

Hedonism In the Digital Era: An Analysis of the use of Social Networks as a Source of Pleasure

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Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between hedonism and the use of social networks in the context of the digital era. In an increasingly technology-dependent society shaped by virtual communication, social networks have become powerful tools for fulfilling individuals' emotional and psychological needs, including immediate pleasure, attention, and social validation. Drawing on theories such as Cultivation Theory (George Gerbner) and Framing Theory (Goffman), the study explores the hedonistic motivations that underlie users' behavior on digital platforms. To analyze this phenomenon, an empirical study was conducted, the data of which show that the majority of young people experience the use of social networks as a source of immediate pleasure, especially in relation to receiving likes, sharing personal content, and engaging in social interactions. However, a considerable proportion of respondents also reported feelings of emptiness, decreased self-esteem, and emotional dependence on these platforms. The results suggest that social networks function as a powerful mechanism for fulfilling hedonistic needs, but they also raise concerns regarding long-term effects on psychological well-being. The paper concludes with suggestions for media awareness and a more conscious use of technology and social media.

Keywords: *Digital Era, Digital Hedonism, Self-Esteem, Social Networks, Social Validation.*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, human reality is increasingly intertwined with technology, particularly with social networks, which have become everyday platforms for interaction, self-expression, and often for the pursuit of pleasure (Zhakin, 2023). Likewise, in the digital era, social networks have become an inseparable part of daily life for millions of individuals worldwide (Musiał & Kazienko, 2013). These platforms not only provide opportunities for communication and information, but are increasingly perceived as sources of personal pleasure (Putsom & Wongkoey, 2025). They enable the creation of different identities (Abidjanova, 2025), the receipt of rapid attention (Heitmayer, 2025), and participation in various virtual communities (Thomas, 2025), offering experiences that activate pleasure centers in the brain. The concept of hedonism (Moore, 2004; Crisp, 2006; Vogt, 2018), which has historically been defined as the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Ævarsson, 1987; Carrurers, 2024; Suladze, 2025), is taking on new forms within this digital reality (Subathra et al., 2025; Rahman & Elijana, 2025). Today, likes, shares, comments, and reactions have become tools for experiencing a form of immediate pleasure (Snider, 2025), albeit with a debatable impact on individual well-being (Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2025).

This paper aims to analyze how the use of social networks is related to the concept of hedonism and how this relationship influences users' experience of pleasure within the context of contemporary cultural and technological developments. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how social networks function as a modern form of hedonism by examining the ways in which people seek and experience pleasure through them. Drawing on media and communication theories, as well as empirical studies, the objective is to provide an in-depth overview of the impact of digital content on human psychology and behavior.

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Literature Review

Hedonism, as an ethical and psychological theory, argues that people act in ways that maximize pleasure or minimize pain. In philosophy, hedonism originates from the thought of Epicurus, who viewed pleasure as the ultimate goal of life, not in an excessive or bodily form, but as tranquility of the soul (*ataraxia*). In later centuries, hedonism was adopted by utilitarian theory, with representatives such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who proposed that actions should be measured based on the maximization of pleasure for the majority (Kelly, 1990; Vergara, 2011; Komu, 2020). In modern times, hedonistic psychology analyzes pleasure within emotional and neurological contexts. Studies have shown that stimuli providing immediate reward, such as interactions on social networks, activate brain centers associated with dopamine a neurotransmitter known for its role in the experience of pleasure (Kazmi et al., 2025; Shabaz et al., 2025).

In the digital context, social networks provide a space where users can seek validation (Mukherjee et al., 2025), acceptance (Wahyudi & Daryanti, 2025), and immediate emotional stimulation (Wang & Wang, 2025), which are essential elements of hedonistic pleasure. “Digital hedonism is defined as the practice of seeking pleasure through the use of digital technologies, where virtual interactions replace or enrich traditional forms of emotional fulfillment” (Aslan & Shiong, 2023; Sandua, 2024).

With the development of technology and the widespread use of the internet, the concept of pleasure has also shifted into the virtual world. Social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) offer a constant environment of positive stimuli, often designed to generate immediate pleasure and increase user engagement. Scholars such as Turkle (2015) and Twenge (2019) have raised concerns about the effects of this type of pleasure consumption, emphasizing that it is often temporary and superficial, and may be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression when users fail to receive the “rewards” they expect.

In communication studies, the **Uses and Gratifications Theory** explains how individuals use media to fulfill personal needs, including emotional pleasure, stress relief, or identity construction (Ruggiero, 2000; Lim & Ting, 2012). Additionally, models of digital social capital and attention theory help explain the importance of virtual interactions in the experience of positive emotions. McQuail, one of the leading theorists of communication, provides a theoretical framework for analyzing media use for personal purposes, including hedonistic aspects (McQuail, 2010).

Authors such as Zizi Papacharissi (2011) emphasize the role of social networks in creating a “networked self,” where self-presentation and public evaluation are central to perceived pleasure. She addresses the ways in which individuals construct and experience the self through social networks, with an emphasis on emotional communication and pleasure (Papacharissi, 2011). Meanwhile, Sherry Turkle (2011) discusses the consequences of emotional distancing that these platforms may produce, directly affecting the quality of experienced pleasure.

Similarly, Jenkins provides an overview of the interaction between users and platforms, and how digital social experience is built upon participation and shared pleasure (Jenkins, 2006), while Marwick and Boyd explore the interconnection between social networks and social emotions such as tension, approval, and exposure (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). On the other hand, Livingstone analyzes the ways in which young people seek pleasure, affirmation, and self-expression in digital spaces (Livingstone, 2008). Goffman, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, argues that individuals interact in life as actors on a stage managing the image they wish to present to others. In the context of social networks, this “stage” is the digital profile, where users select, modify, and manipulate content to construct an idealized self. Gerbner argued that prolonged exposure to media creates a second reality in the mind of the consumer. In the case of social networks, where content is dominated by success, beauty, travel, and positive emotions, a false standard of everyday life is created.

- It influences what people believe life should be like in order to feel satisfied.
- Comparisons with others' lives increase feelings of lack and insufficiency.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is based on the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, supporting the theoretical analysis with real data from the public and field experts, as well as through the use of a structured interview and an online questionnaire administered to 100 young people aged 18–30, randomly selected on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The questions focused on feelings experienced after the use of social networks, the importance of likes,

the impact on self-esteem, and emotional emptiness following use. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods (percentages, means) and simple correlational analyses to understand the relationships between pleasure and factors such as frequency of use, social interactions, and level of self-esteem.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of social networks as a form of pleasure-seeking in the digital era. The main objectives include:

- To identify the hedonistic motivations behind the use of social networks.
- To analyze feelings of pleasure, emptiness, or dependence associated with these platforms.
- To explore the impact of likes and social interactions on individuals' subjective well-being.
- To contribute to the understanding of the relationship between technology and emotions in the contemporary media environment.

Hypothesis:

"In the digital era, users approach social networks in order to fulfill hedonistic needs related to affirmation, entertainment, and self-presentation."

Research Questions

- Do social networks create a cultivated reality that influences the perception of real life as less pleasurable?
- Do people feel better after posting, or more insecure when they do not receive the expected reaction?
- How does the pressure to "look good" affect self-perception?

The study is also limited in two aspects: (a) the age of the respondents, as 18–30 is the age group that generates the highest use of social networks, and (b) the number of respondents, 100, chosen for ease of data processing. The main limitations are related to the sample size and the subjective nature of some responses. Since participants were selected primarily online, there is a possibility of incomplete representation of the population.

Results

This study was based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, using a structured interview and an online questionnaire administered to 100 young people aged 18–30, randomly selected on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The questions focused on feelings experienced after using social networks, the importance of likes, the impact on self-esteem, and emotional emptiness following use. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods (percentages, means) and simple correlational analyses to understand the relationships between pleasure and factors such as frequency of use, social interactions, and level of self-esteem.

The structured interview included questions such as: *How do you experience your emotions after using social networks? Do you feel more confident or less confident after online interactions? Does the number of likes ever influence your decisions regarding future posts? How would you describe the feeling you have when you do not receive the reactions you expect? Do you feel dependent on social networks for your sense of well-being?*, etc. The interview responses helped contextualize the statistical data and contributed to the construction of a deeper understanding of users' personal experiences. The results collected from the questionnaire are presented below in the form of graphs for clearer visual analysis.

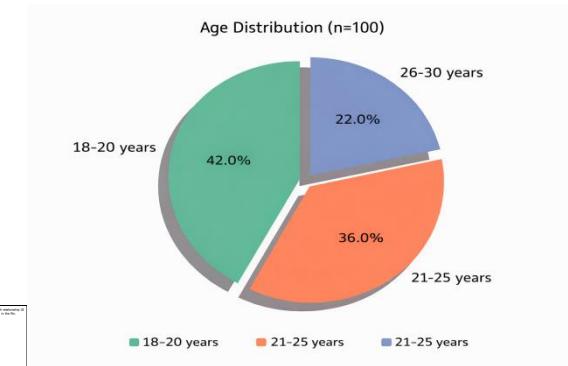


Figure 1. Age of Respondents

The 18–20 age group accounts for 42% of the respondents, representing the largest segment of the sample. This indicates that a substantial proportion of participants are in the early stage of youth. The 21–25 age group constitutes 36% of the sample and is the second-largest group, comprising individuals who are typically in the later stages of university education or at the beginning of their professional careers. In contrast, the 26–30 age group is the smallest, accounting for only 22% of the respondents. This group generally includes individuals who are more firmly integrated into the labor market and, as a result, tend to have less available leisure time compared to younger age groups. Overall, the age distribution reveals a pronounced dominance of respondents aged 18–25, who together comprise 78% of the sample. This demographic structure may have influenced the study's findings, particularly if the research topic relates to social media use, digital technologies, or contemporary cultural trends. Consequently, the results are more likely to reflect the behaviors, attitudes, and preferences of younger cohorts, while the perspectives of the 26–30 age group are relatively underrepresented.

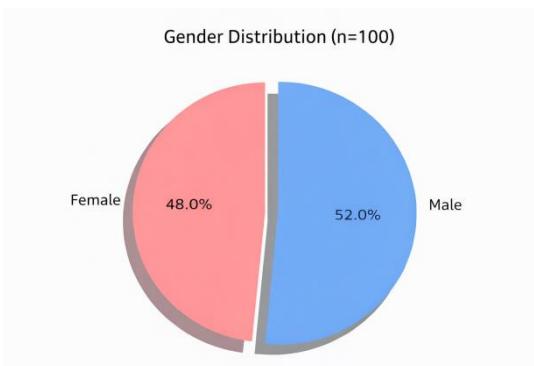


Figure 2. Gender of Respondents

Females constitute 48% of the sample, a proportion that is nearly equal to that of males. Males account for 52% of the respondents, indicating a slightly higher level of representation. This close gender balance suggests that the study's data are unlikely to be biased toward one gender, which is an important factor for the reliability and validity of the findings. Moreover, this near-equal gender distribution allows for direct comparisons between genders in subsequent analyses, for instance with regard to social media use, hedonic gratification, or media preferences.

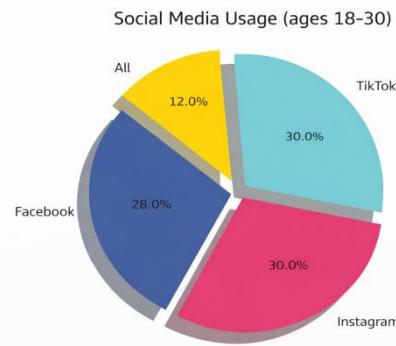


Figure 3. Most Frequently Used Platform

Instagram (30%) and TikTok (30%) emerge as the most frequently used platforms, indicating that younger cohorts show a stronger preference for visually oriented and dynamic social media environments. Facebook (28%) continues to exhibit a relatively high level of use; however, its prevalence appears slightly lower compared to newer platforms. Additionally, 12% of respondents report using all platforms, suggesting the presence of a highly active user segment that remains continuously engaged across multiple social media environments. This distribution suggests that social media use within this age group is closely associated with the pursuit of interactivity, entertainment, and visibility. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, in particular, offer a greater number of hedonic elements including visual appeal, short-form video content, and immediate interaction which may explain their dominant position among younger users.

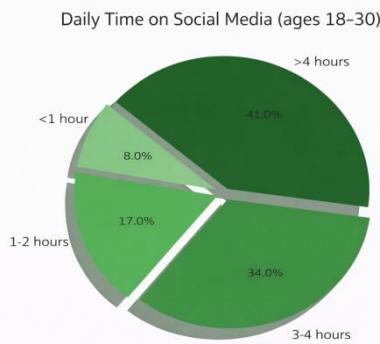


Figure 4. Time Spent on Social Media Daily

A total of 41% of respondents report spending more than four hours per day on social media, indicating very intensive use and a high level of digital engagement, which may be associated with addiction-like behaviors. This level of sustained exposure raises important questions regarding its potential impact on individual well-being and creates conditions conducive to dependency-related patterns, in line with the literature on "digital dopamine". Furthermore, 34% of participants spend between three and four hours per day on social media, representing another substantial group for whom social media constitutes an integral part of everyday life. In contrast, 17% report spending one to two hours daily, suggesting a more moderate pattern of use. Only 8% of respondents spend less than one hour per day on social media, representing a small minority that appears able to effectively regulate their online time. Overall, these findings indicate that the majority of young people in the sample (approximately 75%) spend more than three hours per day on social media. This pattern reinforces the notion that social media platforms function not only as significant sources of gratification but also as potential drivers of addictive tendencies.

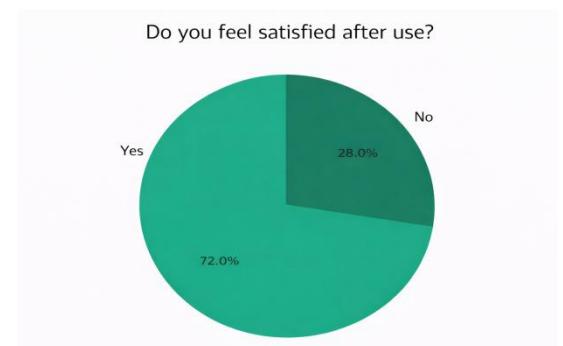


Figure 5. Satisfaction after using social media?

A total of 72% of respondents answered "Yes" while 28% answered "No". This indicates that a majority of users experience immediate satisfaction following the use of digital platforms, reflecting a predominance of short-term hedonic effects consistent with the expectations of instant gratification. However, it is important to note that this sense of satisfaction may be temporary and contingent on external factors. Consequently, these findings should be interpreted in light of the transitory nature of such gratification and in contrast with the sense of emptiness reported in Question 8.

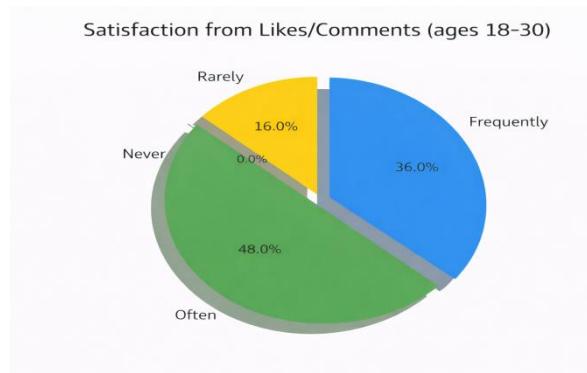


Figure 6. Frequency of Feeling Satisfaction From Likes or Comments on Their Posts

A total of 48% of respondents report always experiencing pleasure, indicating that nearly half of young users are highly emotionally influenced by reactions on social media. An additional 36% report feeling pleasure often, representing a substantial proportion whose well-being is closely linked to digital interaction. Meanwhile, 16% report feeling pleasure rarely, a smaller group that does not regard social media reactions as a major source of satisfaction. Notably, 0% of respondents reported never experiencing pleasure, indicating that all participants associate, to some degree, their sense of gratification with the feedback they receive online. These findings suggest that digital social capital such as likes, comments, and other reactions plays a significant role in the hedonic experiences of younger cohorts. For many, the experience of pleasure appears almost inevitable when receiving attention online.

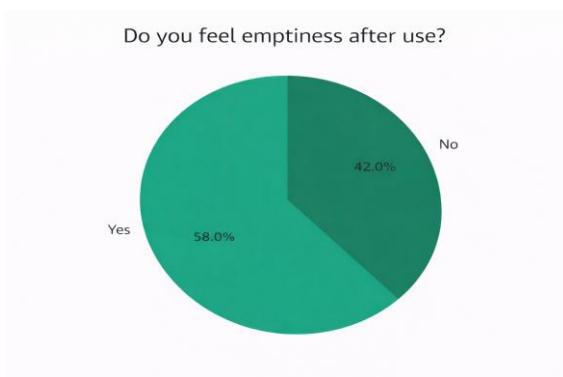


Figure 7. Importance of Other Responses (Likes, Comments)

A total of 65% of participants acknowledge the importance of likes, reflecting a need for social validation and the experience of pleasure through social approval, whereas 35% of respondents indicate that likes are not important to them. These findings align with Papacharissi's observations regarding digital self-presentation as an emotionally charged process.

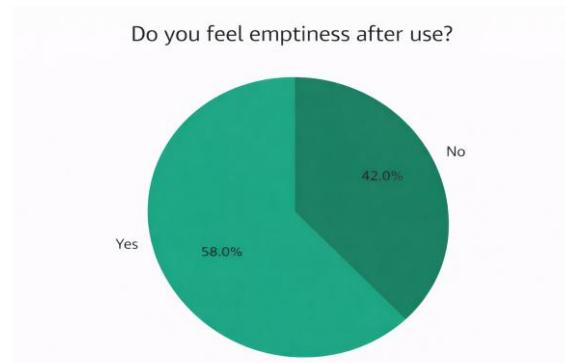


Figure 8. Emotional Emptiness After Using Social Media Other Responses (Likes, Comments)

A total of 58% of respondents reported experiencing a sense of emptiness after using social media, while 42% did not. This finding indicates that the pleasure derived from social media use may be temporary and potentially superficial. It also supports Turkle's thesis regarding emotional distancing and the effects of consuming fast-paced, uncontrolled content.

The findings from Questions 5, 6, and 8 collectively illustrate the interplay between immediate gratification and subsequent emotional emptiness among young social media users. As reported in Question 5, 72% of respondents experience satisfaction following social media use, highlighting the prevalence of short-term hedonic effects. This gratification is further reinforced by the responses to Question 6, where 48% of participants always feel pleasure from receiving likes or comments, and 36% often experience such pleasure, indicating that social validation plays a central role in their emotional engagement online.

However, the data from Question 8 reveal that 58% of respondents also experience a sense of emotional emptiness after using social media. This suggests that the pleasure derived from these platforms is often transient and contingent upon external feedback, supporting the notion of temporary hedonic satisfaction. The contrast between immediate gratification and subsequent emotional emptiness underscores the dual nature of social media use: while it can serve as a significant source of pleasure and social affirmation, it may simultaneously foster emotional dependency and a sense of incompleteness, consistent with the literature on digital dopamine, emotional distancing, and the hedonic consequences of fast-paced, feedback-driven content consumption (Turkle, Papacharissi). Overall, these results indicate that social media operates as both a hedonic reward system and a potential source of emotional vulnerability for younger cohorts, emphasizing the importance of understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying digital engagement.



Figure 9. The Impact of Social Media on Their Self-Confidence

A total of 60% of respondents reported that social media has influenced their self-confidence, which may manifest as either an increase or decrease depending on the nature of online interactions. This finding aligns with the literature on digital psychology, highlighting the reliance on external validation and the continuous social comparison that users often experience.

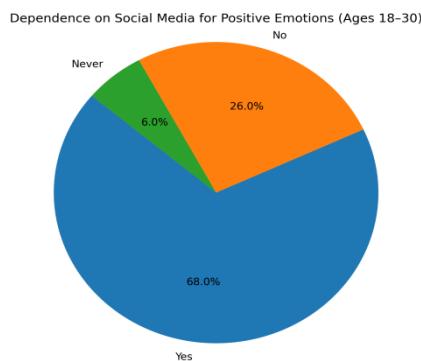


Figure 10. Dependence on Social Media to Feel Positive Emotions

A majority of 68% of respondents indicated "Yes," acknowledging that they experience an emotional dependency on social media. This finding suggests that positive feelings such as pleasure, joy, and motivation are closely tied to their online experiences. Meanwhile, 26% of participants responded "No," representing a smaller group who are able to separate their emotional well-being from digital interactions, which may reflect a degree of self-regulation or more moderate use of social media. Finally, 6% reported "Never," indicating that they do not associate positive emotions with social media at all. These individuals may derive positive experiences from alternative sources, such as personal relationships, offline activities, or other forms of engagement.

The findings from Questions 9 and 10 collectively highlight the significant impact of social media on young users' self-confidence and emotional dependency. As indicated in Question 9, 60% of respondents reported that social media has influenced their self-confidence, with effects varying depending on the nature of online interactions. This underscores the role of social comparison and reliance on external validation, which are widely documented in the digital psychology literature. Question 10 further reveals that 68% of participants feel dependent on social media to experience positive emotions, suggesting that hedonic experiences such as pleasure, joy, and motivation are closely linked to online engagement. In contrast, 26% reported no dependency, indicating the presence of a subgroup able to regulate their emotional well-being independently of digital interactions. A small minority (6%) reported never associating positive emotions with social media, implying that alternative sources of gratification, such as personal relationships or offline activities, play a more prominent role for these individuals.

Taken together, these results illustrate a dual dynamic: social media can enhance self-confidence and provide immediate emotional gratification, yet it can simultaneously foster emotional dependency and reinforce vulnerability to social comparison. This duality reflects the broader tension identified in the literature between instant hedonic rewards and potential negative psychological consequences, emphasizing the importance of understanding the mechanisms through which digital engagement shapes the emotional and psychological experiences of younger cohorts.

From the perspective of digital hedonism, social media constitutes a powerful source of positive emotions, creating psychological dependency for the majority of users. According to Media Dependency Theory, the more users rely on social media for gratification, the greater the importance of these platforms in their daily lives. This finding also explains why likes, comments, and other reactions function as "digital rewards" that reinforce frequent usage behaviors. These results are consistent with prior studies highlighting the emotional ambivalence experienced on digital platforms (Turkle, 2011; Przybylski et al., 2013). Social media thus operates as a strong source of hedonic pleasure, while simultaneously posing potential emotional and psychological risks, underscoring the need for deeper interventions in digital literacy and awareness of long-term effects.

While social media provides quick micro-pleasures, the lack of authenticity and the pressure for social performance may negatively affect psychological well-being (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). The findings of this study align closely with the existing literature. As noted by Papacharissi (2011) and Turkle (2011), social media use is closely linked to the need for self-presentation and immediate

validation. Our results confirm that users experience temporary satisfaction, often followed by a sense of emptiness, supporting theories regarding the ambivalent nature of digital gratification. Furthermore, the notion of the “networked self” and dependence on social approval, discussed by authors such as Boyd (2014) and Przybylski et al. (2013), is clearly reflected in our data on the impact of likes and interactions on self-confidence. This study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the ongoing tension between the pursuit of pleasure and the short-term emotional effects associated with social media use, particularly among young people. It highlights the necessity for a more critical and conscious approach to technology use in everyday life.

Discussion

The present study highlights the prominent role of social media in shaping the emotional experiences of young users aged 18–30. The demographic analysis (Questions 2–4) revealed a predominance of younger participants (18–25), with a nearly balanced gender distribution, suggesting that the findings largely reflect the behaviors and preferences of early adulthood cohorts. Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most frequently used platforms, indicating a preference for visually oriented and dynamic social media, while the majority of participants spent more than three hours daily online, reflecting high engagement and potential for dependency.

Consistent with the principles of digital hedonism, participants reported high levels of immediate gratification. For instance, 72% experienced satisfaction after using social media (Question 5), and nearly half always felt pleasure when receiving likes or comments (Question 6). At the same time, 58% reported feelings of emotional emptiness following social media use (Question 8), highlighting the ambivalent nature of digital gratification. Similarly, 60% acknowledged that social media influenced their self-confidence (Question 9), and 68% admitted feeling dependent on social media to experience positive emotions (Question 10). These results illustrate the dual impact of social media: while it serves as a powerful source of short-term pleasure and social validation, it also fosters emotional dependency and vulnerability to social comparison.

The findings align with Media Dependency Theory, which posits that the more users rely on media for gratification, the more central these platforms become in their daily lives. Likes, comments, and reactions act as “digital rewards,” reinforcing frequent engagement and immediate hedonic satisfaction. This pattern supports previous studies emphasizing the emotional ambivalence inherent in digital experiences (Turkle, 2011; Papacharissi, 2011; Przybylski et al., 2013), as well as the notion of the “networked self” and the psychological effects of social approval dependence (Boyd, 2014).

Overall, this study underscores a continuous tension between the pursuit of hedonic pleasure and the short-term emotional consequences of social media use. It highlights the necessity for critical digital literacy, awareness of potential psychological risks, and strategies to manage online engagement, particularly among younger users who are most susceptible to immediate gratification and social comparison pressures.

Conclusions

The data from this study demonstrate that social media use is closely linked to hedonic motivations, such as the pursuit of immediate gratification and the need for social validation. However, the dynamics of this experience are complex, as short-term benefits are often accompanied by long-term emotional consequences, including feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and decreased self-confidence. This duality indicates that social media can serve as a powerful source of well-being, but also presents significant risks when used without awareness or self-regulation. The results highlight the need for educational interventions and awareness-raising, particularly among young people, to promote balanced and healthy technology use. Media literacy programs should address the emotional and psychological dimensions of online interactions, helping individuals understand the impact of these platforms on their feelings and self-esteem.

Developing awareness programs in schools and universities on the psychological impact of social media. Promoting alternative sources of pleasure and well-being beyond the digital world, such as physical activity, art, and real-life social connections. Involving researchers and mental health professionals in the development of digital policies that consider the emotional dimension of users. Encouraging social media platforms to review the functioning of likes and algorithmic metrics to minimize the pressure for social performance. A holistic approach is necessary, combining education, awareness, and social policies to create a healthier digital environment, where hedonic pleasure does not come at the expense of long-term emotional well-being. Social media in the digital age has become

an arena where individuals seek pleasure, validation, and emotional fulfillment. This study shows that although many users report positive feelings after use, there exists a second dimension of emptiness and emotional dependency. The findings indicate that social media has become a powerful space for achieving hedonic gratification in the digital era. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the “Uses and Gratifications Model” and Self-Determination Theory, the analyses reveal that social media use often serves to satisfy psychological needs for approval, acceptance, and immediate positive emotional experiences.

However, the experienced satisfaction is primarily temporary and contingent on external feedback, such as likes or comments. This creates a hedonic cycle in which individuals seek rapid emotional stimulation, but in the absence of deep psychological fulfillment, may experience feelings of emptiness and reduced self-esteem. A key aspect emerging from this analysis is the tension between immediate pleasure and long-term well-being. This raises important questions about the nature of digital gratification: is it a genuine fulfillment of emotional needs, or a superficial substitute for intimacy and human connection? Digital hedonism is a complex phenomenon that requires increased attention from scholars in communication, psychology, sociology, and technology. Critical and conscious use of these platforms is key to maintaining sustainable emotional well-being. Ultimately, digital hedonism should not be viewed merely as a new form of pleasure-seeking nor inherently negative, but as a complex process involving psychological, social, and technological interactions. Increased digital literacy and awareness are essential to understand how to use social media in ways that promote sustainable well-being rather than fleeting gratification. Future studies could expand the sample, include diverse age groups, and analyze the cultural and gender influences on the experience of digital pleasure.

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