale comprises six items designed to capture general psychological discomfort over the past 30 days without targeting specific psychiatric diagnoses. Prochaska et al. (2012) examined the validity and utility of the K6 for identifying moderate psychological distress by comparing participants' scores on the K6 with other indicators of psychological well-being. They proposed a new, lower threshold (≥ 5) for moderate psychological distress in addition to the established threshold for severe distress (≥ 13). The K6 has demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.89$; Kessler et al., 2002). It was selected for this study due to its brevity, non-diagnostic focus, and capacity to capture general psychological distress.

2.3.5 Perceived Loneliness

Perceived loneliness was measured using the UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (UCLA-3). The UCLA-3 is a shortened version of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (R-UCLA), developed to facilitate simpler administration, such as during telephone interviews (Hughes et al., 2004). The scale consists of three items rated on a three-point Likert scale, where one represents "Hardly ever," 2 represents "Sometimes," and three represents "Often." Hughes et al. (2004) demonstrated that the UCLA-3 has acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$) and that its outcomes correlate with depressive symptoms and higher levels of perceived stress. These findings suggest that the scale effectively measures loneliness in relation to psychological distress. The short version was selected for this study to minimize survey length while maintaining strong psychometric properties comparable to the full version of the scale.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Preliminary data screening involved examining patterns of missingness, identifying outliers, and verifying normality assumptions for key variables. Incomplete or invalid responses were excluded from the final dataset, resulting in a total sample of 1,015 participants.

To examine the dimensionality of the newly developed motivational items not captured by the SN-MotiveS, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was first assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Principal axis factoring was employed for extraction, and factors were rotated using Promax oblique rotation, given the anticipated intercorrelations among constructs. The number of factors retained was determined through parallel analysis, and item retention followed the guidelines of Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), removing items with low loadings or substantial cross-loadings.

Descriptive statistics and a repeated measures ANOVA were then used to compare the frequency of different motivational drivers for social media use. Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction were applied to identify statistically significant differences between motive categories.

To investigate platform-specific motivational patterns, bivariate Pearson correlations were computed between participants' average weekly use of each social media platform and their scores on the ten motivational subscales (including both SN-MotiveS and the new factors derived from EFA).

Finally, to assess how motivations predicted psychological and behavioral outcomes, hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted separately for three outcome variables: problematic social media use (SNAS), psychological distress (K6), and loneliness (UCLA-3). Demographic covariates (age and gender) were entered in the first block of each model, followed by the ten motivational subscales in the second block. Standardized beta coefficients (β), t -values, and significance levels were reported for all predictors. Changes in explained variance (ΔR^2) between models were used to evaluate the contribution of motivational factors.

3. Results

3.1. Factor structure of the added motives

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to determine the dimensionality of the items formulated to measure other motives than the one captured by the SN-MotiveS. Prior to running the analyses, the data were examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO) and Bartlett's test of Sphericity. The KMO value was 0.85, indicating that the patterns of correlations were sufficiently compact to produce reliable factors. In addition, Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 4112.95$, $df = 91$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the correlation matrix significantly differs from an identity matrix, and hence that the items share enough variance to justify factor analysis.

Factors were extracted using principal axis factoring and – given that the factors were expected to be correlated – rotated using an oblique rotation procedure (Promax). The number of factors to extract was determined using parallel analysis (Horn, 1965), which indicated that the eigenvalues of the first four factors exceeded the corresponding eigenvalues in a random score matrix of the same rank. The four extracted factors accounted for 57.8% of the variance.

To determine which items to exclude/include, we followed the criteria suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) and removed items with 1) a lower factor loading than .45 on any of the factors and 2) a difference between factor loadings of less than .20 between the primary and secondary factors that the item loaded upon. This resulted in the exclusion of 4 items, leaving 12 remaining (see Table 2).

The factors were named in accordance with the type of motive for SNS use they were related to and the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of each factor was calculated. This resulted in the following factors: Factor 1: Reactions from others ($\alpha = .90$); Factor 2: Habitual use and boredom ($\alpha = .84$); Factor 3: New social connections ($\alpha = .82$); Factor 4: Algorithmic recommendations ($\alpha = .78$).

3.2. What motives for social media use are most reported?

Next, we aimed to determine whether there was a difference in the extent to which various motives for social media use were reported, and if so, which motives were mentioned more frequently. First, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with the average item scores across the 10 motives as a within-subject factor. The omnibus test showed a significant effect ($F_{(9, 8388)} = 464.9$; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .33$), indicating that the scores varied across the motives. In the next step, the differences between the estimated marginal means for

the different levels of the within-subjects factor were examined to identify which motives were reported more or less often. These comparisons were Bonferroni corrected to account for multiple testing. Table 3 displays descriptive statistics and Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons for the various motives for SNS use.

Table 2. Items measuring motives for social media use and factor loadings.

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1. See how others have reacted to or commented on your posts	.92			
2. See how many views your posts have received.	.81			
3. You received notifications about your posts.	.56			
4. It is a habit that you engage in almost automatically		.84		
5. You feel like you have nothing else to do		.66		
6. You feel bored when not using social media		.60		
7. Find new friends			.83	
8. Find people who share the same interests			.62	
9. Seek contact with other people			.61	
10. You are recommended posts that you might be interested in				.84
11. You get notifications about content that interests you				.63
12. You come across posts about things that interests you				.59

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons of the different motives for SNS use.

Motive	M (SD)	Significantly higher than ($p < .05$)	Significantly lower than ($p < .05$)	Not significantly different from ($p > .05$)
1: Socialization	2.97 (1.17)	2-10	-	-
2: Entertainment	2.56 (.92)	3;4;5;6;8;9	1;7	10
3: Mood management	2.06 (1.18)	4;5;6;8;9	1;2;7;10	-
4: Self-presentation	1.46 (.70)	-	1-10	-
5: Information sharing	1.88 (.88)	4;6;8;9	1;2;3;7;10	-
6: Helping	1.55 (.67)	4	1;2;3;5;7;9;10	8
7: Habit and boredom	2.75 (1.07)	2;3;4;5;6;8;9;10	1	-
8: New connections	1.62 (.76)	4	1;2;3;5;7;10	6;9
9: Reactions from others	1.67 (.86)	4;6	1;2;3;5;7;10	8
10: Algorithmic recom.	2.52 (.92)	3;4;5;6;8;9	1;7	2

As can be seen in Table 3, the most frequently reported were Socialization (maintaining contact with those close to you), Habitual use and boredom (using social media out of habit and since it feels boring when not using), Entertainment (having fun and hanging out), and Algorithmic Recommendations (social media use triggered by recommendations and notifications). On the other hand, the motives least frequently reported were Self-Presentation (posting information and pictures of yourself), Helping (using social media to help others and sign petitions), New Social Connections (using social media to contact others), and Reactions from others (checking how other users have responded to one's postings).

3.3 How are the different motives for social media use associated with the use of different social media platforms?

As previously described, the present study also aimed to investigate the relationship between different motives and the use of various social media platforms. To do this, bivariate correlations were calculated between the motives and reported weekly usage of different social media platforms. The results are shown in Table 4.

As shown, the analyses indicated that the motives Socialization, Helping, and New Social Connections had the strongest connection with using Instagram and Snapchat, while Entertainment was most strongly linked to Snapchat and TikTok. The motives Mood Management, Habitual Use, Boredom, and Algorithmic Recommendations, on the other hand, showed the strongest links with using Instagram and TikTok. Additionally, the motives Self-Presentation, Information Sharing, and Reactions from Others were most strongly associated with using Facebook and Instagram.

Table 4. Bivariate correlations between scores on the motives for SNS use scales and average weekly use of different social media platforms.

	Youtube	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	TikTok	X
Socialization	-.08*	.08*	.23**	.24**	.14**	-.02
Entertainment	.17**	-.08*	.21**	.24**	.33**	.15**
Mood management	.19**	-.09**	.24**	.15**	.32**	.05
Self-presentation	-.02	.11**	.22**	.12**	.02	-.03
Information sharing	-.03	.14**	.14**	.09**	.06*	.02
Helping	.03	.08*	.09**	.10**	.08*	.04
Habit and boredom	.08*	-.01	.28**	.25**	.35**	.08*
New connections	.06	.04	.13**	.11**	.10**	.06
Reactions from others	-.07*	.14**	.19**	.03	-.03	-.03
Algorithmic recom.	.09**	.06	.13**	.04	.11**	.08*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

3.4 Associations between motives for social media use and problematic social media use, distress, and loneliness.

To investigate the associations between motives for social media use and psychological functioning, a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses was conducted. For each outcome variable - problematic social media use (SNAS), psychological distress (Kessler-6), and loneliness (UCLA-3) - demographic covariates were entered in Block 1, including gender and age, followed by the ten motivational variables in Block 2. Gender was included due to the imbalance in the sample (71.8% women), allowing for examination of whether gender differences influenced the psychological outcomes. Age was included as a continuous covariate, given the broad age range of participants (17–78 years). The standardized regression coefficients (β), t -values, and significance levels are reported below for both models. Results for the full models are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Hierarchical linear regression analyses of Gender and motives for social media use as predictors of problematic social media use (SNAS), Distress (Kessler-6), and Loneliness (UCLA-3).

	SNAS			Kessler-6			UCLA-3		
	β	t	p	β	t	p	β	t	p
Model 1									
Gender	-0.07	-2.46	.014	-0.11	-3.42	<.001	-0.01	-0.27	.789
Age	-0.45	-15.05	<.001	-0.32	-9.98	<.001	-0.19	-5.56	<.001
Model 2									
Gender	0.01	0.31	.755	-0.04	-1.42	.155	0.02	0.59	.554
Age	-0.11	-3.80	<.001	-0.07	-2.23	.026	-0.02	-0.41	.680
Socialization	-0.003	-0.10	.924	-0.05	-1.47	.142	-0.08	-2.07	.039
Entertainment	0.06	1.87	.062	-0.03	-0.66	.508	0.07	1.51	.132
Mood management	0.28	9.84	<.001	0.56	16.67	<.001	0.32	7.95	<.001
Self-presentation	0.06	1.96	.050	-0.10	-2.68	.008	-0.06	-1.35	.179
Information sharing	0.03	1.16	.245	-0.03	-0.81	.420	-0.08	-2.12	.035
Helping	-0.06	-2.18	.030	0.03	0.79	.430	0.02	0.60	.546
Habit and boredom	0.41	12.86	<.001	0.06	1.45	.148	0.02	0.43	.669
New connections	0.09	3.45	<.001	0.11	3.37	<.001	0.14	3.49	<.001
Reactions from others	0.04	1.21	.227	0.08	2.32	.021	0.09	2.00	.046
Algorithmic recom.	0.03	0.99	.325	-0.04	-1.45	.149	-0.05	-1.45	.146

Note: Statistically significant predictors are written in bold figures.

The hierarchical regression analyses revealed distinct patterns of association between motivational factors and the three outcome variables: problematic social media use, psychological distress, and loneliness. In each case, the inclusion of motivational variables in Model 2 led to a substantial and statistically significant increase in explained variance compared to the gender-only models.

For problematic social media use, Model 1 indicated that both gender and age were significant predictors, with men and older participants reporting lower levels of problematic use. However, these effects were attenuated when motivational factors were entered in Model 2, which significantly increased the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .363$, $p < .001$). In the full model, the strongest associations were observed for *Habitual use and boredom*, followed by *Mood management*, with smaller effects for *Self-presentation* and *New social connections*.

Age remained a significant negative predictor, suggesting that problematic use decreases slightly with increasing age, even after accounting for motivational differences.

In the initial model for psychological distress, both gender and age were significant predictors, with women and younger participants reporting higher distress levels. After including motivational variables in Model 2, the overall model fit improved substantially ($\Delta R^2 = .289, p < .001$). The motive most strongly associated with distress was *Mood management*, followed by seeking *New social connections*. Interestingly, *Self-presentation* was negatively associated with distress, suggesting a potential distinction between expressive and compensatory forms of SNS use. Other motives did not contribute significantly to distress in the final model. Age remained a small but significant negative predictor, indicating that younger age was associated with higher distress independent of motivational patterns.

For loneliness, age but not gender was a significant predictor in the initial model, with younger participants reporting more loneliness. In Model 2, the inclusion of motivational variables significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = .135, p < .001$). Loneliness was positively associated with *Mood management*, *Reactions from others*, and *New social connections*, and negatively associated with socialization and information sharing. Age was no longer significant in the full model, suggesting that motivational patterns may account for the age-related variance in loneliness.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the motivations underlying social media use among young adults and examine their associations with key psychological and behavioral outcomes, including problematic social media use (PSMU), mental health, loneliness, and quality of life. By integrating both established motives, such as socialization and escapism, and emerging ones, like algorithmic recommendations, habitual use, and feedback-seeking, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how these motivations relate to well-being.

5.1. Motives for social media use across different platforms

The most frequently reported motives were socialization, habitual use, boredom, entertainment, and algorithmic recommendations. These findings support prior research on the central role of social media in maintaining connections and providing entertainment and distraction (Cuadrado et al., 2022; Ellison et al., 2007). The emergence of algorithmic recommendations as a distinct motive highlights how passive, personalized content delivery now drives engagement (Bucher, 2018; Parsonage, 2024).

Motives such as self-presentation, helping others, seeking new connections, and checking reactions were less common. This contrasts with earlier studies emphasizing self-presentation (Toma & Hancock, 2013; Vogel et al., 2014), suggesting a shift toward more passive, consumption-based use. Notably, platform-specific analyses revealed that Instagram and Snapchat were associated with socialization and new connections, whereas TikTok and Snapchat were more closely tied to entertainment and mood regulation. Facebook was linked to self-presentation, information sharing, and feedback-seeking—consistent with its design as a space for identity curation and social feedback (Cuadrado et al., 2022; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

5.2 Associations with Well Being

Motivations were significantly associated with key psychological outcomes, and several patterns illustrate how specific motives may foster problematic social media use (PSMU). Habitual use and mood management emerged as the strongest predictors of PSMU, consistent with research on behavioral addiction that emphasizes repetitive, automatic engagement as a maladaptive form of emotion regulation (Andreassen et al., 2012; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). For example, users may check platforms compulsively during idle moments or “doomscroll” late at night to escape stress, reinforcing dependency through repetitive relief-seeking cycles (Elhai et al., 2017). Over time, this habitual coping strategy can escalate into compulsive patterns that displace healthier coping mechanisms.

Mood management also predicted psychological distress and loneliness, supporting the compensatory internet use framework, where social media is used to alleviate negative affect but often fails to improve well-being (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Nesi et al., 2025). For instance, turning to TikTok or Instagram during episodes of anxiety may provide a temporary distraction, but excessive reliance can contribute to rumination, disrupted sleep, and heightened emotional vulnerability (Keles et al., 2020).

Interestingly, self-presentation was negatively associated with distress. Expressive behaviors, such as posting curated photos or sharing personal reflections, may enhance agency and foster validation from peers, improving mood in the short term (Toma & Hancock, 2013). However, other studies suggest that the same

behaviors can fuel problematic comparison and feedback dependency in different contexts (Ryan et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2014). This indicates that platform affordances and individual differences likely moderate whether self-presentation is protective or maladaptive.

The motive “new social connections” showed positive associations with PSMU, distress, and loneliness. Users seeking new connections online may compensate for unmet offline social needs, but online interactions do not always provide the intimacy or stability required to alleviate loneliness (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Yang et al., 2018). This discrepancy can foster compulsive attempts to expand digital networks without achieving meaningful emotional support, thereby reinforcing problematic use.

By contrast, prosocial motives—such as helping others or sharing useful information—were negatively or only weakly associated with distress and problematic engagement. This suggests that motivations oriented toward contributing to others may represent more adaptive digital habits.

Finally, while socialization motives were expected to reduce loneliness, this effect was not observed, possibly reflecting the superficiality of many online interactions or their inability to substitute for deeper offline connections (Twenge et al., 2019). Notably, gender initially predicted PSMU and distress, but these effects disappeared once motivational patterns were taken into account, indicating that psychological motives, rather than demographic variables alone, account for problematic outcomes.

Taken together, these findings underscore that motivations provide a more effective explanatory model for digital behavior than simply measuring time spent online. Still, the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions. Future longitudinal studies could clarify whether specific motives directly increase vulnerability to distress or whether individuals experiencing distress are more likely to adopt these motives as coping strategies.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings align with established frameworks while pointing toward the need for updated theoretical models. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT; Katz et al., 1973) explains traditional motives, such as entertainment and socialization; however, emerging motives, like algorithmic engagement and habitual use, necessitate expansion. These reflect a shift toward less volitional, more reactive behaviors, better captured by dual-process models of media use (LaRose et al., 2009).

Mood management aligns with the Compensatory Internet Use Theory (CIUT), which views digital engagement as a coping mechanism for unmet offline needs (Elhai et al., 2017; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Similarly, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that users turn to social media to satisfy basic needs, such as relatedness or competence, in the absence of offline fulfillment (Błachnio et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sha et al., 2019). The consistent associations between mood-related and habitual use and problematic outcomes support calls to integrate motivational theory with insights into persuasive platform design (Alter, 2017; Montag et al., 2019). Features like algorithmic feeds, infinite scroll, and notification systems foster automatic behaviors that blur the line between intentional and compulsive use.

From a practical standpoint, interventions should focus on reducing problematic use by targeting underlying motives—particularly emotion regulation and boredom. Digital literacy efforts that promote emotional self-regulation and awareness of persuasive design could help users develop healthier engagement habits.

In addition, prosocial motives like helping and information sharing, which were not linked to distress, may represent protective engagement strategies. Platforms could encourage these behaviors by designing features that foster meaningful interaction, civic participation, and community support. Finally, a motivation-based approach to social media literacy is essential. Rather than focusing solely on time online, attention should shift to the reasons behind engagement. This can help distinguish adaptive from maladaptive use and inform user-specific and platform-specific interventions. Recent research supports this view. Fassi et al. (2024) found a small but consistent link between social media use and internalizing symptoms, moderated by content and engagement style. Similarly, Karim et al. (2020) highlighted associations between problematic use and anxiety or depression, often driven by disrupted sleep or compulsive checking. Voggenreiter et al. (2023) showed that online feedback quality impacts emotional well-being, with low feedback increasing stress and disconnection.

Taken together, these findings suggest that platform architecture, engagement motives, and emotional context all shape how social media affects mental health. This study contributes by showing how motivational factors help differentiate problematic from benign use—offering practical and theoretical insights into digital well-being.

5.4 Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, this study has important limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions about causality. While the findings indicate associations between motivations and well-being outcomes, it remains unclear whether certain motives lead to problematic use and distress or whether individuals with higher distress levels are more likely to engage with social media for those reasons. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify the directionality of these relationships.

Second, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Future studies could benefit from incorporating objective behavioral data, such as screen time tracking or platform-specific usage logs, to validate self-reported engagement patterns. Additionally, while the study examined differences in motives across platforms, it did not consider potential demographic moderators, such as age, gender, or personality traits, which could influence how individuals engage with social media. Further research should explore how these variables interact with motivations and psychological outcomes.

Third, the generalizability of the findings is limited by both the sampling method and the cultural context. The study employed a convenience sample of Swedish university students, which may not be representative of the broader population. Additionally, cultural norms shape social media use: previous research indicates that users in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in self-presentation and seek feedback, while users in collectivistic cultures tend to focus on relational motives and group belonging (Jackson & Wang, 2013; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). As a result, the demographic makeup of the sample and its cultural environment may have affected the prevalence of certain motives and their links to psychological outcomes. Future cross-cultural and population-based research is necessary to determine if these patterns apply to other groups and settings. Lastly, although the study identified new motives such as algorithmic engagement and feedback-seeking behaviors, future studies should work to refine and validate these concepts. The impact of algorithmic recommendations on compulsive engagement is significant to explore, given the growing role of personalized content in shaping social media use.

5. Conclusion & Practical Implications

This study provides a comprehensive examination of why young adults engage with social media and how these underlying motivations relate to psychological well-being and problematic usage. While social media platforms continue to serve essential functions, such as fostering social connections, providing entertainment, and facilitating self-expression, our findings underscore that not all motives are equally benign. Motives related to habitual use, mood management, and algorithmically driven engagement emerged as the most robust predictors of problematic social media use and psychological distress. These findings suggest that digital behaviors increasingly reflect not only conscious choices but also automated responses and design-driven reinforcement mechanisms.

By incorporating both established and emerging motivational dimensions, this study extends previous research and highlights the evolving psychological landscape of social media use. The results show that motivations are not uniform across platforms: for example, entertainment and feedback-driven motives are more prevalent on TikTok and Instagram, whereas Facebook use is more closely associated with self-presentation and information sharing. These platform-specific patterns emphasize the importance of treating social media not as a monolithic activity but as a set of diverse, context-dependent engagements shaped by user intent and platform architecture.

From a practical perspective, these insights carry important implications for mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and platform designers. First, interventions targeting problematic social media use may benefit from focusing on the psychological functions that drive engagement, particularly the use of platforms for mood regulation or as a means of coping with boredom. Programs that teach alternative coping strategies, such as emotional self-regulation or mindfulness-based techniques, may be especially beneficial for users at risk of compulsive behavior.

Second, the identification of algorithmic engagement as a distinct motivational category calls attention to the persuasive and often opaque role of recommendation systems. Policy measures could include mandatory transparency reports on algorithmic curation, the implementation of user-control tools (e.g., chronological feed options, time-limit settings), and restrictions on design features like infinite scroll or autoplay that are known to encourage compulsive use. Such measures would enable users to manage their engagement more effectively while holding platforms accountable for their manipulative design practices.

Third, the finding that helping and information-sharing motives were associated with lower psychological distress points toward more adaptive forms of engagement. Educational programs at the school and university

levels could integrate digital well-being curricula that emphasize prosocial uses of social media, such as community building, civic participation, and collaborative learning, rather than passive consumption. Parent- and teacher-focused guidance initiatives could further reinforce healthy norms of digital use.

Finally, these findings support a motivation-based approach to social media literacy. Rather than emphasizing time spent online as the primary indicator of risk, future research and practice should focus on the reasons individuals engage with platforms. Digital literacy campaigns could encourage critical reflection on why users engage online, alongside practical strategies for balancing entertainment-driven and algorithm-driven use with healthier forms of digital interaction. Understanding and addressing these motivations, particularly those rooted in emotional needs or habitual use, can inform more nuanced and effective strategies for supporting well-being in an increasingly digital world.

In summary, this study provides a more detailed map of the motivational landscape of social media use among young adults, highlighting key psychological mechanisms that may underlie both beneficial and maladaptive patterns of engagement. Future research should continue to refine motivational typologies and explore how interventions can be tailored not only to individual needs but also to platform-specific and cultural dynamics.

Statement of Researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement:

All authors contributed to the study using the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) as follows:

Martin Wolgast: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data Analysis; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

Hampus Adler: Conceptualization; Methodology; Writing – Review & Editing.

Sima Nurali Wolgast: Conceptualization; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript. They agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work and ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author. However, the data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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This research was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Department of Psychology, Lund University, 20/1 2024.

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