Original Investigation | Özgün Araştırma

Gazi Med J 2026;37(3):419-427

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12996/gmj.2026.4707

Risky Social Media Use, Fear of Missing Out, Psychological Distress, and Social Media Use Motivations: A Cross-Sectional Study

Riskli Sosyal Medya Kullanımı, Gelişmeleri Kaçırma Korkusu, Psikolojik Sıkıntı ve Sosyal Medya Kullanım Motivasyonları: Kesitsel Bir Çalışma

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Risky social media use is related to fear of missing out (FoMO) and psychological distress, but the role of specific use motivations remains less clear. This study compares FoMO, psychological distress, and motivations for social media use between individuals with risky social media use and those without.

Methods: This cross-sectional online study included 349 adult social media users. Participants completed the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), FoMO, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21, and Social Media Use Motivations Scale. Risky social media use was defined as a BSMAS score of ≥19. Group comparisons and correlation analyses were conducted.

Results: Participants with risky social media use had higher FoMO, depression, anxiety, and stress scores, and higher scores on most motivation measures. Information-seeking motivation did not differ between groups and was not correlated with BSMAS scores.

CONCLUSION: Risky social media use was more closely related to FoMO, psychological distress, and social-emotional motives than to information seeking.

Keywords: Risky social media use, FoMO, psychological distress, social media use motivations, depression, anxiety

ÖZ

Amaç: Riskli sosyal medya kullanımı, gelişmeleri kaçırma korkusu (FoMO) ve psikolojik sıkıntı ile ilişkilidir; ancak belirli kullanım motivasyonlarının rolü daha az açıktır. Bu çalışma, riskli sosyal medya kullanımı olan ve olmayan bireyler arasında FoMO, psikolojik sıkıntı ve sosyal medya kullanım motivasyonlarını karşılaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Yöntemler: Kesitsel desenli bu çevrim içi çalışmaya 349 yetişkin sosyal medya kullanıcısı dahil edilmiştir. Katılımcılar Bergen Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığı Ölçeği (BSMAS), FoMO Ölçeği, Depresyon Anksiyete Stres Ölçeği-21 ve Sosyal Medya Kullanım Motivasyonları Ölçeği'ni doldurmuştur. Riskli sosyal medya kullanımı, BSMAS puanının ≥19 olması olarak tanımlanmıştır. Grup karşılaştırmaları ve korelasyon analizleri yapılmıştır.

Bulgular: Riskli sosyal medya kullanımı olan katılımcıların FoMO, depresyon, anksiyete ve stres puanları ile çoğu motivasyon ölçümünden aldıkları puanlar daha yüksektir. Bilgi arama motivasyonu gruplar arasında farklılık göstermemiş ve BSMAS puanlarıyla ilişkili bulunmamıştır.

Sonuç: Riskli sosyal medya kullanımı, bilgi aramadan ziyade FoMO, psikolojik sıkıntı ve sosyal-duygusal motivasyonlarla daha yakından ilişkili bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Riskli sosyal medya kullanımı, FoMO, psikolojik sıkıntı, sosyal medya kullanım motivasyonları, depresyon, anksiyete

Cite this article as: Ünver H, Varlı MR, Duman A, Yığman F. Risky social media use, fear of missing out, psychological distress, and social media use motivations: a cross-sectional study. Gazi Med J. 2026;37(3):419-427

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Received/Geliş Tarihi: 08.05.2026
Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 01.06.2026
Publication Date/Yayınlanma Tarihi: 10.07.2026

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become an important part of everyday life, serving multiple functions such as facilitating communication and entertainment, enabling self-expression, supporting information-seeking, and maintaining social relationships. Although social media use may facilitate social connection and access to information, excessive or poorly regulated use may be related to difficulties controlling online behavior and negative consequences for daily functioning. Problematic or risky patterns of social media use are often conceptualized through behavioral addiction models. Within this approach, such use is characterized by core features such as excessive preoccupation with social media, using it to regulate mood, needing increasing engagement over time, discomfort when access is restricted, use-related conflicts, and repeated unsuccessful attempts to reduce use (1,2). In this regard, risky social media use does not necessarily indicate a formal psychiatric diagnosis, but rather refers to a pattern of use that may be related to psychological vulnerability and impaired self-regulation.

Previous studies have widely investigated fear of missing out (FoMO) as a psychological factor associated with problematic patterns of social media use. This term describes individuals' apprehension that others are participating in enjoyable or meaningful experiences without them, accompanied by a persistent need to stay informed about others' activities through ongoing social connection (3). Social media platforms may intensify this experience by providing continuous exposure to others' activities, relationships, achievements, and social events. Existing evidence indicates that higher FoMO is associated with greater social media engagement and a greater tendency toward problematic use (4). In addition, FoMO was linked to psychological distress and maladaptive online behaviors, suggesting that the desire to remain socially updated may contribute to repetitive checking and difficulty disengaging from social media platforms (5,6).

Risky social media use is related to several indicators of emotional strain, including depressive and anxiety symptoms as well as perceived stress. However, this relationship is unlikely to follow a simple one-way pattern. Instead, social media involvement and psychological distress may influence each other through multiple, partly overlapping mechanisms. Individuals experiencing distress may use social media for distraction, reassurance, social contact, or emotion regulation. Conversely, excessive use may increase exposure to social comparison, perceived exclusion, sensitivity to online feedback, and interpersonal stressors, all of which may contribute to negative emotional states. Therefore, examining depression, anxiety, and stress together may provide a broader understanding of the emotional correlates of risky social media use.

In addition to psychological distress, the motivations underlying social media use may help distinguish adaptive or instrumental use from riskier patterns. From a uses and gratifications perspective, individuals may use social media to satisfy various psychological and social needs, including social interaction, entertainment, self-presentation, information seeking, and relationship maintenance (7). These motives may not have the same relationship with risky use. For example, socially driven motives, such as maintaining connection, seeking social recognition, monitoring others, or expressing oneself, may be more closely related to FoMO and emotional distress than instrumental motives, such as obtaining information. The Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (SMU-SNS) was designed to measure different reasons for engaging with social networking platforms. It covers nine motivational domains: romantic or flirting-related use, forming new friendships, academic use, preserving social ties, observing others' activities, entertainment, gaining social approval, self-presentation, and obtaining information (8).

Previous studies largely focused on the links among problematic social media use, FoMO, and psychological distress. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how these factors operate alongside specific and multidimensional motives for social media use. This distinction is important because similar levels of social media engagement may reflect different underlying motives and may not carry the same psychological meaning. A more detailed motivational approach may therefore contribute to a better understanding of why some individuals show riskier social media use patterns.

This study aims to compare individuals with and without risky social media use with respect to FoMO, psychological distress, and motivations for social media use. This study hypothesized that individuals with risky social media use would report higher FoMO and psychological distress scores and stronger motivations for social media use than individuals without risky social media use. In addition, this study explored whether specific motivational dimensions, including social/interpersonal and information-seeking motivations, differed in their association with risky social media use.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Sample

The study data were collected via a web-based survey between February and March 2025. The sample consists of adult social media users who were reached via Instagram, X, and TikTok. The survey package included online informed consent, a sociodemographic questionnaire, and self-report measures evaluating risky social media use, FoMO, psychological distress, and motives for social media use. After eligibility screening and data cleaning, 349 participants remained in the analytic sample.

Inclusion criteria were: age 18–65 years, use of social media, ability to read and understand the survey content, and provision of voluntary consent to participate in this study. Exclusion criteria were: self-reported past psychiatric disorders, current psychotropic medication use, any medical or neurological condition that could impair capacity to provide informed consent or affect reality testing, and incomplete questionnaires. No structured psychiatric interview was conducted. Instead, psychiatric eligibility was assessed during the collection of sociodemographic data, and participants reporting a previous psychiatric disorder or current psychotropic medication use were excluded.

Ethical Approval and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Health Sciences Türkiye, Ankara Etlik City Hospital's Institutional Ethics Committee (approval number: AEŞH-BADEK-2025-0083; dated 29.01.2025), and the study procedures were conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were invited to take part in this study through online announcements posted on social media platforms. Before

completing the survey, all participants were informed about the study objectives and provided online informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants completed the questionnaires anonymously.

Measures

Sociodemographic Data Form

Participant characteristics were recorded using a form prepared by the research team. The form collected information on demographic variables, including gender, age, educational level, employment status, marital status, and perceived economic status, living arrangements, psychiatric and medical history, family history of psychiatric or medical conditions, medication use, daily screen exposure, duration of social media use, and the most commonly used platform.

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)

The BSMAS was used to assess risky social media use patterns. This instrument was originally introduced by Andreassen et al. (9) and later validated in Turkish by Demirci (10). The Turkish version includes six questions addressing key behavioral addiction features related to social media use, namely salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Each item is scored using a five-point Likert scale. The overall score ranges from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater severity of problematic social media use.

Participants were grouped based on their BSMAS total scores. A score of ≥19 was used to define the risky social media use group, while participants scoring below 19 were placed in the non-risky use group. The threshold of 19 was adopted from Bányai et al. (11), who identified this value through latent profile analysis as an appropriate cut-off for detecting individuals vulnerable to problematic social media use.

Fear of Missing Out Scale

FoMO was assessed using the Turkish version of the FoMO adapted to the social media context by Çelik and Özkara (12). This scale measures FoMO related to social media use and includes personal and social FoMO dimensions. In the present study, personal, social, and total FoMO scores were used in the analysis. Higher scores indicate a higher level of FoMO.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21)

Psychological distress was evaluated using the Turkish adaptation of the DASS-21, the validity of which was reported by Yılmaz et al. (13). This 21-item measure provides separate scores for depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms, with seven items allocated to each domain. Responses are given using a four-point Likert format. No items are reverse-scored, and higher scores indicate greater symptom severity.

Social Media Use Motivations Scale

Motivations for social media use were examined using the Turkish adaptation of the SMU-SNS. The original instrument, developed by Pertegal et al. (8), measures the reasons individuals engage with social networking platforms within the uses and gratifications approach. The original form consists of 27 items grouped into nine subdimensions: flirting, making new friends, academic purposes, maintaining social connectedness, following and monitoring others, entertainment, seeking social recognition, self-expression, and seeking information.

It was adapted to Turkish by Dölay (14). In the present study, the nine motivational dimensions were evaluated separately. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating stronger motivation in the corresponding dimension.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 22.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). For descriptive reporting, continuous variables were presented as means and standard deviations, while categorical variables were summarized using counts and percentages.

Participants were divided into two groups based on the BSMAS cut-off score: those below the risky-use threshold and those meeting the risky-use threshold. The distribution of continuous variables was assessed using histograms, Q-Q plots, and skewness and kurtosis values. An independent-samples t-test was used to compare continuous variables between groups, and chi-square tests were used for categorical comparisons. Fisher's exact test was employed when expected cell counts were low.

Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships among risky social media use severity, FoMO, depression, anxiety, stress, and social media use motivations. All analyses were two-tailed, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

The final analysis included 349 participants. Based on the predetermined BSMAS cut-off value, 223 participants were assigned to the non-risky social media use group, whereas 126 participants met the criterion for risky social media use.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

The mean age of participants without risky social media use was 34.78 ± 10.40 years, whereas that of those with risky social media use was 30.47 ± 9.77 years. Participants with risky social media use were significantly younger than those without [$t(347) = 3.802$, $p < 0.001$].

Gender distribution differed significantly between the groups [$\chi^2(1) = 6.245$, $p = 0.012$]. The proportion of women was higher in the risky social media use group than in the non-risky social media use group (66.7% vs. 52.9%, respectively).

Employment status also differed significantly between the groups [$\chi^2(3) = 11.441$, $p = 0.010$]. The risky social media use group had a lower proportion of employed participants and a higher proportion of students than the non-risky social media use group. Specifically, 66.7% of the risky use group were employed compared to 79.8% of the non-risky use group; 19.8% of the risky use group were students compared to 9.9% of the non-risky use group.

No significant group differences were found in marital status [$\chi^2(2) = 2.627$, $p = 0.269$], educational level [$\chi^2(3) = 2.142$, $p = 0.544$], perceived economic status [$\chi^2(2) = 4.985$, $p = 0.083$], living arrangement [$\chi^2(5) = 6.966$, $p = 0.223$], or most frequently used social media platform [$\chi^2(3) = 6.375$, $p = 0.095$] (Table 1).

Comparison of FoMO, Psychological Distress, and Social Media Use Motivations

As anticipated, participants in the risky social media use group had markedly higher BSMAS scores than those in the non-risky group [$t(347) = -25.679$, $p < 0.001$].

FoMO scores were significantly higher among participants with risky social media use. Personal FoMO scores [15.01 ± 7.04 vs. 9.00 ± 4.69, $t(309) = -9.011$, $p < 0.001$], social FoMO scores [7.84 ± 5.08 vs. 5.71 ± 3.12, $t(333) = -4.752$, $p < 0.001$], and total FoMO scores [22.31 ± 10.78 vs. 14.62 ± 6.77, $t(303) = -7.634$, $p < 0.001$] were higher in the risky use group than in the non-risky use group.

Psychological distress scores were significantly higher among participants in the risky social media use group. Specifically, depression scores were higher in this group compared to participants in the non-risky use group [6.95 ± 4.17 vs. 3.95 ± 3.74, $t(347) = -6.906$, $p < 0.001$].

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics by risky social media use.

Variable	No risky use, (n = 223)	Risky use, (n = 126)	χ^2/t	df	p-value
Age (years), mean (SD)	34.78 (10.40)	30.47 (9.77)	3.802	347	<0.001
Gender, n (%)			6.245	1	0.012
Female	118 (52.9)	84 (66.7)			
Male	105 (47.1)	42 (33.3)			
Marital status, n (%)			2.627	2	0.269
Single	112 (50.2)	72 (57.1)			
Married	102 (45.7)	52 (41.3)			
Other	9 (4.0)	2 (1.6)			
Education, n (%)			2.142	3	0.544
Primary education	2 (0.9)	1 (0.8)			
High school	15 (6.7)	8 (6.3)			
University	126 (56.5)	81 (64.3)			
Postgraduate	80 (35.9)	36 (28.6)			
Employment status, n (%)			11.441	3	0.010
Not working	15 (6.7)	15 (11.9)			
Working	178 (79.8)	84 (66.7)			
Student	22 (9.9)	25 (19.8)			
Retired	8 (3.6)	2 (1.6)			
Perceived economic status, n (%)			4.985	2	0.083
Income less than expenses	49 (22.0)	29 (23.0)			
Income equal to expenses	100 (44.8)	69 (54.8)			
Income greater than expenses	74 (33.2)	28 (22.2)			
Living arrangement, n (%)			6.966	5	0.223
Alone	46 (20.6)	23 (18.3)			
With family	4 (1.8)	4 (3.2)			
With spouse/children	109 (48.9)	51 (40.5)			
With parents	44 (19.7)	33 (26.2)			
With friends	17 (7.6)	15 (11.9)			
Other	3 (1.3)	0 (0.0)			
Primary social media platform, n (%)			6.375	3	0.095
Instagram	131 (58.7)	76 (60.3)			
Other	33 (14.8)	22 (17.5)			
Twitter	55 (24.7)	21 (16.7)			
TikTok	4 (1.8)	7 (5.6)			

Values are presented as mean (SD) or n (%). Percentages are column percentages. SD: Standard deviation, t: Independent samples t-test, χ^2: Chi-square test.

Anxiety scores [7.60 ± 3.75 vs. 4.63 ± 3.62, t(347) = -7.279, p < 0.001], stress scores [7.05 ± 4.02 vs. 4.13 ± 3.78, t(347) = -6.768, p < 0.001], and DASS-21 total scores [21.60 ± 11.29 vs. 12.71 ± 10.60, t(347) = -7.352, p < 0.001] were also significantly higher in the risky use group.

Regarding motivations for social media use, participants with risky social media use had significantly higher scores on most motivational dimensions. The risky use group reported higher scores for flirting motivation [5.37 ± 3.53 vs. 4.35 ± 3.31, t(347) = -2.695, p = 0.007], making new friendships [5.76 ± 3.73 vs. 4.77 ± 3.43, t(347) = -2.510, p = 0.013], academic purposes [7.51 ± 5.08 vs. 5.82 ± 4.18, t(347) = -3.355, p < 0.001], maintaining social connectedness [12.64 ± 4.74 vs. 9.83 ± 4.76, t(347) = -5.302, p < 0.001], following and monitoring others [10.56 ± 4.79 vs. 7.84 ± 4.30, t(347) = -5.454, p < 0.001], entertainment [15.48 ± 4.04 vs. 13.04 ± 5.05, t(347) = -4.642, p < 0.001], social recognition [6.10 ± 3.41 vs. 4.97 ± 3.17, t(347) = -3.125, p = 0.002], and self-expression [9.17 ± 5.09 vs. 7.50 ± 4.89, t(347) = -3.017, p = 0.003]. However, information-seeking motivation did not differ significantly between the groups [16.48 ± 4.20 vs. 16.15 ± 4.51, t(347) = -0.660, p = 0.510] (Table 2).

Statistical Analyses

Pearson correlation analyses revealed that BSMAS total scores were positively correlated with FoMO scores: moderately with personal FoMO (r = 0.571, p < 0.001) and total FoMO (r = 0.522, p < 0.001), and weakly to moderately with social FoMO (r = 0.295, p < 0.001).

BSMAS total scores were also positively correlated with psychological distress. Significant correlations were found between BSMAS total scores and depression (r = 0.406, p < 0.001), anxiety (r = 0.387, p < 0.001), stress (r = 0.383, p < 0.001), and DASS-21 total scores (r = 0.411, p < 0.001).

Considering social media use motivations, BSMAS total scores were significantly and positively correlated with flirting (r = 0.182, p < 0.001), making new friendships (r = 0.148, p = 0.005), academic purposes (r = 0.230, p < 0.001), maintaining social connectedness (r = 0.407, p < 0.001), following and monitoring others (r = 0.359, p < 0.001), entertainment (r = 0.358, p < 0.001), social recognition (r = 0.182, p < 0.001), and self-expression (r = 0.198, p < 0.001). Information-seeking motivation was not significantly correlated with BSMAS total scores (r = 0.077, p = 0.152) (Table 3).

Table 2. Comparison of psychological scale scores by risky social media use.

Variable	**No risky use, mean (SD)**	**Risky use, mean (SD)**	**t**	**df**	**p-value**
BSMAS					
Total	12.82 (3.49)	21.77 (2.35)	-25.679	347	**<0.001**
FoMO					
Personal FoMO	9.00 (4.69)	15.01 (7.04)	-9.011	309	**<0.001**
Social FoMO	5.71 (3.12)	7.84 (5.08)	-4.752	333	**<0.001**
Total	14.62 (6.77)	22.31 (10.78)	-7.634	303	**<0.001**
DASS					
Depression	3.95 (3.74)	6.95 (4.17)	-6.906	347	**<0.001**
Anxiety	4.63 (3.62)	7.60 (3.75)	-7.279	347	**<0.001**
Stress	4.13 (3.78)	7.05 (4.02)	-6.768	347	**<0.001**
Total	12.71 (10.60)	21.60 (11.29)	-7.352	347	**<0.001**
Motives for social media use					
Flirting	4.35 (3.31)	5.37 (3.53)	-2.695	347	**0.007**
Making new friends	4.77 (3.43)	5.76 (3.73)	-2.510	347	**0.013**
Academic purposes	5.82 (4.18)	7.51 (5.08)	-3.355	347	**<0.001**
Social connectedness	9.83 (4.76)	12.64 (4.74)	-5.302	347	**<0.001**
Following others	7.84 (4.30)	10.56 (4.79)	-5.454	347	**<0.001**
Entertainment	13.04 (5.05)	15.48 (4.04)	-4.642	347	**<0.001**
Social recognition	4.97 (3.17)	6.10 (3.41)	-3.125	347	**0.002**
Self-expression	7.50 (4.89)	9.17 (5.09)	-3.017	347	**0.003**
Information seeking	16.15 (4.51)	16.48 (4.20)	-0.660	347	0.510

Values are presented as mean (SD). Bold values indicate statistically significant group differences (p < 0.05). BSMAS: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, DASS: Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, FoMO: Fear of missing out, SD: Standard deviation, t: Independent samples t-test.

Table 3. Correlations among social media addiction, FoMO, psychological distress, and social media use motives.

		BSMAS total	Personal FoMO	Social FoMO	FoMO total	DASS depression	DASS anxiety	DASS stress	DASS total	Dating motive	New friendship motive	Academic motive
BSMAS total	r	—										
	p	—										
Personal FoMO	r	0.571	—									
	p	<0.001	—									
Social FoMO	r	0.295	0.667	—								
	p	<0.001	<0.001	—								
FoMO total	r	0.522	0.949	0.868	—							
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—							
DASS depression	r	0.406	0.340	0.300	0.341	—						
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—						
DASS anxiety	r	0.387	0.356	0.300	0.330	0.868	—					
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—					
DASS stress	r	0.383	0.340	0.304	0.327	0.880	0.860	—				
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—				
DASS total	r	0.411	0.362	0.316	0.349	0.960	0.950	0.957	—			
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—			
Dating motive	r	0.182	0.265	0.323	0.294	0.124	0.118	0.123	0.127	—		
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.021	0.028	0.021	0.017	—		
New friendship motive	r	0.148	0.197	0.297	0.244	0.137	0.134	0.115	0.135	0.624	—	
	p	0.005	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.010	0.012	0.031	0.012	<0.001	—	
Academic motive	r	0.230	0.304	0.342	0.361	0.255	0.188	0.236	0.238	0.205	0.251	—
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—
Social connection motive	r	0.407	0.511	0.411	0.509	0.261	0.243	0.253	0.264	0.309	0.292	0.333
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Following others motive	r	0.359	0.496	0.455	0.513	0.183	0.193	0.170	0.190	0.332	0.281	0.276
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Entertainment motive	r	0.358	0.269	0.166	0.235	0.355	0.362	0.365	0.377	0.159	0.127	0.121
	p	<0.001	<0.001	0.002	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.003	0.018	0.024
Social recognition motive	r	0.182	0.386	0.489	0.445	0.186	0.174	0.174	0.186	0.389	0.455	0.267
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.001	0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Self-expression motive	r	0.198	0.292	0.235	0.267	0.261	0.252	0.205	0.250	0.194	0.359	0.255
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Information seeking motive	r	0.077	0.127	0.031	0.096	0.193	0.205	0.199	0.208	0.003	0.062	0.190
	p	0.152	0.026	0.569	0.096	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.960	0.252	<0.001

Table 3. Continued.

	Social connection motive	Following others motive	Entertainment motive	Social recognition motive	Self-expression motive	Information seeking motive
BSMAS total						
Personal FoMO						
Social FoMO						
FoMO total						
DASS depression						
DASS anxiety						
DASS stress						
DASS total						
Dating motive						
New friendship motive						
Academic motive						
Social connection motive	—					
	—					
Following others motive	0.642	—				
	<0.001	—				
Entertainment motive	0.447	0.376	—			
	<0.001	<0.001	—			
Social recognition motive	0.429	0.470	0.182	—		
	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—		
Self-expression motive	0.446	0.289	0.248	0.484	—	
	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	—	
Information seeking motive	0.409	0.242	0.373	0.154	0.340	—
	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.004	<0.001	—

Bold values indicate statistically significant correlations (p <0.05). BSMAS: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, DASS: Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, FoMO: Fear of missing out, r = Pearson correlation coefficient.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined FoMO, psychological distress, and motivations for social media use among individuals with and without risky social media use. The principal findings revealed that participants in the risky social media use group reported greater FoMO, more pronounced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, and higher levels of motivation across most domains of social media use. Correlation analyses also indicated that higher BSMAS scores were related to FoMO, psychological distress, and several motivational dimensions. In contrast, information-seeking motivation neither differed significantly between the risky and non-risky groups nor showed a significant association with BSMAS scores. Taken together, these results suggest that risky social media use may be more closely associated with social, emotional, and interpersonal motives than with instrumental, information-oriented use.

In accordance with the study hypothesis, participants with risky social media use reported higher levels of FoMO than those without risky use. This result is consistent with earlier evidence linking FoMO to excessive and problematic engagement with social media platforms (3,4). Social media platforms provide continuous access to others' activities, social interactions, and rewarding experiences. For individuals with higher FoMO, this constant flow of social information may increase the need to remain connected, frequently check updates, and avoid missing social experiences (3). Therefore, FoMO may serve as an important psychological mechanism that maintains repetitive and poorly controlled social media use. The moderate positive correlation between BSMAS total scores and total FoMO scores in the present study further supports the role of FoMO as a central correlate of risky social media use.

These findings further indicated that risky social media use was related to higher levels of psychological distress. Individuals in the risky use group were found to have higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and higher overall DASS-21 scores. This pattern aligns with previous studies showing links between problematic social media use, FoMO, anxiety symptoms, depressive symptomatology, and reduced psychological well-being (5,6). Several mechanisms may explain this relationship. Individuals experiencing emotional distress may use social media for distraction, reassurance, social contact, or temporary emotion regulation. At the same time, excessive social media use may increase exposure to social comparison, perceived exclusion, interpersonal stressors, and sensitivity to online feedback (5,6). The direction of this relationship cannot be determined due to the cross-sectional design of the present study. Nevertheless, the results indicate that risky social media use is significantly related to a broader psychological distress profile, including depressive, anxious, and stress-related symptoms.

A notable contribution of the present study is the evaluation of the multidimensional motivations for social media use. Participants with risky social media use scored higher on most motivational dimensions, including flirting, making new friends, academic purposes, maintaining social connectedness, following and monitoring others, entertainment, social recognition, and self-expression. These findings are consistent with the uses and gratifications perspective, which suggests that individuals use social media to meet different psychological and social needs, including social interaction, entertainment, self-presentation, and information seeking (7). They are also consistent with the multidimensional structure proposed in the SMU-SNS, which addresses different motives for social media use rather than treating social media engagement as a single homogeneous behavior (8). However, these findings also indicate that not all motives are equally related to risky use. Motivations involving social connection, monitoring others, entertainment, recognition, and self-expression seem more relevant to risky use than to information seeking.

The lack of significant group differences in information-seeking motivation is particularly important. Even though individuals may use social media to obtain information, this motive did not distinguish participants with risky use from those without. Similarly, information-seeking motivation was not significantly correlated with BSMAS total scores. This suggests that risky social media use may not simply reflect frequent or active engagement with social media platforms. Rather, it may be more strongly related to social and emotional motives, such as the need to stay socially connected, observe others, gain recognition, express oneself, or regulate mood through entertainment. This distinction may help clarify why some forms of social media use are relatively functional, whereas others may become more difficult to control. From this perspective, the findings of this study support the idea that problematic social media use should be understood not only in terms of frequency or duration of use, but also in terms of the psychological motives underlying use (7,8).

The sociodemographic findings should also be taken into consideration. Participants with risky social media use were significantly younger than those without risky use. This finding is consistent with the idea that younger adults may be more exposed to social media platforms and may integrate them more strongly into daily social interactions. Gender distribution also differed between groups, with a higher proportion of women in the risky use group. Employment status also differed: those with a higher proportion of students and a lower proportion of employed individuals. These variables may reflect differences in social media exposure, daily routines, peer interaction patterns, and availability of unstructured online time. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as this study was not designed to examine demographic predictors of risky social media use.

Study Limitations

This study also has several limitations. Its cross-sectional nature precludes any inference about causality or temporal ordering among FoMO, psychological distress, and risky social media use. Therefore, it remains unclear whether FoMO and distress increase susceptibility to risky use, whether risky use contributes to emotional difficulties, or whether these factors operate in a reciprocal manner. In addition, the data were collected entirely via self-report instruments, which are subject to memory-related inaccuracies, response tendencies, and individual differences in symptom appraisal. Another limitation is the absence of a structured psychiatric interview. Even though participants who reported a previous psychiatric disorder or current use of psychotropic medication were excluded, psychiatric

eligibility was determined solely by self-report. Moreover, because recruitment was conducted online via social media platforms, the findings may not be fully representative of the general population. Finally, the risky use grouping was established based on a previously proposed cut-off score (11); therefore, it should be regarded as a risk classification rather than a formal clinical diagnosis of addiction.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. It evaluated risky social media use alongside FoMO, psychological distress, and a detailed set of motivations for social media use. This multidimensional approach provides a more nuanced understanding of risky social media use. The findings of this study suggest that risky use is not only related to general motivation to use social media, but is also particularly associated with social and emotional motivations. This may have practical implications for prevention and intervention. Interventions targeting risky social media use may benefit from addressing FoMO, emotional distress, and social needs that drive repetitive online engagement, rather than focusing solely on reducing screen time.

CONCLUSION

Risky social media use was associated with higher FoMO, higher levels of psychological distress, and stronger motivations for social media use. Participants with risky use reported higher scores for depression, anxiety, and stress and for several motivational dimensions, particularly those related to social connection, following others, entertainment, recognition, and self-expression. In contrast, information-seeking motivation did not differ significantly between the two groups and was not related to the severity of social media addiction symptoms. Overall, these results indicate that risky social media use is more strongly linked to social and affective motives than to instrumental information-oriented use. Further longitudinal studies are needed to determine the temporal direction of these relationships and to test whether FoMO and particular social media use motives contribute to the emergence or persistence of risky use patterns.

Ethics

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Health Sciences Türkiye, Ankara Etlik City Hospital's Institutional Ethics Committee (approval number: AEŞH-BADEK-2025-0083; dated 29.01.2025), and the study procedures were conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent: Before completing the survey, all participants were informed about the study objectives and provided online informed consent.

Footnotes

Authorship Contributions

Concept: H.Ü., A.D., F.Y., Design: H.Ü., F.Y., Data Collection or Processing: H.Ü., M.R.V., A.D., Analysis or Interpretation: H.Ü., F.Y., Literature Search: H.Ü., M.R.V., A.D., F.Y., Writing: H.Ü., M.R.V., A.D., F.Y.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

Financial Disclosure: This research received no specific grant and financial support from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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