

# Investigating the Role of Social Media Addiction in the Collapse of Collective Identity and the Increase of Performative Individualism among Students

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## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the role of social media addiction in predicting the collapse of collective identity and the increase of performative individualism among students of metropolitan universities in Iran. This study was conducted using a quantitative descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population included students studying at metropolitan universities in Iran during the 2025–2026 academic year. A total of 450 students were selected through multistage cluster sampling. Data were collected using the Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS), Collective Identity Scale, and Individualism–Collectivism Scale. After obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality of participants' information, questionnaires were completed by the students. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to examine research variables, while Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were applied to investigate relationships among variables and determine the predictive role of social media addiction. The results showed that social media addiction had a significant negative relationship with collective identity ( $r = -0.61, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher levels of social media dependence were associated with weaker collective belonging and social identification. Furthermore, social media addiction had a significant positive relationship with performative individualism ( $r = 0.68, p < 0.01$ ). Regression analysis demonstrated that social media addiction significantly predicted changes in collective identity ( $\beta = -0.61, p < 0.001$ ) and explained 37% of its variance ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ). Moreover, social media addiction was a significant positive predictor of performative individualism ( $\beta = 0.68, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that excessive engagement with social networking platforms increased tendencies toward self-presentation and individualistic identity construction. The findings indicated that social media addiction plays an important role in transforming students' identity patterns by reducing collective identity and strengthening performative individualism. Excessive dependence on social networking platforms may shift identity formation from community-based belonging toward digitally mediated self-expression and external validation. Therefore, promoting digital literacy and balanced social media use among university students is essential.

**Keywords:** Social Media Addiction; Collective Identity; Performative Individualism; Digital Identity; University Students; Social Networks

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## Introduction

The rapid expansion of social networking platforms has fundamentally transformed patterns of communication, identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and social participation in contemporary

societies. Social media has moved beyond its initial function as a technological communication tool and has become a complex socio-cultural environment in which individuals construct, negotiate, and display various dimensions of their personal and social identities. Particularly among university students, who are positioned at a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and social belonging, digital platforms have become influential spaces for interaction, self-expression, and social comparison. Although social media provides opportunities for communication, information exchange, community formation, and access to diverse social networks, excessive and uncontrolled engagement with these platforms has introduced new psychological and sociological challenges. Social media addiction, defined as a pattern of compulsive and excessive use accompanied by loss of control and negative consequences, has therefore become a growing concern in the analysis of young people's identity structures and social behaviors (1, 2).

Social media addiction is not limited to increased screen time but includes psychological dependence, emotional attachment to online interactions, compulsive checking behaviors, and the prioritization of virtual engagement over offline social relationships. Studies have shown that addictive patterns of social media use are associated with several psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal consequences among young populations. Excessive reliance on digital platforms can affect emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, academic functioning, and overall well-being. Research among university students has indicated that social media dependence can influence perceived academic performance through mechanisms related to psychological well-being and social anxiety, suggesting that digital dependence affects both individual functioning and broader social participation (3). Similarly, studies on social media addiction among students have highlighted its association with psychological vulnerabilities, problematic behavioral patterns, and disruptions in everyday functioning (4, 5).

One of the most important consequences of excessive social media engagement concerns identity construction. Identity has traditionally developed through interactions with social groups, cultural institutions, shared values, and collective experiences; however, digital environments have introduced new forms of identity performance. In online spaces, individuals frequently reconstruct themselves through selective self-presentation, visual representation, and continuous management of social impressions. While such opportunities may support identity exploration, they may also create fragmented and unstable identity structures when individuals increasingly depend on external validation and digital recognition. Research has demonstrated that online environments significantly influence self-identification processes by encouraging individuals to reconstruct personal identities according to the expectations and feedback mechanisms of social platforms (6). Similarly, studies on online authenticity emphasize the paradox that although users attempt to present authentic identities, the structural characteristics of social media often encourage strategic identity management and selective self-representation (7).

Among young users, particularly university students, social media platforms have become important arenas for constructing both personal and collective identities. Collective identity refers to the individual's sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and perceived connection with social groups and communities. Traditionally, collective identity is developed through shared cultural experiences, social participation, and common values; however, digital individualization may weaken these collective connections by shifting attention from group-oriented belonging toward personalized visibility and individual recognition. Previous studies have suggested that online socialization plays a meaningful role in shaping online social identity and

transforming how individuals perceive their membership within social groups (8). Moreover, investigations among younger populations indicate that frequent social media use can influence identity status by changing patterns of self-perception, belonging, and social comparison (9).

The transformation of identity in digital environments is closely associated with the emergence of performative individualism. Performative individualism refers to a form of self-oriented behavior in which individuals continuously present, promote, and reconstruct their identities for social recognition and external approval. Unlike traditional individualism, which emphasizes autonomy and independence, performative individualism is strongly connected to visibility, audience evaluation, and digital feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and followers. Social media platforms provide technological structures that encourage individuals to create idealized versions of themselves, resulting in increased emphasis on personal branding and self-display. Research on self-presentation among students has shown that social media interaction significantly shapes the ways individuals manage their public image and construct socially desirable identities (10). Furthermore, studies indicate that online self-presentation pressure is closely related to addictive social media behaviors, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between the need for digital approval and excessive platform engagement (11).

The mechanisms of social media addiction are reinforced by multiple psychological and social factors. Fear of missing out, constant comparison with others, and the desire for immediate feedback encourage repeated engagement with social networking platforms. Such mechanisms can gradually replace deeper social relationships with superficial forms of interaction based on visibility and validation. The phenomenon of phubbing, or ignoring immediate social environments due to digital engagement, illustrates how social media addiction can disrupt interpersonal connections and alter social behaviors (12). Additionally, research examining social media addiction and personality dimensions has indicated that individual psychological characteristics influence vulnerability to addictive digital behaviors, suggesting that excessive use results from complex interactions between personality, social motivations, and platform characteristics (13).

In addition to psychological consequences, social media addiction affects broader cultural and social relationships. Social networking platforms provide users with opportunities to belong to digital communities, but these forms of belonging may differ from traditional collective bonds. Online communities are often flexible, temporary, and based on individual interests rather than stable collective identities. The expansion of mediated social connections among young people demonstrates how social platforms influence the relationship between leisure, social interaction, and identity formation (14). Moreover, social media has been shown to create new pathways for developing values, beliefs, and group affiliations, as digital platforms increasingly participate in shaping moral, cultural, and social identities among students (15).

The relationship between social media and identity formation has become particularly important in university contexts because students represent one of the most active groups in digital environments. University years are associated with the development of personal values, social roles, and collective belonging; therefore, excessive dependence on online platforms may have long-term consequences for identity development. Studies on Generation Z university students have shown that social media has become deeply embedded in their everyday social practices, influencing communication habits, relationships, and self-expression patterns (16). Furthermore, research among students has emphasized that social media use is strongly associated with digital behaviors, academic experiences, and changing social interactions (17, 18).

Another important factor in understanding the effects of social media addiction is the relationship between online engagement and self-concept. A stable self-concept allows individuals to maintain consistency in identity and social roles, whereas excessive digital dependence may increase identity uncertainty by exposing individuals to continuous comparison and external evaluation. Studies have demonstrated associations between self-concept clarity and problematic internet behaviors among university students, suggesting that unclear identity structures may contribute to maladaptive online engagement (19). Similarly, identity management on social networking platforms has been identified as an important mediator linking personality traits and addictive patterns of social media use, indicating that the way individuals construct and regulate online identities contributes to digital dependence (20).

Although social media addiction has frequently been examined from psychological and behavioral perspectives, its implications for collective identity and social structures require deeper investigation. Existing research has explored social media effects on happiness, lifestyle, creativity, psychological adjustment, and interpersonal behaviors, demonstrating that digital dependence produces multidimensional outcomes across different domains of life (21-23). Moreover, recent studies have emphasized that social media addiction is associated with emotional experiences, social pain, online behaviors, and even negative forms of digital interaction such as trolling (24). These findings indicate that social media addiction should not only be considered an individual behavioral problem but also a social phenomenon capable of reshaping identity relations.

The expansion of social media also creates new opportunities and risks within the Iranian socio-cultural context. Research on Iranian adolescents has shown that social media use provides opportunities for communication, learning, and self-expression, while simultaneously creating threats related to excessive dependence, social comparison, and identity challenges (25). The dual nature of digital platforms highlights the necessity of examining how social media influences young people's balance between individual expression and collective belonging. In metropolitan environments, where exposure to globalized digital cultures is more intense, university students may experience stronger tensions between traditional collective identities and emerging individualized digital lifestyles.

Recent research has also demonstrated that digital addiction is shaped by broader psychological and social processes, including social suspicion, emotional experiences, and online community engagement. Social suspicion has been identified as a contributing factor in social media addiction among college students, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal and cognitive mechanisms in problematic digital behaviors (26). Furthermore, research on online engagement and digital communities has shown that technological interaction systems can have unintended consequences by reinforcing excessive involvement and dependency patterns (27). The development of digital dependence is also connected to broader mechanisms of attachment and repeated engagement, as demonstrated in studies examining addiction formation processes under social network influence (28).

While digital platforms can create supportive spaces and facilitate social connections, their effects depend on how individuals use them. Online environments may provide meaningful support networks for individuals and communities, especially when used for communication, empowerment, and social participation (29). However, uncontrolled dependence may increase exposure to risks, including privacy concerns, psychological pressure, and problematic online experiences. Studies have demonstrated that

attitudes toward platforms such as Instagram are influenced by self-esteem and privacy concerns, indicating that identity-related factors are deeply connected with digital behaviors (30). Other research has highlighted risks associated with online victimization and harmful digital interactions, emphasizing that social media environments can influence individuals' psychological security and social experiences (31). In addition, consumer and youth engagement studies have shown that social media participation is increasingly integrated into identity expression and social behaviors from early stages of development (32).

Therefore, considering the growing influence of social networking platforms on students' identity formation, social belonging, and self-presentation behaviors, the present study aimed to investigate the role of social media addiction in the collapse of collective identity and the increase of performative individualism among students of metropolitan universities in Iran.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

The present study was conducted using a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design with a predictive approach. The statistical population included all undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at major universities located in Iranian metropolitan cities, including Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz, during the 2025–2026 academic year. Considering the large size of the population and the requirements of correlational studies, 450 students were selected as the final sample using multistage cluster sampling. First, several metropolitan universities were selected from different geographical regions of Iran; then, faculties and academic departments were randomly chosen, and eligible students were invited to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria consisted of being enrolled as a university student, being between 18 and 35 years old, active use of at least one social networking platform for a minimum of one year, and willingness to participate in the research. The exclusion criteria included incomplete questionnaires and unwillingness to continue participation. Before data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study, confidentiality of their information, and voluntary nature of participation, and informed consent was obtained.

### *Data Collection*

**Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS):** Social media addiction was measured using the Social Media Addiction Scale developed by Tutgun-Ünal and Deniz (2015). This instrument consists of 41 items designed to evaluate problematic and excessive engagement with social networking platforms. The questionnaire includes four main dimensions: occupation, mood modification, relapse, and conflict. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social media addiction. Previous studies have confirmed the construct validity and reliability of this scale, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients have demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for the total scale and its dimensions.

**Collective Identity Scale:** Collective identity was assessed using the Collective Identity Scale developed by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992). This instrument evaluates individuals' perceived connection, belonging, and emotional attachment to social groups and collective communities. The scale consists of 16 items and measures four components: membership esteem, private collective self-esteem, public collective self-esteem,

and importance to identity. Responses are recorded using a Likert-type scoring system, where higher scores represent stronger collective identity and greater psychological attachment to social groups. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire have been supported in previous research across different cultural and social contexts.

**Individualism–Collectivism Scale:** The tendency toward individualism, particularly performative individualism in digital environments, was assessed using the Individualism–Collectivism Scale developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). The scale consists of 16 items and evaluates patterns of self-orientation and social orientation through four dimensions: horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism, and vertical collectivism. In the present study, greater emphasis was placed on individualistic orientations related to self-presentation, personal distinction, and social comparison behaviors. Items are scored using a Likert scale, and higher scores in individualism dimensions indicate stronger individualistic tendencies. Previous studies have reported appropriate psychometric properties, including acceptable construct validity and internal consistency reliability.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. First, descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to describe demographic characteristics and research variables. Before conducting inferential analyses, statistical assumptions were examined. The normality of data distribution was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis indices and the Shapiro–Wilk test, the independence of errors was assessed using the Durbin–Watson statistic, and multicollinearity among predictor variables was examined using tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) indices. Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationships between social media addiction, collective identity, and performative individualism. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive role of social media addiction in explaining changes in collective identity and individualistic tendencies among students. The significance level for all statistical analyses was considered 0.05.

### Findings and Results

A total of 450 university students from metropolitan universities in Iran participated in the present study. Regarding gender distribution, 238 participants (52.89%) were female and 212 participants (47.11%) were male. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of 23.84 years (SD = 4.17). Regarding educational level, 281 students (62.44%) were undergraduate students, 132 students (29.33%) were master’s students, and 37 students (8.23%) were doctoral students. In terms of academic fields, 176 participants (39.11%) studied humanities and social sciences, 149 participants (33.11%) were from engineering and technical fields, and 125 participants (27.78%) were studying medical and basic sciences. Moreover, the average daily use of social networking platforms among participants was 4.62 hours (SD = 1.91), indicating a relatively high level of exposure to digital social environments among the studied population.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
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Social Media Addiction	128.46	22.73	62	189	0.41	-0.36
Occupation	39.27	7.84	18	55	0.33	-0.28
Mood Modification	31.64	6.52	14	45	0.46	-0.31
Relapse	27.85	5.91	12	40	0.38	-0.24
Conflict	29.70	6.16	13	49	0.43	-0.39
Collective Identity	51.32	9.46	22	78	-0.52	-0.18
Performative Individualism	57.91	10.38	25	80	0.49	-0.42

The descriptive findings presented in Table 1 demonstrate the distribution of the main research variables. The mean score of social media addiction ( $M = 128.46$ ,  $SD = 22.73$ ) indicated that participants experienced moderate to high levels of problematic engagement with social networking platforms. Among the components of social media addiction, occupation had the highest mean score ( $M = 39.27$ ,  $SD = 7.84$ ), suggesting that cognitive preoccupation and excessive attention toward online social interactions were among the most prominent aspects of social media dependency among students. The mean score of collective identity ( $M = 51.32$ ,  $SD = 9.46$ ) reflected a moderate level of perceived belonging and attachment to collective groups, while the mean score of performative individualism ( $M = 57.91$ ,  $SD = 10.38$ ) indicated a considerable tendency toward self-presentation and individualistic orientation in digital contexts. Furthermore, skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within the acceptable range of  $\pm 2$ , confirming the normal distribution of the data and supporting the application of parametric statistical analyses.

**Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix between Social Media Addiction, Collective Identity, and Performative Individualism**

Variable	1	2	3
1. Social Media Addiction	1		
2. Collective Identity	-0.61**	1	
3. Performative Individualism	0.68**	-0.57**	1

Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The results of Pearson correlation analysis presented in Table 2 indicated significant relationships among the research variables. Social media addiction had a significant negative relationship with collective identity ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that higher levels of dependence on social networking platforms were associated with lower levels of social belonging, group attachment, and collective identification among university students. In contrast, social media addiction showed a significant positive relationship with performative individualism ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), demonstrating that students with greater levels of problematic social media use reported stronger tendencies toward self-presentation, individual distinction, and identity construction based on digital recognition. Additionally, collective identity was negatively correlated with performative individualism ( $r = -0.57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that weakening collective orientations was associated with greater emphasis on individualistic and self-promotional behaviors.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis for Predicting Collective Identity Based on Social Media Addiction**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Regression	14932.84	1	14932.84	0.61	0.37	0.37	263.48	<0.001
Residual	25388.62	448	56.67					
Total	40321.46	449						

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 examined the predictive role of social media addiction in explaining changes in students’ collective identity. The results showed that the regression model was statistically significant ( $F(1,448) = 263.48, p < 0.001$ ). The obtained coefficient of determination demonstrated that social media addiction explained approximately 37% of the variance in collective identity ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ). This finding indicates that excessive and problematic use of social networking platforms is an important predictor of decreased collective identity among students. In other words, increased dependence on digital networks, constant engagement with individualized online environments, and prioritization of virtual interactions may contribute to reduced attachment to collective values, shared social meanings, and group-based identity structures.

**Table 4. Regression Coefficients for Predicting Collective Identity and Performative Individualism Based on Social Media Addiction**

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p
Collective Identity	Constant	83.91	2.04	-	41.13	<0.001
Collective Identity	Social Media Addiction	-0.25	0.02	-0.61	-16.23	<0.001
Performative Individualism	Constant	18.06	2.31	-	7.82	<0.001
Performative Individualism	Social Media Addiction	0.31	0.02	0.68	19.62	<0.001

The regression coefficients presented in Table 4 provide a more detailed explanation of the predictive effects of social media addiction on identity-related outcomes. The standardized beta coefficient showed that social media addiction was a significant negative predictor of collective identity ( $\beta = -0.61, t = -16.23, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that an increase in addictive patterns of social media use was associated with a significant decline in students’ collective identification and social connectedness. Furthermore, social media addiction significantly and positively predicted performative individualism ( $\beta = 0.68, t = 19.62, p < 0.001$ ), demonstrating that higher dependence on social networking platforms increased students’ tendency toward identity performance, self-focused presentation, and the construction of individualized digital identities. Overall, these findings confirm that social media addiction plays a dual role by simultaneously weakening collective identity structures and strengthening performative forms of individualism among students of metropolitan universities in Iran.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study aimed to investigate the role of social media addiction in the collapse of collective identity and the increase of performative individualism among students of metropolitan universities in Iran. The findings demonstrated that social media addiction had a significant negative relationship with collective identity, indicating that students with higher levels of dependency on social networking platforms reported lower levels of social belonging, collective attachment, and identification with shared social groups. Furthermore, regression analysis confirmed that social media addiction significantly predicted the

weakening of collective identity among students. This finding suggests that excessive involvement in digital environments may gradually shift students' attention from stable social memberships and community-based values toward individualized and personalized forms of identity construction.

The negative effect of social media addiction on collective identity can be explained through the transformation of social relationships in digital environments. Traditional collective identity is developed through stable interactions, shared experiences, cultural participation, and long-term relationships with social groups. However, excessive social media engagement changes the nature of these interactions by replacing deeper forms of belonging with temporary, fragmented, and algorithm-driven digital connections. This interpretation is consistent with previous research indicating that online social environments significantly influence social identity formation and reshape individuals' understanding of their relationship with communities and social groups (8). Similarly, studies examining identity development among young users have emphasized that intensive social media use can influence identity status by altering patterns of self-definition, belonging, and social interaction (9).

The findings are also supported by studies suggesting that digital platforms create new spaces for identity exploration while simultaneously challenging traditional forms of social connection. Although social media allows individuals to participate in online communities and interact with diverse groups, excessive dependence on these platforms may create unstable identity patterns because individuals increasingly adjust their behaviors and beliefs according to digital feedback. Research on Generation Z university students has shown that social media is deeply integrated into students' daily experiences and influences their communication patterns, social relationships, and identity expression processes (16). Similarly, studies on contemporary youth have demonstrated that social media-mediated relationships create new forms of connection and identity construction that may differ from conventional collective relationships (14).

Another major finding of this study revealed that social media addiction was positively and significantly associated with performative individualism. The results indicated that students who showed stronger addictive patterns of social media use were more likely to emphasize self-presentation, personal visibility, and identity performance in online environments. This finding demonstrates that social media addiction may strengthen an externally oriented form of individualism in which identity is continuously reconstructed according to audience reactions, social approval, and digital recognition. This result is consistent with studies showing that social networking platforms encourage individuals to actively manage their public image and develop self-presentation strategies to gain attention and social validation (10).

The relationship between social media addiction and performative individualism can be explained by the structural characteristics of digital platforms. Social networking sites provide users with continuous opportunities to edit, display, and evaluate their identities through posts, images, videos, and interactions. Over time, individuals may increasingly perceive themselves through measurable indicators of digital approval, such as followers, likes, and comments. This process may encourage users to prioritize a socially attractive representation of themselves rather than authentic self-expression. This explanation is aligned with research on the online authenticity paradox, which suggests that although individuals seek authenticity on social media, the expectations and mechanisms of digital platforms often push them toward strategic self-representation and identity management (7). Furthermore, previous findings have demonstrated that online

self-presentation pressure is closely associated with addictive social media behaviors, showing that the need to maintain an ideal digital identity can reinforce continuous platform engagement (11).

The results of the present study also showed that the decline in collective identity was accompanied by an increase in performative individualism. This finding indicates that social media addiction may simultaneously weaken group-based belonging and strengthen self-focused identity behaviors. In other words, when students become more dependent on digital spaces for social interaction and recognition, their sense of connection with collective values may decrease, while their motivation for individual visibility increases. Previous studies support this interpretation by emphasizing that social media environments influence self-identification processes and encourage users to construct identities through online interactions and social comparison (6). In addition, research has indicated that online identity management plays an important role in the relationship between personality characteristics and social media addiction, demonstrating that the way users construct their digital identities can contribute to problematic patterns of use (20).

The findings further highlight that social media addiction should be considered not only as an individual behavioral issue but also as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon affecting students' relationships with themselves and society. Addictive social media use may create a cycle in which students increasingly seek emotional satisfaction, recognition, and belonging from online environments while reducing participation in offline collective experiences. Previous research has identified psychological and interpersonal consequences of social media addiction, including emotional difficulties, reduced well-being, and changes in social functioning (1, 2). Moreover, research among university populations has demonstrated that social media dependence can affect students' psychological well-being, academic functioning, and social experiences (3, 4).

The mechanisms underlying these relationships may involve social comparison, fear of missing out, and the continuous need for online interaction. Social media platforms create environments where individuals are constantly exposed to the achievements, appearances, and lifestyles of others, which can increase pressure to construct competitive and idealized versions of the self. Previous research on problematic social media behaviors has shown that fear of missing out and personality-related factors contribute to social media addiction and related interpersonal problems such as phubbing behaviors (12). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that personality characteristics and psychological tendencies influence vulnerability to addictive social media use, suggesting that digital dependence emerges from interactions between personal characteristics and online social environments (13).

The findings of this study are also consistent with research emphasizing the role of psychological processes in social media addiction. The weakening of collective identity and increase of performative individualism may occur because addictive engagement with digital platforms changes how individuals evaluate themselves and their social positions. Previous studies have shown that lower self-concept clarity is associated with problematic internet use among university students, indicating that uncertainty about identity may increase dependence on online spaces for self-definition and validation (19). Furthermore, recent evidence has demonstrated that psychological mechanisms such as social suspicion and emotional experiences contribute to addictive social media behaviors among college students, supporting the importance of psychological factors in understanding students' digital identity patterns (24, 26).

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest that digital environments have both constructive and destructive effects on students' identities. Social media can facilitate communication, social support, and access to communities, but excessive dependence may reduce meaningful social participation and increase identity performance. Previous research has shown that online platforms can provide social support and opportunities for interaction among different populations (29). However, other studies have emphasized that maladaptive use of social networking sites can produce negative psychological and behavioral consequences when online interaction becomes excessive or uncontrolled (33). Research on social media engagement also suggests that digital systems may create unintended consequences by reinforcing continuous involvement and dependency patterns (27).

The findings of the current study are particularly meaningful within the context of Iranian metropolitan university students, where young people experience interaction between local cultural values and globalized digital influences. Social media creates opportunities for creativity, communication, and identity exploration, but it may also challenge traditional forms of collective belonging. Previous research in Iran has similarly shown that social media provides both opportunities and threats for young users, including benefits related to communication as well as risks associated with excessive use and identity-related challenges (25). Additionally, studies examining digital lifestyles and addiction have demonstrated that problematic technology use can influence young people's behaviors, daily routines, and psychosocial development (22).

The current findings can also be interpreted in relation to the broader transformation of identity and social interaction in digital societies. Social media dependence may reinforce repeated engagement patterns by providing continuous rewards and social feedback, which can gradually influence personal values and behavioral tendencies. Research on addiction formation mechanisms in social networks has highlighted the role of social influence and repeated engagement in developing dependency behaviors (28). Moreover, studies on mobile dependence and creative identity suggest that digital technologies interact with self-esteem and identity-related processes, further confirming the relationship between technology use and self-construction mechanisms (23). The influence of digital environments on young users is also reflected in studies showing that social media affects happiness, attitudes, and everyday experiences among students (21).

Finally, the results emphasize that social media addiction is associated with significant changes in how students construct, express, and experience identity. While social media can support communication and participation, uncontrolled engagement may contribute to the replacement of collective belonging with performative forms of self-expression. This conclusion is supported by studies demonstrating that social media influences self-esteem, privacy concerns, online behaviors, and psychological experiences (30). Moreover, exposure to digital risks and negative online experiences further demonstrates the complex role of social platforms in shaping modern identity and social relationships (31). Studies on young consumers and digital participation also confirm that online engagement has become deeply connected with self-expression and social behavior patterns among younger generations (32). Overall, the findings suggest that managing social media dependence is essential for maintaining a balance between individual expression and collective identity development.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design of the research limits the possibility of determining causal relationships among

social media addiction, collective identity, and performative individualism. Second, data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by response bias, social desirability, or participants' subjective interpretations of their online behaviors. Third, although the sample included students from metropolitan universities in Iran, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students from smaller cities, different educational environments, or other cultural contexts. Additionally, differences related to specific social media platforms and types of online activities were not separately examined.

Future studies are suggested to use longitudinal and experimental designs to investigate the causal mechanisms through which social media addiction influences identity transformation over time. Researchers should examine the role of mediating and moderating variables such as personality traits, self-esteem, social comparison, emotional regulation, and cultural values to provide a deeper understanding of digital identity processes. Future research can also compare different social media platforms and investigate how specific platform characteristics contribute to collective identity weakening or performative self-presentation. Furthermore, qualitative approaches are recommended to explore students' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of identity formation in digital environments.

Based on the findings of this study, universities, educators, and mental health professionals should develop programs that promote healthy and balanced social media use among students. Educational interventions should focus on improving digital literacy, critical awareness of online identity construction, and strategies for maintaining meaningful offline social relationships. Universities should encourage collective activities, student communities, and social participation programs that strengthen belonging and interpersonal connections. Moreover, counseling services can help students develop healthier patterns of technology use while maintaining a balanced relationship between personal expression and collective identity.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

### **Transparency of Data**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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