



REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

The Effect of Social Media Addiction on Obesity in Young Adults

Genç Yetişkinlerde Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığının Obezite Üzerine Etkisi

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Abstract:

This narrative review aims to examine the relationship between social media addiction and obesity in young adults aged 18–30, within the framework of behavioral, psychosocial, and biological mechanisms. The literature search was conducted in March 2025 using the National Thesis Center of Turkey (YÖK) and Google Scholar databases. Studies published between 2000 and 2025 that included young adult samples were considered. Search terms— young adults, social media addiction, obesity, screen time, emotional eating, sedentary lifestyle, and sleep—were combined using appropriate logical relationships. Studies including participants aged 18–30 with full text available were included, while adolescent samples were excluded, except for limited discussion to illustrate mechanisms. A total of 412 records were screened, and after title–abstract review, 67 full-text articles were assessed, of which 29 studies were included in the synthesis. The findings indicate that increased screen time is associated with reduced physical activity, impaired sleep, and heightened emotional eating behaviors. The evidence is primarily correlational, and causal inferences are limited. The results suggest a potential protective role for digital awareness programs and healthy lifestyle interventions. Current literature indicates that increased social media use is associated with reduced physical activity, poorer sleep quality, and higher energy intake. Based on these findings, the study emphasizes the importance of promoting digital literacy programs, encouraging healthy lifestyle habits, and developing interventions for effective online time management.

Keywords: Social media addiction, Obesity, Screen time, Emotional eating.

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Öz:

Bu anlatı derleme çalışmasının amacı, 18–30 yaş arası genç yetişkinlerde sosyal medya bağımlılığı ile obezite arasındaki ilişkiyi davranışsal, psikososyal ve biyolojik mekanizmalar çerçevesinde incelemektir. Literatür taraması Mart 2025 tarihinde YÖK Ulusal Tez Merkezi ve Google Akademik veritabanlarında gerçekleştirilmiştir. 2000–2025 yılları arasında yayımlanan ve genç yetişkin örnekleme içeren çalışmalar dahil edilmiştir. Arama terimleri genç yetişkin, sosyal medya bağımlılığı, obezite, ekran süresi, duygusal yeme, sedanter yaşam ve uyku, birbirleriyle uygun mantıksal ilişkilerle birleştirilmiştir. 18–30 yaş örneklem içeren, tam metnine erişilebilen çalışmalar dahil edilmiştir. Ergen örneklem dışlanmış; yalnızca mekanizmayı açıklamak amacıyla sınırlı biçimde tartışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Toplam 412 kayıt taranmış, başlık-özet elemesi sonrası 67 makale değerlendirilmiş ve 29 çalışma senteze alınmıştır. Bulgular, artan ekran süresinin fiziksel aktivite azalması, uyku bozukluğu ve duygusal yeme davranışlarıyla ilişkili olduğunu göstermektedir. Bulgular nedensel değil, korelasyonel düzeyde değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, dijital farkındalık programları ve sağlıklı yaşam müdahalelerinin potansiyel koruyucu rolüne işaret etmektedir. Literatürdeki güncel bulgular, sosyal medya kullanım süresinin artışının fiziksel aktivitelerde azalma, uyku kalitesinin bozulması ve enerji alımında artış gibi sonuçlar ortaya çıkardığını belirtmektedir. Çalışma sonucunda, dijital farkındalık programlarının yaygınlaştırılması, sağlıklı yaşam alışkanlıklarının teşvik edilmesi ve çevrim içi zaman yönetimine yönelik müdahalelerin geliştirilmesinin önemi ifade edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya bağımlılığı, Obezite, Ekran süresi, Duygusal yeme.

Introduction

In this era in which we continue our lives, technological advancements bring innovations for humanity; however, just as these innovations have positive effects, they also have negative impacts (Castells, 2010). The concept of social media, which has come to dominate many areas of our lives, makes life easier on one hand, but on the other hand, it affects our lives in many ways. Social media holds a central position in the daily lives of young adults (Taşkıran, 2025). Uncontrolled use is associated with a sedentary lifestyle, sleep disorders, and unhealthy eating habits (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The rapid spread and development of communication tools have made social media indispensable in our lives. However, alongside those who use social media and communication tools in a controlled manner, there are also individuals who do not use them, and this situation has led to the emergence of the concept of social media addiction (Andreassen, 2015). Addiction and communication studies are generally associated with the uses and gratifications theory. The "Uses and Gratifications" theory is associated with the work of Elihu Katz. According to Katz, individuals have certain psychological and social needs. Based on these needs, individuals develop certain expectations about how to fulfill them through social media. Psychologist Elihu Katz, who studied individuals' actions on social media, states that people satisfy their needs and expectations through media use. In this context, social media is considered an important tool for meeting individuals' needs. However, some unforeseen or undesirable consequences can arise when social media is used uncontrollably (Yaylagül, 2016).

Due to social media addiction, individuals experience psychological problems as well as physical issues such as eating disorders (Mohaç, 2015; Muslu & Gökçay, 2019). Excessive use of social media significantly affects the health and practicality of our daily lives. Multiple studies have linked social media addiction to psychological problems such as narcissism, self-esteem issues, and depression (Andreassen et al., 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Kayıkçı et al., 2025). As a result of social media addiction, side effects such as stress, sleep problems, anxiety, difficulties and failures in

time management, and excessive social media use can also reduce the academic performance of students (Durak, 2019; Gezgin et al., 2018).

Another significant effect of the rapid advancement of technology in our lives is the lack of physical activity. People now mostly perform their tasks online while sitting. Although minimizing the boundaries of time and space brings many benefits—such as easier communication, remote education, working from home, and online shopping—these conveniences often limit our physical activity.

The use of social media and the internet leads to a number of physical problems. These include visual impairments, back pain, and most importantly, obesity (Tremblay et al., 2011; WHO, 2020).

Obesity is a health-related condition characterized by excessive fat accumulation that causes adverse physiological effects, resulting from an imbalance between energy expenditure and excessive food intake in the human body (Hruby & Hu, 2015). Obesity is a health problem arising from various factors, including lifestyle, genetic inheritance, and external influences (Swinburn et al., 2011). Genetic inheritance plays a significant role in obesity. Scientific studies have shown that individuals with a family history of obesity are more likely to experience this condition (Loos & Bouchard, 2003). The interactions between family genetic makeup and environmental or individual factors play an important role in understanding differences in body composition within populations. Given that body mass index is highly heritable and obesity tends to run in families, genetic factors are expected to contribute to its development. Differences in obesity rates among races and ethnic groups also support the influence of this genetic predisposition (Ogden et al., 2017).

External factors such as easy access to unhealthy foods, limited opportunities for physical activity during the day, environments conducive to obesity, and an unbalanced lifestyle characterized by poor nutrition and physical inactivity increase susceptibility to obesity (Karaçil & Şanlıer, 2014). In both our country and globally, the

prevalence of obesity is steadily increasing. Food advertisements frequently encountered on social networks further trigger emotional hunger. This emotional hunger increases the tendency to consume unhealthy foods (Şanlıer & Yabancı, 2017).

The use of social networks disrupts sleep patterns, which negatively affects metabolism. Exposure to images and videos on social media that portray individuals with healthy, idealized bodies can lead to distorted body perception, thereby increasing susceptibility to obesity. According to Michael Macht (2008), obesity can reduce an individual's self-esteem, and overweight individuals may misinterpret their own body image as well as others' attitudes toward them in a negative way. As a result, decreased self-esteem can lead to depression. Emotional states such as fear, joy, anger, and sadness can influence not only food choices but also the amount of food consumed, the duration of chewing, and digestion (Macht, 2008).

Obesity leads to a number of health problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, various types of cancer, and low self-esteem. Therefore, in the prevention and treatment of obesity, adopting a healthy lifestyle, developing balanced eating habits, providing education on exercise and sports, and bringing patients together to support and motivate each other can all be helpful (Leibbrand & Fichter, 2002). The fundamental step in preventing and treating obesity is to ensure that individuals consistently adopt balanced eating habits.

Among the technological advancements that have contributed to obesity becoming a societal problem, mass media tools such as computers, phones, and televisions are the first to come to mind. For this reason, social media addiction observed in individuals leads to irregular lifestyles and both psychological and physical decline. Excessive engagement with social media platforms, a persistent desire to stay connected to these platforms, and spending so much time on them that it harms other social activities, work life, studies, mental health, and interpersonal relationships are all considered indicators of social media addiction (Andreassen, 2014).

The increase in social media use leads to a sedentary lifestyle and, consequently, to obesity. Within this context, the objectives of this study are as follows. Another study on social media addiction, as discussed by Griffiths (2005), suggests that in order for excessive social media use to be considered an addiction, six specific criteria must be present in the individual simultaneously. In this regard, behaviors strongly associated with internet and social media addiction—such as the cycle of social media use, gaming, and watching series/movies—have become a priority among young individuals (Rumpf et al., 2011; Van Rooij et al., 2010).

The concept of addiction is defined as an individual's inability to control an object or behavior and being unable to live without it (TBM, 2015). Although social media addiction is not classified as a disorder in the DSM-V, a review of the literature shows that it is considered a behavioural addiction (Griffiths & Szabo, 2014; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). In this sense, maintaining balance and making an effort to avoid becoming addicted to social media are of great importance.

Social media usage is increasing rapidly in our current era, and this rise is especially notable among young adults. Today, social media use, which has become addictive among adults, not only meets the social needs of different social groups and large masses but also adds a new dimension to the concept of socialization (Vural & Bat, 2010; Solmaz et al., 2013; Sağbaş et al., 2016). The emergence of social media addiction among young adults has led to certain problems. Studies have shown that social media addiction leads to the waste of free time, which in turn results in academic failure (Menayes, 2015; Kırık et al., 2015; Hawi & Samaha, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to examine all possible effects of social media addiction, physical activity limitations, nutritional habits, and obesity among young adults. It is also known that extended time spent online increases stress levels, which in turn triggers emotional eating (Vannucci et al., 2020). With the increase in social media use in today's society, the prevalence of sedentary lifestyles is rising, and this trend is reported to increase the risk of obesity (Loh et al., 2023). In this context, the study aims to evaluate the effects of social media addiction on individuals' health behaviors from a holistic perspective, in line with the current literature review (Sun & Zhang, 2022).

Method

This study is a narrative review. The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and the National Thesis Center of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). The studies included in this review were selected based on specific criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (i) the sample consisted of young adults aged 18–30, (ii) the study addressed the relationship between social media use and body weight, obesity, or levels of physical activity, (iii) it was published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal or was an accessible academic thesis, (iv) it was published in 2010 or later, and (v) it was written in either Turkish or English. Records obtained from the systematic search were first screened at the title and abstract level, and then assessed for eligibility through full-text review. Studies that met the inclusion criteria were included in the final analysis; they were coded according to their content, and a thematic synthesis was conducted under the headings of behavioral, psychosocial, and biological mechanisms.

Studies that do not cover the young adult population, focus solely on technology use without including any health-related outcome variables, are publications without accessible full texts, or are opinion pieces and commentary articles, were evaluated as exclusion criteria.

A qualitative research method was used in this study. The data in our research were collected using the "document analysis technique," which is one of the qualitative research data collection methods. The data were gathered from studies obtained through the National Thesis Center, affiliated with higher education institutions, and from Google Scholar. The aim was to identify studies investigating the relationship between social media addiction and obesity among young adults, and to present the summary findings of these studies regarding social media addiction and obesity. This study is limited to postgraduate theses registered and accessible electronically in the Higher Education Council Thesis Documentation Center between 2000 and 2025, as well as to publications found in Google Scholar.

Findings

According to Bayrak and Cihan (2021), the World Internet, social media, and Mobile Usage Statistics indicate that 4.38 billion people are internet users, representing 56% of the world's population. In their studies on young adults, Kaya and Demir (2021) and Arslan (2023) found that intensive social media use increases levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Additionally, some studies indicate that social media addiction leads to decreased self-esteem and reduced life satisfaction (Yılmaz, 2022).

In their 2022 study, Turan and Ersoy reported that feedback on social media affects individuals' reward systems by increasing dopamine release, which in turn triggers addictive behavior. Research by Kılınc and Kartal (2022) found that overweight or obese young people have longer screen times, are less likely to participate in physically active pursuits such as sports, and tend to consume more snacks while in front of screens. In a study by Ballard and colleagues (2009) involving 116 university students, it was found that individuals who spent more time playing video games had higher body mass indices than others. In a 2023 study by Özkan et al., consistent with the literature, the authors found that a large proportion of participants (62.8%) engaged in less physical activity as their time spent on social media increased. Another survey among young adults showed that the overall obesity rate was 20.3% and the rate of being overweight was 13.6%; it also demonstrated that individuals with obesity had a significantly higher tendency to be drawn to unhealthy foods and beverages after seeing advertisements on social media (Aljefree & Alhothali, 2022). In a national longitudinal study, each additional hour of screen time was associated with an increase of approximately 0.06 kg/m² in BMI. The same study also observed a significant relationship, indicating that each additional hour of screen time raised the likelihood of obesity by about 9% (Nagata et al., 2023). The reviewed studies show that social media use among young adults is significantly associated with behavioral and psychosocial risk factors related to obesity.

Review studies report that as the level of social media addiction increases, sedentary lifestyles become more prevalent, sleep patterns are disrupted, and energy balance is negatively affected (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Studies examining the relationship between screen time and body mass index (BMI) emphasize that each additional hour of screen time is statistically significantly associated with an increase in BMI, and prolonged screen exposure raises the likelihood of obesity (Nagata et al., 2023). In a cross-sectional study of young adults, individuals who used electronic screens for more than 6 hours a day had a significantly higher risk of obesity (Rafique et al., 2022).

Meta-analytic findings focusing on psychosocial mechanisms show that social media use is related to stress levels and emotional eating behaviors, which can indirectly increase obesity risk by making weight control more difficult (Vannucci et al., 2020). Additionally, screen time has been found to be a stronger predictor of overweight and obesity compared to physical activity levels. However, some studies highlight methodological limitations, including heterogeneous age groups and reliance on self-report measures (Maher et al., 2012).

Recent studies suggest that social media use may be linked to dopaminergic processes that activate the brain's reward system. Constant notifications, likes, and feedback processes can create short-term pleasure effects, resulting in behavior patterns similar to addiction. These behavioral mechanisms overlap with reward-based eating behaviors that increase the tendency toward high-calorie foods, thereby indirectly raising the risk of obesity (Sun & Zhang, 2022).

One consistent finding in the literature is that excessive social media use increases sedentary behavior and reduces physical activity. In particular, increased screen time has been shown to reduce necessary daily movement, which is associated with higher BMI (Maher et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Additionally, using social media late into the night negatively affects sleep quality and duration and contributes to weight gain by adversely impacting metabolism (Tremblay et al., 2011).

Alongside behavioral effects, psychosocial processes also play a significant role in the relationship between social media and obesity. Ideal body and self-perception images created on social media platforms increase the tendency to engage in social comparison, which is linked to negative psychological states such as low body satisfaction and low self-esteem (Jiménez-García, Arias & Hontanaya, 2025). Such poor body perception and psychological pressure can trigger emotional eating behavior in young adults, indirectly leading to unhealthy eating tendencies and an increased risk of obesity (Evcili & Eroğlu, 2024).

Systematic reviews demonstrate that social media use exerts indirect pressure on physical activity; leisure-time behaviors become more passive, and motivation for exercise decreases (Goodyear et al., 2021). These findings indicate that behavioral-level lifestyle changes are among the fundamental factors that increase the risk of obesity.

Discussion

Recent literature indicates that the increase in social media use in recent years has been accompanied by a decrease in physical activity and an increase in weight gain (Shiyab et al., 2023). Current findings suggest that increased social media use may be associated with lower levels of physical activity and weight gain among young adults. However, this relationship appears to be multidimensional, shaped by the interaction of behavioral, psychosocial, and biological processes, rather than being linear and unidirectional. In particular, the increase in screen time reinforces a sedentary lifestyle, facilitates irregular eating behaviors, and disrupts sleep patterns—key behavioral mechanisms that indirectly increase the risk of obesity (Maher et al., 2012; Yıldırım, 2022).

From a psychosocial perspective, young adulthood is a period marked by intense identity development and the search for social belonging, which makes individuals more sensitive to idealized content on social media (Arnett, 2019). Continuous comparison-based online interactions have been linked to decreased body satisfaction, increased tendencies toward emotional eating, and reduced self-awareness (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2021). Additionally, prolonged online exposure has been reported to increase stress levels, impair attentional processes, and reduce sleep quality (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). A reduction in sleep duration, coupled with an increase in emotional eating

behaviors, is thought to make weight management more difficult and contribute to the development of obesity (Vargas, 2020).

However, the magnitude of the effects reported in the literature varies across studies. Much of this variability may stem from differences in the measurement tools used and the characteristics of the samples. In most of the reviewed research, physical activity, screen time, and eating habits have been assessed using self-report scales. This can limit measurement accuracy due to recall bias and social desirability bias, leading to relationships appearing weaker or stronger than they actually are (Tremblay et al., 2011; Maher et al., 2012). Additionally, considering the impact of cultural context on social media usage patterns and body image, direct comparisons between studies conducted in different countries become more challenging (Goodyear et al., 2021).

The fact that most of the current evidence is based largely on cross-sectional designs represents a significant methodological limitation. While such studies can reveal correlational patterns, they do not allow for causal inferences. The question of whether social media use increases the risk of obesity or whether existing lifestyle habits shape social media use remains largely unanswered (Shiyab et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2019). Additionally, the inclusion of adolescents or older age groups outside the young adult age range in some studies makes it difficult to distinguish results specific to the target population of this review. Furthermore, the possibility of publication bias in the literature should not be overlooked. The higher likelihood of publishing positive findings may lead to an overestimation of the overall effect size of the relationship between social media use and obesity. This warrants caution, especially when interpreting results from studies with small sample sizes (Mathur, 2024).

When all these findings are considered together, it can be said that social media addiction creates a multi-layered risk profile in young adults—not only promoting a sedentary lifestyle, but also affecting psychological well-being and eating behaviors. In this context, digital detox programs, awareness interventions targeting social media use, and holistic approaches that support healthy living habits stand out as potential protective strategies to reduce the risk of obesity (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Sun & Zhang, 2022). For future research, increasing studies that more clearly define young adult samples, utilize longitudinal designs, and are supported by objective measurement tools will contribute to a more robust understanding of the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between social media use and obesity.

The fact that a significant portion of the literature is based on adolescent samples limits the ability to make conclusions specific to the young adult population. Therefore, in the present review, findings from adolescents have been included only within a framework that explains the underlying mechanisms.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Based on the literature review, this study has examined the effects of social media addiction on obesity among young adults from a comprehensive perspective. The findings show that the relationship between social media addiction and obesity is multidimensional and indirect. A review of the literature indicates that social media use not only

increases online interactions but also plays a dominant role in individuals' physical activity, mood, eating habits, and overall lifestyle (Andreassen, 2015). The review also reveals significant associations among social media use, obesity, and related health behaviors in young adults; the literature notes that increased social media engagement can influence lifestyle and behaviors, reducing healthy habits over time (Park, 2022). However, because much of the current evidence relies on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions from these relationships. According to Çayır et al. (2011), excessive use of social networks reduces individuals' social activity with those around them, which in turn increases the risk of obesity. Additionally, individuals with low socioeconomic status face a greater risk for obesity due to limited access to healthy foods, medical resources, and safe environments for exercise.

Specifically, prolonged screen time is associated with minimal physical activity and leads to weight gain by creating an energy imbalance (Hruby & Hu, 2015). In addition to these findings, social media addiction is also strongly linked to psychological processes. Research shows that social media use is associated with narcissism, self-esteem, and a tendency for social comparison (Andreassen et al., 2017). This can affect individuals' self and body perception both positively and negatively, potentially triggering unhealthy eating habits and increasing the risk of obesity. Therefore, social media addiction should be considered not only a behavioral problem but also a psychosocial health risk for individuals. Furthermore, uncontrolled use of social media can hinder interpersonal relationships and lead to social isolation, causing anxiety and depression (Gezgin & Kurtça, 2024).

The findings indicate that the connections between social media addiction and obesity are multidimensional and based on reciprocal interactions. For future research, it is important to include experimental and longitudinal studies to more clearly and comprehensively reveal the causal relationship between these two variables. Additionally, there is a need for research and interventions to increase media literacy and digital awareness, and to promote and support healthy living and physical activity among young adults (Goodyear et al., 2021).

It should also be noted that studies in the literature report no significant relationship between excessive social media or technology use and obesity. Most of the studies included in this review assess screen time, eating habits, and physical activity levels using self-report measures. This approach may reduce measurement accuracy due to recall bias and social desirability bias (Maher et al., 2012; Tremblay et al., 2011). Furthermore, because the existing evidence largely relies on cross-sectional research designs, even if an association between social media use and obesity is demonstrated, it is difficult to draw causal inferences (Wang et al., 2019).

Social media addiction emerges as a behavioral factor that can increase the risk of obesity among young adults (Meral, 2018). The relationship between social media addiction and obesity is indirect and multidimensional. The findings are predominantly cross-sectional and do not allow for causal conclusions. Future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal and experimental designs.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Participation Approval
Not applicable.

Publication Permission
Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Gİ and AB prepared the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations sections of the article, while EB and GK introduction and contributed to the identification of studies to be included in the research.

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