

Social media addiction and future anxiety among veterinary students: A reciprocal risk association

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between social media addiction and future anxiety among veterinary students. The research was conducted using a cross-sectional and correlational survey model. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and hierarchical regression analysis were used in the analysis of the data. The findings showed a positive and significant relationship between social media addiction and future anxiety. According to the results of the hierarchical regression analysis, social media addiction significantly predicts future anxiety even after controlling for demographic variables. However, alternative analyses showed that future anxiety also significantly predicts social media addiction; this indicates that the relationship between the two variables may not be unidirectional but rather exhibit a cyclical pattern where they mutually reinforce each other over time. Furthermore, gender was found to be a significant predictor of future anxiety, with female students reporting higher levels of future anxiety than male students. The findings suggest that the level of problematic social media use, rather than the quantity of social media use, may be related to future anxieties among university students.

Keywords: Anxiety, mental health, problematic social media use, university students, veterinary education

INTRODUCTION

With the widespread adoption of digital technologies, social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of university students. While social media platforms offer individuals opportunities such as quick access to information, social interaction, and entertainment, excessive and uncontrolled use can have negative effects on psychological well-being. In particular, problematic social media use and social media addiction have been considered a significant risk area in recent years, associated with mental health indicators such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Huang, 2022; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The psychological effects of social media use on university students can become more pronounced because individuals are in a developmentally uncertain period of their lives. During young adulthood, students face numerous uncertainties about the future, such as academic success, post-graduation employment, economic independence, and the development of professional identity. In this context, anxiety about the future stands out as a significant psychological construct affecting the mental health of university students. Anxiety about the future is defined as a multidimensional construct characterized by negative expectations about the future, a perception of uncertainty, and feelings of loss of control (Esmer & Aribaş, 2023; Gedikli & Akdoğan, 2023).

The relationship between social media use and the psychological processes of university students has been addressed with increasing interest in recent years. The literature emphasizes that the psychological effects of social media are multifaceted and can lead to different

outcomes depending on the form of use and individual characteristics. On the one hand, it is reported that social media platforms can reduce anxiety through functions such as establishing social connections, experiencing positive experiences, and providing escape from daily stressors. On the other hand, it is stated that intensive and problematic social media use can increase stress and anxiety levels through social comparison processes, fear of missing out, and excessive exposure to stimuli (Anto et al., 2023; Huang, 2022). These findings show that the social media experiences of university students not only bring negative effects but can also create different effects on psychological well-being depending on the form of use. In this context, examining the relationship between social media addiction and future anxieties of university students will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of psychological risk factors. Considering that a large proportion of active internet users utilize social media platforms, examining the level of addiction and psychological effects these platforms create in individuals is considered an important research area (Ağırtaş & Güler, 2020). Revealing the relationship between social media addiction and future anxieties of university students will allow for a clearer understanding of the role of social media on young individuals' perceptions and anxieties about the future.

When considered specifically in the context of veterinary students, this relationship becomes even more significant. Veterinary education can create significant psychological pressure on students due to the intense academic and clinical workload, high performance expectations, and the emotional demands of the profession.

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Studies highlight that veterinary students can experience high levels of stress and anxiety, and that uncertainty about their professional future plays a significant role in this process (Islam et al., 2025). In addition, encountering content on social media related to difficulties in finding employment in veterinary medicine, economic problems, burnout, and negative professional experiences can negatively affect students' expectations for the future (Won, 2025).

In this context, it is important to examine the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety about the future, especially in groups with high academic and emotional burdens such as veterinary students. However, the current literature shows a limited number of studies that address the direction and nature of the relationship between these two variables while controlling for demographic variables. This study aims to examine the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety about the future in veterinary students and to evaluate different aspects of this relationship.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a significant relationship between social media addiction and anxiety about the future?
- 2) Does social media addiction predict anxiety about the future when demographic variables are controlled for?
- 3) Does anxiety about the future exhibit a reciprocal relationship with social media addiction?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and data collection

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design and was conducted among undergraduate veterinary students at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Kafkas University, Türkiye, during the 2025–2026 academic year. A total of 377 students were invited to participate in the study. However, seven students declined participation by indicating “I do not agree to participate” on the informed consent form, and twelve questionnaires were excluded due to random or incomplete responses. Consequently, data from 358 participants were included in the final analyses. Data were collected through face-to-face administration of self-report questionnaires after obtaining informed consent from all participants. Data collection was conducted outside of scheduled class hours, participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and would not affect their academic evaluation in any way.

Data collection instruments

Data were collected using a face-to-face questionnaire consisting of three sections: a personal information form, the Future Anxiety Scale, and the Social Media Addiction Scale. The personal information form included 13 items assessing participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

The Future Anxiety of University Students Scale (FAS), developed by Geylani and Çiriş Yıldız (2022), consists of 19 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and includes

two subdimensions: Future fear and despair of the future. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

The Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS), developed by Tutgun-Ünal (2015), comprises 41 items across four subdimensions (occupation, relapse, mood modification, and conflict). The scale showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.967$). Permission to use both FAS and the SMAS was obtained from their original developers prior to data collection.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 26.0; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics were calculated as frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and as means and standard deviations for continuous variables. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between the study variables.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed to evaluate the suitability and internal structure of the Likert-type scales used in the study. PCA was conducted to explore and examine the factor structure of the scales in the present sample. The adequacy of the data for factor analysis was confirmed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and the Bartlett sphericity test. The internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. PCA analyses were performed using JAMOVI version 2.2.5.

Hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify predictors of future anxiety among veterinary students. In Model 1, demographic variables were entered as control variables, while social media addiction was added in Model 2. Model fit was evaluated using R^2 and adjusted R^2 values, and overall model significance was assessed using the F-test.

RESULTS

The study was conducted with 358 participants. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are given in Table 1. Since some participants did not answer all sociodemographic questions, frequency and percentage values were calculated based on valid responses. 58.1% of the participants were male, and the vast majority were in the 21–23 age range (57.3%). It was determined that the students' overall grade point average was most concentrated in the 2.51–3.00 range (34.1%). Approximately half of the participants used 3–5 active social media accounts (49.2%), and 38.3% had been using social media for 8–11 years. The most frequent daily time spent on social media was found to be between 3–5 hours (38.3%). The most common purpose of social media use was entertainment (68.7%). More than half of the participants stated that they lived in student housing (50.6%), and the most frequently stated post-graduation career goal was clinical practice (Companion animals) (29.1%).

The results of the PCA performed to determine the factor structure of the scales used in the study on veterinary students are shown in Table 2. Based on the Scree plot and eigenvalues, the PCA revealed a 4-factor structure explaining 55.7% of the total variance for the SMAS scale and a 2-factor structure explaining 47.8% of the total variance

ce for the FAS scale (Figure 1). The internal consistency of the scales was evaluated using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was calculated as $\alpha=0.956$ for SMAS and $\alpha=0.726$ for FAS (Table 2).

The total scores calculated based on the veterinary students' responses were 97.01 for SMAS (min: 41-max: 205) and 58.26 for FAS (min: 19-max: 95).

According to Pearson correlation analysis, a positive and significant relationship was found between social media addiction and anxiety about the future ($r=0.269$, $p<0.01$). In line with the purpose of the study, demographic variables that were theoretically related to the study variables were included as control variables. (Table 3).

Hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis was applied to determine the variables predicting future anxiety among university students. FAS was used as the dependent variable, and variance was examined by adding different datasets to the model at each stage (Table 4). In Model 1, demographic variables (gender, age, class level, grade point average, daily time spent on social media, and other demographic variables) were included as control variables. This model was found to explain 15% of the variance in future anxiety ($R^2=0.15$, $p<0.001$).

In Model 1, it was determined that the gender variable significantly predicted future anxiety ($\beta = -0.337$, $p < 0.001$), while other demographic variables did not make a significant contribution. In Model 2, the total score for social media addiction was added to the model. It was found that the addition of social media addiction significantly increased the explanatory power of the model, and the total variance explained rose to approximately 21% ($R^2 = 0.214$, $p < 0.001$). In Model 2, the gender variable was found to significantly predict future anxiety ($\beta = -0.312$, $p < 0.001$). Social media addiction was also found to be a significant and positive predictor of future anxiety, even when demographic variables were controlled for ($\beta = 0.279$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that an increase in the level of social media addiction increases future anxiety among university students.

In this study, alternative regression models were developed to more thoroughly evaluate the direction of the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety

about the future. In this context, social media addiction was considered as the dependent variable, and whether anxiety about the future predicted social media addiction was examined. The findings showed that anxiety about the future significantly predicted social media addiction. However, since the theoretical framework of the study focuses on explaining the effects of social media use on individuals' psychological processes, the hierarchical regression model, in which anxiety about the future is considered as the dependent variable, was prioritized in the presentation of the findings. The findings of the alternative models were also discussed in the discussion section as supporting evidence to allow for the evaluation of social media addiction within the context of a reciprocal relationship.

DISCUSSION

This study found a positive and significant relationship between social media addiction and future anxiety among veterinary students, and examined the demographic factors influencing these two conditions. To this end, the reliability of the measurement instruments used in the study was first evaluated. Since a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70 indicates acceptable internal consistency (Hussey et al., 2023), Social Media Addiction Scale and the Future Anxiety Scale were determined to be highly reliable.

The mean total score (97.01) obtained from the Social Media Addiction Scale, when evaluated considering the descriptive level classifications suggested in the study in which the scale was developed (Tutgun-Ünal, 2015), showed that the participants' social media addiction levels were in the "slightly addicted" category. This finding indicated that the sample group did not point to a high-risk level in terms of social media addiction. However, the literature reports that even low or moderate levels of social media addiction can show significant relationships with various psychological variables such as loss of control, difficulties in emotion regulation, depression, anxiety, and stress (Hoşgör & Güngördü, 2025; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). In this context, the detection of a positive and significant relationship with future anxiety despite the relatively low level of social media addiction in the study points to the importance of the functional

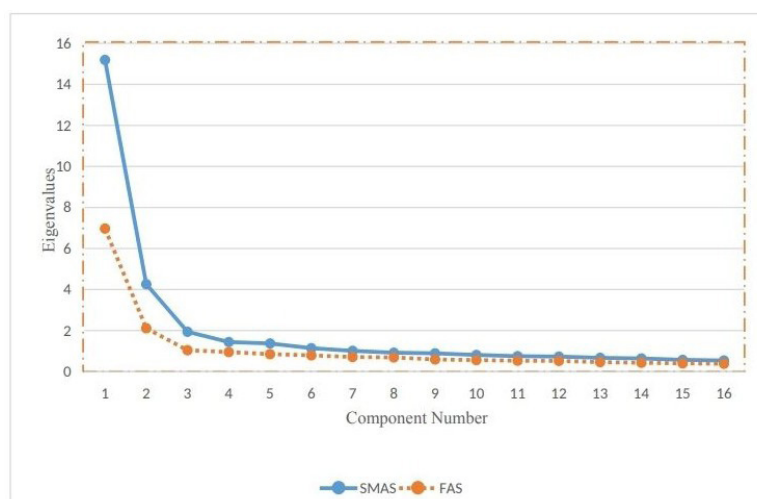


Figure 1. Scree plot chart of principal components in Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS) and Future Anxiety of University Students Scale (FAS).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Variables		N	%
Gender	Female	150	41.9
	Male	208	58.1
Age	18-20	104	29.1
	21-23	205	57.3
	24 years and older	49	13.6
Grade point average	Below 2.00	56	15.6
	2.01-2.50	88	24.6
	2.51-3.00	122	34.1
	3.01-3.50	45	12.6
	3.51-4.00	8	2.2
Class level	First grade	57	15.9
	Second grade	84	23.5
	Third grade	64	17.9
	Fourth grade	90	25.1
	Fifth grade	63	17.6
Number of actively used social media accounts	0-2	50	14.0
	3-5	176	49.2
	6-8	95	26.5
	9 or more	37	10.3
How long have you been using social media?	0-3 years	20	5.6
	4-7 years	110	30.7
	8-11 years	137	38.3
	More than 12 years	90	25.1
Daily time spent on social media	0-1 hours	11	3.1
	1-3 hours	109	30.4
	3-5 hours	137	38.3
	5-7 hours	61	17.0
	More than 7 hours	39	10.9
What is your main purpose for using social media (choose the most dominant one)?	Entertainment	246	68.7
	News	21	5.9
	Communication	44	12.3
	Work-related activities	5	1.4
	Other	27	7.5
What is your family's monthly income level?	0-30.000 TRY	58	16.2
	30.001-60.000 TRY	86	24.0
	60.001-90.000 TRY	102	28.5
	90.001-120.000 TRY	50	14.0
	120.001 TRY and above	60	16.8
Do you earn any money from social media?	Yes	9	2.5
	No	345	96.4
Do you have a regular job outside of your studies?	Yes, full-time	7	2.0
	Yes, part-time	48	13.4
	No	302	84.4

Table 1. (continued) Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Variables		N	%
Where do you currently live?	Private dormitory	11	3.1
	Public (state) dormitory	132	36.9
	With family/relatives	28	7.8
	Student apartment	181	50.6
	Other	5	1.4
What is your primary career goal after graduation?	Clinical practice (Companion animals)	104	29.1
	Clinical practice (Farm animals)	85	23.7
	Academia	25	7.0
	Public sector	43	12.0
	Private sector (Pharmaceuticals, feed industry, etc.)	9	2.5
	Undecided	72	20.1
	Other	16	4.5

(N= number of participants, Note: Percentages were calculated based on valid responses. The number of valid responses may vary across variables due to missing data)

Table 2. PCA results of the scales.

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Bartlett’s test of sphericity	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	Percentage of total variance (%)
SMAS	0.956	X ² :9438 Df: 820 P<0.001	0.938	55.7
FAS	0.726	X ² :2655 Df: 171 P<0.001	0.923	47.8

(SMAS: Social Media Addiction Scale; FAS: Future Anxiety of University Students Scale)

Table 3. Correlation analysis.

Variables	Pearson correlation coefficients	
	SMAS	FAS
Grade point average	-0.051	0.114*
Daily time spent on social media	0.403**	0.027
SMAS	1	0.269**
FAS	0.269	1

(SMAS: Social Media Addiction Scale; FAS: Future Anxiety of University Students Scale; *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level)

and psychological effects of social media use rather than its quantitative aspects.

The finding of a positive and significant relationship between social media addiction and future anxiety in the present study is consistent with previous research addressing the interaction between digital media use and psychological well-being. Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently report that problematic social media use is associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Alansari et al., 2025; Huang, 2022). The intense and often contradictory flow of information encountered in social media environments can make it difficult to access accurate and reliable information, leading to reduced clarity and cognitive confusion. This situation can increase feelings of loss of control and helplessness in individuals, raising anxiety levels and strengthening the perception of uncertainty (Okun & Arun, 2024). It is particularly emphasized that social

media addiction in young adults reinforces negative expectations about the future through constant social comparison, information overload, and increased sensitivity to uncertainty (Liu, 2024; Marino et al., 2018).

When evaluated from the perspective of veterinary students, this relationship is likely to become even more significant. It is reported that veterinary students may experience high levels of anxiety and stress, with intense academic/clinical workload, performance pressure, and the emotional demands of the profession (such as difficult interactions with pet owners, patient and mortality processes) being significant sources of stress (Islam et al., 2025). In addition, students’ frequent exposure to veterinary-related content on social media (discussions of job finding and income, burnout in the profession, harsh working conditions, customer complaints, negative reviews, and cost discussions) can negatively impact their future expectations regarding the profession, increasing

Table 4. Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Future Anxiety

Variable	Model I					Model II				
	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	62.119	5.851		10.617	<0.001	56.491	5.761		9.805	<0.001
Gender	-6.357	1.087	-0.337	-5.851	<0.001	-5.890	1.052	-0.312	-5.601	<0.001
Age	0.917	1.027	0.061	0.892	0.373	0.673	0.992	0.045	0.679	0.498
Grade point average	0.819	0.518	0.090	1.581	0.115	0.925	0.500	0.102	1.850	0.065
Class level	-0.049	0.523	-0.006	-0.093	0.926	0.007	0.504	0.001	0.013	0.990
Daily time spent on social media	-0.495	0.532	-0.054	-0.930	0.353	-1.501	0.555	-0.165	-1.706	0.107
Main purpose for using social media	-0.589	0.436	-0.078	-1.350	0.178	-0.503	0.421	-0.067	-1.194	0.233
Number of actively used social media accounts	0.582	0.639	0.053	0.911	0.363	0.758	0.617	0.069	1.228	0.221
Income level	0.359	0.404	0.049	0.889	0.375	0.264	0.390	0.036	0.679	0.498
Employment status	0.444	1.284	0.020	0.346	0.730	0.088	1.239	0.004	0.071	0.944
Career goal after graduation	0.345	0.260	0.075	1.329	0.185	0.267	0.251	0.058	1.065	0.288
SMAS						0.092	0.019	0.279	4.758	<0.001
R ²	0.150					0.214				
Adjusted R ²	0.120					0.183				
F Change	4.990***					6.943***				

(Gender was coded as: 1 = Female, 2 = Male . Categorical variables included in the regression analysis were numerically coded in accordance with the sociodemographic classifications presented in Table 1. SMAS: Social Media Addiction Scale; *B* = Unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE*: Standard error; β : Standardized regression coefficient (Beta); *R*²: Coefficient of determination; *Adjusted R*²: Adjusted coefficient of determination; *F Change* = Significance of the change in the model. ****p*<0.001.)

feelings of uncertainty about the future (Won, 2025). The findings of this study demonstrate that social media use has evolved from a purely entertainment activity into a factor influencing individuals' psychological processes. Although a large majority of participants stated that they primarily use social media for entertainment (68.7%), a significant proportion also use it for communication (12.3%) and news consumption (5.9%). It is thought that the use for news and communication, in particular, may lead to individuals being constantly exposed to a flow of information and current events; this, in turn, may increase the perception of uncertainty and affect anxiety levels. In this context, defining social media use as entertainment does not negate its psychological effects; on the contrary, the quality of the content individuals are exposed to and the manner of use are key factors determining the impact of social media on mental health.

In addition to the model in which social media addiction predicts future anxiety, the finding that an alternative model where future anxiety predicts social media addiction was also significant suggests that concerns about the future may be a factor that increases social media use behaviors. Indeed, it has been reported that individuals with high levels of anxiety and uncertainty use social media more intensively to cope with negative emotions, and this use can develop into a problematic pattern over time (Elhai et al., 2016; Jiang, 2021). University students may use social media as a mood regulation and avoidance tool to cope with negative emotional states such as future anxiety, academic pressure, and uncertainty. Although social media provides temporary relief by offering distraction and a way to escape negative thoughts in the

short term, this avoidant coping mechanism can reinforce social media addiction over time (Okun & Arun, 2024). In this study, the fact that a large majority of participants stated that they primarily use social media for entertainment purposes suggests that social media may function as a means of escaping negative emotions and providing short-term relief; This aspect suggests that it could also be used as an avoidance coping strategy in the face of anxiety about the future.

The literature emphasizes that problematic smartphone and social media use is closely related to anxiety and worry levels; this relationship is based on cognitive processes such as perceived uncertainty about the future and fear of missing out (Elhai et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been shown that anxiety plays a significant role in the relationship between social media addiction and cognitive processes; negative attention bias, in particular, functions as a mediating mechanism in this process (Qiu et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that students experiencing high levels of future-related anxiety may obtain short-term relief by turning to social media more frequently; however, in the long term, they may enter a risk pattern in which anxiety and addiction mutually reinforce one another.

In the present study, the negative beta coefficient for gender indicates that female veterinary students reported higher levels of future anxiety compared to male students. These findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that future anxiety may vary by gender. Studies reporting higher levels of anxiety among female students explain this difference by women's greater sensitivity to uncertainty and their tendency to cognitively evaluate

potential future-related risks more intensively (McLean & Anderson, 2009). A recent review conducted specifically on veterinary students also emphasizes that female students experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological burden, which may be associated with intense academic demands, the emotional nature of the profession, and uncertainties regarding their professional future (Islam et al., 2025). Considering the demanding working conditions and emotional challenges inherent in veterinary education, the heightened perception of uncertainty among female students may contribute to increased levels of future anxiety. However, some studies suggest that anxiety levels do not differ significantly by gender, indicating that gender should be evaluated alongside factors such as coping styles, perceived social support, cultural context, and academic conditions (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2012). Beyond identifying gender as a significant predictor, the present findings underscore the importance of considering gender-specific vulnerabilities in the context of future anxiety. The relatively strong contribution of gender in the regression model suggests that female students may be disproportionately affected by uncertainty related to academic, professional, and career expectations. This may reflect broader psychosocial dynamics, including differences in emotional processing, perceived responsibility, and societal expectations (McLean & Anderson, 2009; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2012). Therefore, gender should be considered a key factor in developing targeted mental health interventions and support programs for veterinary students.

The explained variance ratio ($R^2 = 0.214$) obtained in this study shows that social media addiction and gender significantly predict future anxiety, suggesting that future anxiety exhibits a broader and more multidimensional structure. The literature emphasizes that future anxiety among university students is closely related not only to individual psychological characteristics but also to structural and contextual factors such as unemployment and employment uncertainty, economic anxieties, fear of academic failure, and professional future expectations (Gedikli & Akdoğan, 2023). Furthermore, qualitative studies conducted with higher education students reveal that difficulty in finding employment after graduation, exam pressure, and the perception of increased competition are among the main sources of future anxiety (Esmer & Arıbaş, 2023). In this context, it can be said that the explained variance ratio obtained in the present study reflects a specific part of this multidimensional structure rather than encompassing all determinants of future anxiety; and that it is important to consider academic, economic, and professional variables together in future research.

When these findings are considered together, it can be said that social media addiction and future anxiety are important risk areas that are interrelated and potentially interact in the psychological adjustment processes of university students. The fact that social media addiction predicts future anxiety suggests that digital media use may be closely related to students' cognitive and emotional evaluations of the future; however, the possibility that future anxiety may function as a coping strategy that can increase social media use should not be overlooked. This relationship needs to be addressed more carefully, especially in groups carrying high academic, profes-

sional, and emotional burdens, such as veterinary students; it points to the importance of awareness studies on social media use and interventions that strengthen coping skills with uncertainty about the future in preventive mental health approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study shows a significant relationship between social media addiction and future anxiety among veterinary students, and that social media addiction is a significant predictor of future anxiety, even when demographic variables are controlled for. Furthermore, gender was found to be a significant predictor of future anxiety, with female veterinary students reporting higher levels of future anxiety compared to male students. This finding highlights the importance of considering gender differences in addressing future-related anxiety among students. The variance explained by the regression model suggests that future anxiety has a multidimensional structure and is influenced by academic, economic, professional, and individual factors in addition to social media use. In this context, the findings highlight the importance of raising awareness about social media use and developing approaches that strengthen coping skills for future uncertainties in efforts to support the mental health of young adults.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Kafkas University Non-Interventional Ethics Committee (Approval no: 81829502.903/144). In addition, the necessary institutional permissions were obtained from the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Kafkas University prior to data collection.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Author contributions

SÇA and EY designed the study and collected the data. SÇA conducted the statistical analyses and wrote the manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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