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The Italian Version of the Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS): Adaptation, Validation, and Psychometric Evaluation

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Abstract

The present study evaluated the psychometric properties of the Italian version of the newly developed Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS). Construct validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the ESMS were analyzed with other related constructs such as coping strategies, fear of missing out (FoMO), problematic social media use (PSMU), mental well-being (MWB), and psychological distress. A convenience sample of Italian participants ($N=406$, 84.48% female) completed an online survey. Confirmatory factor analyses supported the original factor structure of ESMS, and the observed variables loaded highly on the same underlying factor. The reliability was also satisfactory, demonstrating that the Italian ESMS possesses very good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=0.89; McDonald's omega=0.90). The validity of the Italian ESMS was supported by its relationships with coping strategies, FoMO, PSMU, psychological distress, and MWB. The results of the present study enrich the understanding of escapism through social media and provide Italian clinicians and researchers with a useful instrument to assess and address problems related to escapism in social media use contexts.

Social networking sites (SNSs) have revolutionized the way individuals connect and communicate with each other. Statista (2023) estimates that there are over four billion active SNSs accounts globally. The speed and convenience of SNS use are among various factors that make them attractive, especially to young people (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). However, over the past two decades, several studies have shown that alongside the numerous benefits to users (e.g., enhancing social networks, information sharing) research indicates that use of these services can be associated with poorer outcomes, such as social isolation, occupational or academic underachievement, psychological and physical distress, and social withdrawal (e.g., Franchina et al., 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Servidio et al., 2024; Soraci et al., 2023). Additionally, problematic internet use has been associated with seeking escapism, fear of missing out (FoMO), and problematic social media use (PSMU), often referred to as social media addiction in its most extreme form (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

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Escapism and Social Networking Site Use

Hirschman (1983) provided an early definition of escapism, characterizing it as a specific coping strategy adopted by individuals to divert or avoid negative or difficult problems or situations in life. According to Young et al. (2017), escapism is a behavior used to distract attention away from real-life challenges, which may stem from psychological sources such as low self-esteem, depression, stress and/or anxiety. Depending on the context, escapism can be viewed as an escape from the monotony of everyday life, a resistance to confront the burden of freedom of choice (Fromm, 1994), or an attempt by individuals to escape their own identity (Baumeister, 1990; Lee et al., 2014). Escapism can be seen as a mechanism with two distinct functions. On the one hand, it can serve as a protective mechanism, providing a means of avoiding the confrontation with personal challenges that may be perceived as overwhelming. On the other hand, it can also be a means of avoiding such confrontation when the intensity and context are such that it would be unwise to do otherwise (Baumeister, 1990; Hirschman, 1983). Indeed, escapism theory, originally proposed to explain suicidal tendencies (Baumeister, 1990), suggests that individuals who are striving beyond their capabilities may feel the urge to detach from themselves or their circumstances (Lee et al., 2014).

Participating in escapist activities frees individuals from incessant self-analysis, comparison, and criticism (Baumeister, 1990). Recent research indicates that escapism provides a temporary respite from real-life worries and problems, while increasing satisfaction in the present moment, or alleviating negative emotional states and instilling optimism about future progress (Billieux et al., 2015; Marino et al., 2018). Similarly, denial of reality can act as a form of coping mechanism, allowing individuals to divert their attention away from their problems instead of addressing them directly (Geirdal et al., 2021; Jouhki et al., 2022). This temporary detachment can be particularly appealing in today's fast-paced, high-pressure societal environment, where individuals may feel overwhelmed by constant demands and expectations (e.g., Cohen & Taylor, 1992). Conversely, other research indicates that if the mechanism of 'escapism' becomes a habitual behavior and is overused, it may become a maladaptive coping strategy, which has been associated with different negative outcomes, such as diminished mental well-being, anxiety, stress, and depression (Akyol et al., 2021; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Tosun & Lajunen, 2010; Wegmann et al., 2015).

Previous studies have examined escapism in relation to activities such as online gaming (Deleuze et al., 2019; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Hussain et al., 2021; Stenseng et al., 2021), while others have focused on the association between escapism and addictive tendencies (Akyol et al., 2021; Jouhki & Oksanen, 2022; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). In these contexts (e.g., online gaming and its relationship to addictive behaviors), escapism is often driven by the immersive qualities of digital environments, which provide immediate feedback, rewards, and sensory engagement, thereby amplifying its appeal. In particular, the immersive and engaging nature of online gaming has been found to mirror the experience of SNS use, highlighting the broader applicability of escapism across different online contexts. In the context of SNS use, research has shown that this 'escape' from life's problems can be facilitated by online technology because it is available at any time of the day (Andreassen et al., 2017; Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019). Furthermore, due to the easy accessibility and immediacy of SNSs, individuals can immerse themselves and actively participate in various engaging activities, such as viewing profiles, watching videos, commenting on profiles, sharing

photos, gaming, gambling, etc. (Andreassen et al., 2016; Griffiths, 2012; Liu et al., 2018; Soraci et al., 2023). These platforms leverage sophisticated algorithms and personalized content delivery, ensuring users remain captivated for extended periods. These activities not only provide distraction but also enable users to create and curate their online personas, further detaching themselves from real-life issues and responsibilities. This allows individuals to disconnect from life's problems, albeit temporarily, with relative ease and speed (Babiker et al., 2023; Błachnio et al., 2016; Jouhki & Oksanen, 2022).

Some individuals need a mental break to be able to cope with everyday reality (Jouhki et al., 2022). Escaping reality through SNS use involves deep immersion, spending hours on platforms such as *Instagram* or *Facebook*, attracted by endless content such as videos, posts, and stories that offer constant distraction (e.g., Soraci et al., 2023). This continuous consumption of curated digital content often creates a paradoxical loop, where the temporary relief from stress eventually contributes to greater dependency and reduced capacity to address underlying issues. This type of engagement, fuelled by the desire for entertainment and/or FoMO, becomes a significant factor in keeping users engaged (Yildirim Demirdög et al., 2024). SNS use can comprise a combination of feelings of escapism, safety, freedom, connectedness, and network participation. These platforms provide a virtual space where users feel liberated from the constraints of their offline lives, offering them a sense of belonging and engagement that they might find lacking in the real world (Zhao & Shi, 2022). Problematic social media use (PSMU) has been associated with escapism where individuals use social media to escape reality or to avoid dealing with problematic situations or emotions (Yildirim Demirdög et al., 2024). As a result, there is often a lack of responsibility and less engagement in coping with the challenges of everyday life (Yildirim Demirdög et al., 2024). Although the concept of escapism is generally associated with negative outcomes such as fear, depression, stress, and anxiety, escape as a coping mechanism can also lead to positive effects, such as momentary relaxation and an improved mood (e.g., Yildirim Demirdög et al., 2024). However, as the boundary between healthy escapism and problematic behavior blurs, individuals may inadvertently reinforce negative patterns, making it important to address the root causes underlying the need for escape. Long-term reliance on escapism through SNS use could potentially lead to problematic psychological issues if not managed appropriately.

The Escapism Social Media Scale

Given the importance of studying the antecedents and the consequences of escapism in the context of SNSs, a psychometrically robust measure is needed to validate the construct. Several instruments have been developed to assess the construct of 'escapism', such as the Escapism Scale (e.g., Nooripour et al., 2023). However, these instruments have not been contextualized for SNS use. Most measures have been developed for general use or for use in specific contexts, such as gaming or substance addiction, and do not consider the specifics of SNSs. Furthermore, the dynamics of interaction and reasons for using SNSs can differ greatly from those of other activities, making these instruments less sensitive in capturing the nuances of SNS-related escapism. Finally, the rapid evolution of SNSs requires updated and specific assessment instruments to accurately capture user behavior in the current online context. Moreover, the broad conceptualization of escapism in existing

measures often leads to confounding results, making it challenging to disentangle escapism motivations specific to SNSs from other types of digital or offline activities. For example, escapism motivations related to SNS use might emphasize social comparison, fear of missing out (FoMO), or avoidance of interpersonal conflicts, aspects that are underrepresented in broader escapism scales (e.g., Gao et al., 2017).

In addition, the lack of specific instruments to assess escapism behavior through SNSs has raised limitations both in the research context and in understanding the possible mental health problems related to SNSs-related escapism coping strategies (e.g., Gao et al., 2017). This gap in measurement instruments hinders the development of targeted interventions and the ability to identify users at higher risk of maladaptive behaviors, such as excessive SNS use, procrastination, and emotional dysregulation. Moreover, a more refined assessment of escapism motivations could inform theoretical models explaining the interplay between escapism, SNS engagement, and psychological well-being.

To overcome these limitations, the four-item Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS) (Gao et al., 2017) was developed. The ESMS allows for the assessment of escapism behaviors within the SNS context. Because of its short length, simple unidimensional structure, convenience to administer and score, and adequate psychometric properties, this instrument has successfully been used in different cultures and contexts. For example, the ESMS has been validated in Turkish (Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019) and Polish (Uram & Skalski-Bednarz, 2024) showing that the scale adequately captures the construct of escapism in the SNS context.

Recent research has also demonstrated its predictive validity, associating higher ESMS scores with indicators of problematic SNS use, including time spent online, self-reported negative outcomes, and compulsive behaviors. This evidence underscores the importance of the ESMS as a psychometric instrument for identifying potential vulnerabilities and exploring the mediating role of escapism in the relationship between SNS use and psychological health outcomes. Future studies should further explore the longitudinal stability of the scale and its application in diverse cultural settings to strengthen its generalizability. For instance, Kırcaburun and Griffiths (2019) found that escapism as assessed using the ESMS was significantly associated with symptoms of SNS addiction and higher levels of FoMO. In their study, escapism mediated the relationships between social presence, spatial presence, and co-presence and problematic *Instagram* use (PIU), highlighting its role as a central mechanism through which individuals use *Instagram* to detach from reality. More specifically, activities such as watching live streams, commenting on posts, and engaging with posts were indirectly associated with PIU via escapism, demonstrating that the immersive nature of these activities can foster unhealthy use patterns. These findings support the convergent validity of the ESMS by showing its strong associations with behaviors and experiences indicative of problematic social media use.

Similarly, Uram and Skalski-Bednarz (2024) conducted a Polish adaptation of the Social Media Escapism Scale (ESMS) and found it to exhibit strong internal consistency and a unidimensional structure. Their research showed that escapism (using the adapted scale) was positively associated with FoMO, *Facebook* addiction, and symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression. Thought suppression was also found to mediate the relationship between escapism and these negative outcomes, further emphasizing the role of escapism in maladaptive psychological processes. The study lends additional support to the psychometric robustness of the ESMS, particularly its convergent validity, because escapism was consistently associated with related constructs such as FoMO, addictive behaviors, and emotional distress. These findings also highlight the scale's potential utility in

cross-cultural settings, making it a valuable instrument for examining the psychological underpinnings of SNS use across diverse populations.

Gao et al. (2017) provided further evidence that higher ESMS scores were predictive of poorer psychological well-being, including increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, suggesting a mediating role of escapism in the relationship between SNS engagement and poor mental health outcomes. Across different studies, the ESMS has consistently demonstrated good psychometric properties, including adequate construct validity, convergent validity, and divergent validity, as well as applicability in identifying the psychological and behavioral risks associated with problematic social media use. These findings underscore the importance of the ESMS in understanding not only the motivations underlying SNS use but also its potential risks, particularly when escapism becomes a dominant coping strategy.

Escapism and Other Coping Strategies

Coping strategies can be conceptualized as psychophysical responses or reactions to stimuli that cause psychological and physical distress and are part of the human experience (Blackburn et al., 2006; Carver et al., 1989; Goldberg, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When a stressful situation triggers unpleasant cognitions, emotions and/or behaviours, the role of coping strategies is to manage these reactions to reduce psychological discomfort. Such strategies involve the behavioral and cognitive efforts of individuals to cope with specific internal or external demands that are perceived to be beyond their capabilities or resources (Lazarus, 1993; Otsuka et al., 2022). In other words, individual coping strategies are process-oriented actions aimed at mastering, tolerating and/or reducing the effects of demands that exceed or conflict with their resources or capabilities (Aldwin, 2007; Stenseng & Phelps, 2013).

Endler and Parker (1990, 1999) developed one of the most widely used classifications for coping strategies and categorized them as: task-oriented coping, emotion management-oriented coping, and avoidance-oriented coping. Task-oriented coping involves actively dealing with problems by seeking practical solutions (Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999). For instance, if an individual has difficulties in studying, they may adopt organizational strategies to better manage their time, supporting their academic commitments. Emotionally-oriented coping involves individuals controlling and regulating their emotions (Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999). For example, an individual who feels anxious may practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing to try and calm their nervous system. Avoidance-oriented coping involves individuals trying to ignore or completely avoid stressful situations or negative emotions (Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999). For example, someone may not deal with a relational issue, hoping that it will resolve itself over time.

It should also be noted that some authors (e.g., Cook & Heppner, 1997; McWilliams et al., 2003) suggest dividing avoidance-oriented coping into two inter-correlated constructs (distraction-oriented coping and social diversion-oriented coping) would be more theoretically and psychometrically suitable. Distraction-oriented coping involves individuals seeking activities or thoughts that temporarily divert attention from stresses or problems (Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). For example, when an individual feels overwhelmed by work, they might decide to take a break to watch a movie or go for a walk, (i.e., as a coping strategy in which individuals treat themselves to relieve stress or improve their mood). Social distraction-oriented coping involves interacting with others or engaging in social activities to get away from stressors. For example, an

individual feeling sad can go out with friends to distract themselves and to help them feel better (Carver et al., 1989; Endler & Parker, 1990, 1999).

The role of escapism as a form of coping is important in the analysis of individual adaptation dynamics. Its interconnections with other coping styles are a fundamental consideration in scientific research (Bowditch et al., 2018). These relationships are influenced by multiple variables, such as the specific context of the study and the characteristics of the population under investigation. In general, escapism shows a tendency to be negatively associated with the task-oriented coping style because those who resort to escapism tend to directly avoid problems rather than deal with them (Yildirim Demirdögˇ et al., 2024). Furthermore, its association with the emotional management-oriented coping style may vary depending on how it is used. Individuals who adopt escapism to avoid negative emotions may be less likely to use adaptive emotional management-oriented strategies (Holahan et al., 2005; Yildirim Demirdögˇ et al., 2024).

Additionally, some authors have reported a positive association between escapism and avoidance-oriented coping strategies (e.g., Bowditch et al., 2018) because escapism itself can be interpreted as a form of avoidance. Likewise, a positive association between escapism and distraction-oriented coping can emerge because escapism often involves seeking out temporary distractions (Yildirim Demirdögˇ et al., 2024). It is also plausible to hypothesize a positive association between socially-oriented coping styles and escapism because both involve seeking social distractions to mitigate stress (Holahan et al., 2005). However, it should be emphasized that actual associations may vary depending on the methodology adopted in the specific study and the characteristics of the population under investigation (Bowditch et al., 2018; Yildirim Demirdögˇ et al., 2024).

The Relationship Between Escapism Through Social Networking Sites, Problematic Social Media Use, Fear of Missing Out, Psychological Distress, and Mental Well-being

Understanding the intricate relationships between variables frequently associated with escapism through social networking sites, such as fear of missing out (FoMO), problematic social media use (PSMU), psychological distress, and mental well-being, provides a vital context for interpreting the dynamics underpinning this construct. These connections, well-documented in the literature, show how escapism often operates within a network of interrelated psychological mechanisms, reinforcing its conceptual relevance in the context of convergent validity. For instance, FoMO has been shown to drive escapism as a coping strategy for anxiety (Alt, 2015; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013), while escapism may, in turn, exacerbate patterns of PSMU and psychological distress (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Oberst et al., 2017).

Fear of missing out (FoMO) is defined as the state of anxiety and stress that arises when an individual fears missing crucial information or social events, especially through social media (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). FoMO functions as a negative reinforcement mechanism, where individuals trying to avoid missing any online social events tend to use SNSs more frequently, temporarily alleviating their FoMO symptoms (Alt, 2015). However, this strategy can also drive individuals towards escapism as they seek to distract themselves from the anxiety associated with FoMO, creating a 'vicious cycle' where FoMO and escapism reinforce each other. This reciprocal reinforcement may lead to a more entrenched pattern of SNS overuse (Oberst et al., 2017). Over time, this mechanism can exacerbate

the negative consequences of SNS overuse, contributing to the onset of problematic social media use (PSMU; Oberst et al., 2017).

PSMU is characterized by the excessive and problematic use of social media, which can lead to disruptions in daily educational and/or occupational duties, social relationships, and other leisure activities, ultimately diminishing an individual's overall quality of life (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Numerous studies have reported an association between PSMU and FoMO (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2017; Oberst et al., 2017). In some cases, the compulsive checking of social media for updates from friends or others is deemed crucial. Such behavior, including the constant need to comment on posts and excessive scrolling, can exacerbate PSMU and, consequently, have a negative impact upon an individual's quality of life, contributing to anxiety, stress and/or depression, among other negative outcomes (Casale & Fioravanti, 2015; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Servidio et al., 2024). Research indicates that these compulsive behaviors not only reinforce PSMU but also create tangible challenges in personal relationships and work productivity.

The relationship between FoMO and escapism can be explained through several interconnected psychological mechanisms (Brand et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013). Individuals who experience FoMO often feel anxious about being excluded from social events, opportunities, or experiences that others are having. This anxiety can generate emotional tension, leading some individuals to engage in escapism as a means of detaching from reality (Akyol et al., 2021). Here, escapism serves as a coping mechanism that temporarily alleviates the emotional discomfort caused by FoMO. However, this temporary relief often motivates further social comparison, potentially exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and/or dissatisfaction (Akyol et al., 2021). Furthermore, escapism can act as a coping mechanism. For example, when an individual is worried about something, they may try to escape these thoughts by immersing themselves in activities that temporarily offer refuge from their concerns (e.g., Pupi et al., 2024).

Similarly, individuals experiencing FoMO may compare their lives with others on SNSs, generating feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction. To cope with these feelings, they may engage in escapism, seeking out activities or online environments that allow them to momentarily forget their worries. Escapism may then be used to seek moments of personal gratification that seem difficult to achieve in real life. Finally, escapism can function as a form of emotional self-regulation. For example, when FoMO and worries generate anxiety, stress, or sadness, escapism may be perceived as a way to temporarily alleviate these emotions (Kardefelt-Winter, 2014; Satici & Uysal, 2015; Servidio et al., 2024). This interplay between FoMO and escapism highlights a continuous search for temporary comfort that, while offering short-term relief, may ultimately hinder long-term emotional well-being (e.g., Uram & Skalski-Bednarz, 2024).

FoMO and PSMU are closely related to escapism and further contribute to psychological distress. FoMO sufferers may try to alleviate anxiety related to the fear of being excluded from social experiences through escapism, by immersing themselves in social media to feel more connected. However, this strategy may be counterproductive, leading to PSMU and exacerbating feelings of stress and dissatisfaction rather than improving them. Kırcaburun and Griffiths (2019) describe PSMU as problematic and unhealthy, characterized by compulsive web use and difficulty controlling access or time spent online. This compulsive behavior often stems from a desire to escape FoMO, which itself can lead to greater anxiety and decreased well-being.

Moreover, the avoidance tendencies that accompany escapism may further intensify distress, preventing individuals from addressing the root causes of their anxiety and dissatisfaction. PSMU can have negative effects on personal well-being, increasing the risk of depression, stress, and anxiety, and negatively affecting personal relationships and productivity (e.g., Ghergut et al., 2022; Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Stenseng et al., 2021). However, the impact of escapism on mental health is nuanced. While it can offer temporary relief, it can also initiate habitual patterns of avoidance and lead to greater long-term distress (Wegmann et al., 2017).

The relationship between escapism, mental well-being, and psychological distress is complex and can have both positive and negative effects (Wegmann et al., 2017). However, prolonged use of escapism as a coping strategy may prevent individuals from confronting and resolving underlying issues, potentially leading to a cycle of avoidance and increasing psychological distress (Wegmann et al., 2017). General psychological distress refers to a state of malaise that may include symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and other forms of emotional distress (Drapeau et al., 2010). The excessive use of social media, underpinned by individuals' need to escape their worries, can lead to poorer mental well-being and increase the risk of developing mental conditions such as depression and anxiety (Ghergut et al., 2022; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The Present Study

Although studies examining escapism have increasingly been conducted (e.g., Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Jouhki & Oksanen, 2022; Pupi et al., 2024), particularly in relation to SNSs, few have examined its association with coping strategies, FoMO, PSMU, psychological general distress (i.e., anxiety, stress, depression), and mental well-being, especially in the Italian context (e.g., Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Pupi et al., 2024).

Moreover, despite the existence of instruments designed to assess motivations underlying escapism (e.g., Motivations for Using Instagram, Pupi et al., 2024), there is currently a lack of specific, psychometrically valid, and robust measures to assess SNS-related escapism in Italy. Therefore, the present study evaluated the psychometric properties of the Italian Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS) alongside other relevant psychosocial variables (e.g., psychological distress, coping strategies, mental well-being, FoMO). This provides a suitable means of assessing potential dysfunctional avoidance behavior through the use of SNSs in an Italian context, along with its associated psychological and social consequences. Furthermore, it facilitates the planning of targeted interventions to improve individuals' mental and general health and serve as a valuable resource for psychological research.

The present study had two main objectives. These were to examine the (i) factorial structure of the Italian ESMS, hypothesizing that it would have a unidimensional structure (H_1) and to evaluate its reliability, and (ii) validity of the Italian ESMS by examining its relationships with coping strategies, FoMO, PSMU, psychological general distress, and mental well-being. It was hypothesized that the ESMS would be positively associated with emotion management-oriented coping, avoidance-oriented coping strategies (e.g., distraction and social distraction-oriented coping), FoMO, PSMU, and psychological distress (anxiety, stress, depression) (H_2). Additionally, it was hypothesized that the Italian ESMS would be negatively associated both with task-oriented coping strategies and mental well-being (H_3).

Methods

Translation Protocol

Based on recent guidelines regarding the cultural adaptation of psychometric instruments (e.g., Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021), the present study ensured that the Italian version of the ESMS retained the conceptual equivalence with the original scale while being culturally relevant to the Italian context, adapting items as needed to reflect culturally appropriate behaviors and experiences. This approach not only enhanced the accuracy of cross-cultural comparisons but also contributed to the growing body of research on the importance of contextual factors in the assessment of psychological constructs. The ESMS was translated from English to Italian by two native Italian speakers, following established international guidelines for translation and cultural adaptation (e.g., Beaton et al., 2000), with the assistance of a native English speaker. In the first step of the translation process, each of the two translators independently translated the scale items to ensure that the meaning of each item was accurately conveyed in Italian. Additionally, the native English speaker provided an independent translation. Once these independent translations were completed, the authors of the present study carefully compared all three versions with each other and with the original English version. During this comparison, the focus was on preserving the conceptual meaning of the items, rather than adhering to a word-for-word translation, to ensure the scale was culturally relevant and easily understandable in the Italian context.

To further validate the accuracy of the translation, a back-translation process was conducted, wherein the Italian version was translated back into English by a separate bilingual expert who was not involved in the initial translation. This back-translation was then compared with the original English version to identify any inconsistencies or loss of meaning. No significant discrepancies were found between the translations. Consequently, no further changes to the items were necessary. Following this, pilot testing was conducted to further ensure the clarity and appropriateness of the translated scale. The Italian ESMS was administered to a small, diverse sample of 10 individuals, who varied in terms of education level and age, to assess the comprehensibility of the items across different demographics. Participants were asked not only to complete the scale but also to provide feedback on any items they found unclear or difficult to understand. None of the participants reported any issues, suggesting that the translation was both accurate and accessible to a wide range of individuals. This step was crucial to confirm that the Italian ESMS retained the same meaning as the original. The Italian ESMS can be found in the Appendix.

Sample Size

To determine the optimal sample size, a power analysis was performed using a priori structural equation modelling software (Soper, 2022), indicating a recommended minimum sample size of 199 with a statistical power of 0.90 (Soper, 2022). Additionally, according to the guidelines provided by Kline (2016), sample size requirements for a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) should consider the number of estimated parameters. In the present study, the CFA included four items involving estimating nine parameters, including four factor loadings, four measurement errors, and one latent construct

variance. Kline (2016) suggests a minimum of 10 participants per estimated parameter, which would result in a recommended sample size of at least 90 participants. For an even more reliable result, a ratio of 20 participants per estimated parameter would be ideal, resulting in a recommended sample size of 180 participants. Given these considerations, along with the power analysis, the sample size of 199 participants was determined to be optimal to ensure robust and generalizable findings.

Participants

Between January 15 and March 1, 2024, a link to an online survey was shared on several Italian online platforms and SNSs (e.g., *Facebook*, *WhatsApp*, etc.). The inclusion criteria were: (i) being at least 18 years old; (ii) understanding the Italian language; (iii) providing informed consent; and (iv) having an active account on at least one SNS. In total, 406 individuals completed the online survey (mean age = 33.13 years; SD = ± 12.33). Of these, 84.48% were female (n = 343), 32.29% were married (n = 134), and 57% were both students and workers (n = 236). See Tables S1 to S4 (Supplementary Materials) for further details. Missing data were below the recommended thresholds (< 5%) and were missing completely at random, as indicated by Little (1988). The pairwise technique was used to handle missing data (Kang, 2013).

Measures

Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS, Gao et al., 2017). The four-item ESMS was used to assess social media-related escapism and was adapted from the Escapism Scale (Hirschman, 1983; modified by Wu & Holsapple, 2014). Items (e.g., *"This SNS helps me escape from the world of reality"*) are rated on a seven-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The total score ranges from 4 to 28, and higher scores indicate higher social media-related escapism. The psychometric properties of the scale are outlined in the Results section.

Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations-Short Version (CISS-SV, Endler & Parker, 1999; Italian version: Pisanti, et al., 2015). The 20-item CISS-SV was used to assess how an individual generally deals with stressful or unpleasant situations. Items are rated on a five-point Likert type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Sample items for the respective subscales include: task-oriented coping (seven items, e.g., *"Think about how I have solved similar problems"*); emotion-oriented coping (seven items, e.g., *"Blame myself for not knowing what to do"*); and avoidance-oriented coping that can be divided into two further subscales: contact a friend-oriented coping (three items, e.g., *"Spend time with a special person"*) and treat oneself-oriented coping (three items, e.g., *"Go out for a meal"*). Cronbach's alphas in the present study were very good, ranging from α = 0.85 to α = 0.87.

Fear Of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS; Przybylski et al., 2013; Italian version: Casale & Fioravanti, 2020). The ten-item FoMOS was used to assess FoMO. Items (e.g., *"I get annoyed when I miss an opportunity to meet my friends"*) are rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*extremely true*). Scores range from 10 to 50, and higher scores indicate a higher level of FoMO. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was good (α = 80).

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS; Andreassen et al., 2017; Italian version: Monacis et al., 2017). The six-item BSMAS was used to assess the risk of social media addiction. Items (e.g., "*How often during the last year have you used social media to forget*

about personal problems?") are rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Scores range from 6 to 30, and higher scores indicate a greater risk of social media addiction. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was excellent ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21, Henry & Crawford, 2005; Italian version: Bottesi et al., 2015). The 21-item DASS-21 was used to assess general psychological distress, and comprises three subscales: anxiety, stress, and depression. Items (e.g., "*I felt like I had nothing to look forward to*") are rated on a four-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very much*). Scores range from 0 to 21 in each subscale, and 0–63 on the total scale. Higher scores indicate greater anxiety, stress, and depression. Cronbach's alphas in the present study were good for all subscales ($\alpha = 0.89$ to 0.90) and the total scale ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al., 2007 – 14 items; Italian version: Gremigni & Stewart-Brown, 2011, which only has 12 items). The 12-item WEMWBS was used to assess mental well-being. Items (e.g., "*I've been feeling optimistic about the future*") are rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*). Scores range from 12 to 60, and higher scores indicate better well-being. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was excellent ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Ethics

The present study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki guidelines involving human participants and received approval from the Ethical Committee of Niccolò Cusano University, Rome, Italy. Prior to participation, all participants provided informed consent. Participant identities remained anonymous, and data were securely stored in an encrypted online repository, accessible solely to the research team.

Data Analysis

For adaptation purposes, the factorial structure of the ESMS was examined, alongside construct validity. First, the distribution of the items was analyzed according to the guidelines of Muthén and Kaplan (1985). They indicate an ideal skewness and kurtosis cut-off of ± 1 as an ideal value range to be observed to ensure normality of the data, and the Shapiro–Wilk index must be non-significant. Subsequently, the main descriptive statistics such as means, and standard deviations were calculated. Furthermore, McDonald's ω (McDonald, 1999) and Cronbach alpha (Cronbach, 1951), were used to test the scale's internal consistency, whose value must be equal to, or greater than 0.70 to be reliable (Cheung et al., 2023; Viladrich et al., 2017).

To test the factorial structure of the Italian ESMS, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. The model fit (Cheung et al., 2023; Kline, 2016) was assessed using the following indices with conventional cut-off values: NNFI (non-normed fit index ≥ 0.95), CFI (comparative fit index ≥ 0.95), GFI (goodness-of-fit index ≥ 0.95), AGFI (adjusted goodness-of-fit index ≥ 0.95), RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation ≤ 0.08), and SMSR (mean square error of approximation residuals ≤ 0.8). Furthermore, acceptable saturation occurred on all items ($\lambda_{ij} \geq 0.50$; Ferguson & Cox, 1993). Subsequently, different types of validity were examined. More specifically, for convergent validity, it is suggested to have a construct reliability > 0.70, all item standardized factor loadings (λ) > 0.50, and an average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.50. Furthermore, the following criteria for

discriminant validity (Cheung et al., 2023) were fulfilled: having an absence of items that cross-loaded on other constructs, maximum shared variance (MSV) < AVE, and through the analysis of the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations, values < 0.85 (HTMT; Cheung et al., 2023). Finally, the correlations between the main instruments' scores were examined using Pearson's correlations. Statistical analysis was conducted applying a statistical weighting technique (Gelman, 2007) to minimize distortions caused by imbalances in the sample, such as an overrepresentation of one gender (e.g., a predominance of females or males). The data analyses were performed utilizing R Core Team (2021) and *JASP version 0.19* (JASP Team, 2024).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

The mean scores on the scales were: (i) 12.52 out of 28 for the ESMS (SD ± 6.42), (ii) 14.76 out of 50 for the FoMOS (SD ± 5.50), (iii) 42.00 out of 60 for the WEMWBS (SD ± 8.75), (iv) 23.52 out of 63 for the DASS-21 (SD ± 14.76), and (v) 10.09 out of 30 (SD ± 4.54) for the BSMAS. The mean scores on the coping strategy subscales of the CISS-SV were (i) 17.98 out of 35 (SD ± 3.42) for task-oriented coping, (ii) 17.18 out of 35 (SD ± 6.32) for emotion-oriented coping, (iii), 7.45 out of 15 (SD ± 3.21) for treat oneself-oriented coping, and (iv) 5.21 out of 15 (SD ± 2.41) for contact a friend-oriented coping. The complete results of the main descriptive analyses are summarized in Tables S1-S5 (Supplementary Materials). The results of the normality tests fell within the range of ± 1 regarding skewness and kurtosis, indicating a substantial normal distribution of the data.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The results of the item distribution of the ESMS were within the normal range, because skewness and kurtosis did not substantially exceed the cut-offs of ± 1 (min = 0.10, max = 1.08, in absolute value). Given these results, the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator was used to conduct the CFA. It was found that the ESMS had a unidimensional (i.e., one-factor) structure. The fit indices, in turn, fell within the cutoffs delineated: $\chi^2 = 8.37$ (df = 2, $n = 411$, $p = 0.015$); CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.08, 95% CI (0.03—0.10), and SRMR = 0.01. In addition, all items had adequate factorial loadings (min = 0.58, max = 0.96 i.e., $\lambda_{ij} \geq 0.50$) (see Table 1 for details). Finally, the items in the

Table 1 Factor loadings of Escapism Social Media Scale ($N = 411$)

Factor	Item	Estimate	SE	z	p	95% CI Lower	Upper	Std. Est
Escapism	ESMS 1	1.533	0.075	20.474	< 0.001	1.403	1.658	0.830
	ESMS 2	1.810	0.069	26.337	< 0.001	1.712	1.903	0.968
	ESMS 3	1.642	0.070	23.523	< 0.001	1.523	1.757	0.906
	ESMS 4	1.052	0.083	12.751	< 0.001	0.884	1.231	0.586

Estimate = ESMS items factor loadings; Std. Est. = Standardized estimate ESMS items factor loadings. SE = Standard error

ESMS were significantly and positively correlated with each other (min = 0.44, max = 0.76) and with the ESMS total (min = 0.51, max = 0.75).

Reliability Analyses

To examine reliability of the ESMS, various indices were used including Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, and composite reliability (CR). The results were as follows: Cronbach's alpha = 0.89, McDonald's omega = 0.90 and CR = 0.88. These results indicated very good reliability.

Convergent/Discriminant Validity Analysis and Correlations

Convergent and discriminant validity were analyzed through R's *'measure Q'* function, with the construction of a model that included the main measures used (i.e., ESMS, FoMO, BSMAS, WEMWBS, CISS-SV, and DASS-21 [anxiety, stress, and depression]). This model had adequate fit indices: CFI = 0.93, NNFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.67, 95% CI (0.064–0.070), GFI = 0.94. The results for convergent validity indicated that there were no items with standardized factor loadings significantly lower than 0.5. Furthermore, the AVE exceeded the ideal threshold of 0.50 (with a value of 0.69), raising no concerns. Finally, the construct reliability was 0.90, indicating an adequate reliability of the construct (i.e., ESMS). For discriminant validity, there were no items with secondary cross-loading and MSV was < 0.69 (i.e., < AVE). Moreover, no value exceeded the threshold of 0.85 for HTMT results. For details see Tables S6 to S9 (Supplementary Materials).

Escapism (ESMS score) was significantly positively correlated with general psychological distress (DASS-21 score: anxiety, stress, and depression), FoMO (FoMOS score), problematic social media use (BSMAS score), emotion management-oriented coping (CISS-SV subfactor score) and treat oneself-oriented coping (CISS-SV subfactor score). Conversely, escapism (ESMS score) was significantly negatively correlated with mental well-being (WEMWBS score) and task-orientation coping (CISS-SV subfactor score). Escapism was not significantly correlated with contact a friend-oriented coping (CISS-SV subfactor score) (see Table 2 for details).

Discussion

The objectives of the present study were twofold. These were evaluate the (i) psychometric properties of the Italian ESMS, and (ii) validity of the Italian ESMS by examining whether it was significantly associated with theoretically related constructs, including emotion-oriented coping strategies and avoidance-coping oriented strategies (i.e., distraction-oriented coping and social distraction-oriented coping), fear of missing out (FoMO), problematic social media use (PSMU), general psychological distress (and its sub-factors depression, anxiety, and stress) and mental well-being. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the observed variables loaded highly onto the same underlying factor (i.e., unidimensional structure), therefore supporting H_1. This result supports the finding of previous validation studies (e.g., Gao et al., 2017; Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019; Uram & Skalski-Bednarz, 2024).

Table 2 Correlations between the main constructs ($N = 406$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. ESMS	—										
2. BSMAS	0.514 ***	—									
3. WEMWBS	−0.253 ***	−0.151 ***	—								
4. FoMOS	0.405 ***	0.422 ***	−0.322 ***	—							
5. Stress	0.257 ***	0.260 ***	−0.458 ***	0.354 ***	—						
6. Anxiety	0.246 ***	0.179 ***	−0.406 ***	0.267 ***	0.755 ***	—					
7. Depression	0.281 ***	0.272 ***	−0.556 ***	0.413 ***	0.780 ***	0.736 ***	—				
8. CISSSVA	−0.198 ***	−0.151 ***	0.441 ***	−0.125 **	−0.155 **	−0.216 ***	−0.247 ***	—			
9. CISSSVB	0.328 ***	0.265 ***	−0.447 ***	0.476 ***	0.536 ***	0.496 ***	0.581 ***	−0.222 ***	—		
10. CISSSVC	−0.044	0.020	0.149 **	0.067	−0.062	−0.020	0.076	0.203 **	0.017	—	
11. CISSSVD	0.119 *	0.256 ***	0.038	0.133 **	0.113 *	0.100 *	0.167	0.079	0.237 ***	0.351 ***	—

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, WEMWBS = Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale, FoMOS = Fear of Missing Out Scale, BSMAS = Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, ESMS = Escapism Social Media Scale. CISSSVA = Task-oriented coping, CISSSVB = Emotion-oriented coping, CISSSVC = Contact a friend-oriented coping, CISSSVD = Treat oneself-oriented coping

The reliability results were also satisfactory, demonstrating that the Italian ESMS has good internal consistency. In the present study, psychometric analyses were carried out in accordance with current psychometric guidelines to provide a robust and thorough analysis (Cheung et al., 2023). In particular, the Italian ESMS exhibited excellent convergent validity, with construct reliability exceeding 0.70, and all item standardized factor loadings above 0.5, and an average variance extracted exceeding 0.50, which are considered satisfactory. Moreover, the results of the discriminant validity assessment were also satisfactory. This was evidenced by the absence of cross-loadings on other constructs, the observation that the maximum shared variance (MSV) was lower than the average variance extracted (AVE), and the finding that the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations did not exceed 0.85 (Cheung et al., 2023). Additionally, the analysis of the correlations between the ESMS score and the other scale scores demonstrated both good convergent and discriminant validity. These rigorous psychometric evaluations ensure that the ESMS is both a reliable and valid instrument for assessing social media-related escapism among Italian adults.

The correlation analyses in the present study between the ESMS score and the scores on various measures of mental well-being and coping strategies offers interesting insights. The ESMS was positively and significantly correlated with general psychological distress (anxiety, stress, and depression), fear of missing out, problematic social media use, and with two types of coping (i.e., emotion management-oriented coping and treat oneself-oriented coping, which refers to distraction-oriented coping, a type of avoidance-oriented coping).

The findings suggest that increases of frequency in SNS use, particularly when motivated by the intention to avoid or escape from stressful situations, are strongly associated with increased levels of psychological distress and problematic social media use. This is in line with research indicating that escapism via SNSs can exacerbate psychological issues, rather than alleviate them (e.g., Soraci et al., 2023). More specifically, individuals who use SNSs as a means of escaping the challenges and demands of everyday life tend to report significantly higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. This association highlights how escapism through SNS use might exacerbate rather than alleviate emotional difficulties and psychological wellbeing. The results of the present study are consistent with existing research showing similar associations (Andreassen et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2013; Tandoc et al., 2015; Vannucci et al., 2017). Previous studies have shown how compulsive SNS use can be, and that the SNS use for escapism often leads to a counterproductive cycle of negativity (e.g., Yildirim Demirdöğen et al., 2024). Individuals who use SNSs to escape their problems may initially seek comfort or distraction, but this behavior if continued, may instead exacerbate the emotional issues they are trying to escape. For example, excessive use of SNSs can lead to increased exposure to negative or idealized portrayals of other people's lives, which can increase feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. In turn, this can contribute to greater anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms (e.g., Zubair et al., 2023).

In addition, SNS use for escapist reasons can interfere with real-life coping mechanisms (i.e., effective and concrete strategies that individuals use to cope and manage the stress and emotional difficulties of everyday life, such as seeking social support, problem solving, etc.). Rather than addressing underlying issues through direct problem solving, seeking social support or other mechanisms, some individuals may become overly reliant on social media platforms for temporary relief. This reliance may prevent them from engaging in more effective coping strategies and hinder their ability to manage stress and emotional challenges constructively (e.g., Jouhki et al., 2022; Taylor &

Stanton, 2007). The concept of a 'spiral of negativity' is central to understanding how escapism via social media can lead to worsening mental health outcomes. This phenomenon occurs when individuals attempt to avoid confronting their negative emotions through SNS use, only to find that this behavior exacerbates their distress. The ongoing cycle of seeking distraction and facing exacerbated emotional turmoil highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding and addressing PSMU (e.g., Servidio et al., 2024; Zubair et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of developing effective interventions that address both the motivations underlying social media use and the resulting psychological effects, with the aim of breaking the cycle of negative reinforcement and promoting healthier coping strategies.

It is noteworthy that there was a positive association between escapism and FoMO, which serves to highlight a pivotal psychological dynamic. FoMO is characterized by an apprehension regarding the possibility of missing out on rewarding experiences that others may have, resulting in a more compulsive engagement in SNS use (Satici et al., 2015; Servidio et al., 2024). This apprehension can intensify feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction, which in turn exacerbate the discomfort that individuals seek to avoid through escapism. The findings of the present study are consistent with the hypothesis that FoMO not only increases the frequency of SNS use but also intensifies the emotional distress from which individuals seek to escape. This intricate interplay demonstrates how FoMO can exacerbate the consequences of escapism, perpetuating a vicious cycle of heightened psychological distress and problematic SNS use (e.g., Servidio et al., 2024).

Individuals who use SNSs as a form of escapism tend to resort more often to coping strategies focused on managing emotions and distraction, rather than dealing with problems directly. This type of coping is known as a 'disengaged' coping style (Bowditch et al., 2018), where an individual seeks to limit their exposure to unpleasant stimuli by disengaging from it. These strategies attempt to relieve stress without resolving the underlying cause of the problem. Emotion-oriented coping strategies may include activities such as ruminating on stressful events or seeking solace in virtual social relationships, while distraction-oriented coping may include activities such as watching videos, playing online games, or passively scrolling through social media feeds (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Baumeister, 2017; Smyth, 1998).

The present study's findings support previous research indicating that the use of SNSs for escapist purposes is frequently associated with a decline in overall mental well-being and an increased risk of PSMU. For instance, Kross et al. (2013) reported that heightened *Facebook* use correlated with decreased subjective well-being over time, suggesting that social media interactions can amplify feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction. Similarly, Marino et al. (2018) reported that problematic *Facebook* use was associated with lower psychological well-being and higher levels of depression among adolescents and young adults. Moreover, Soraci et al. (2023) found a positive association between PSMU (specifically problematic *Facebook* use), coping strategies for escaping negative moods and depression.

Additionally, Geirdal et al. (2021) highlighted that during periods of social distancing in the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive use of social media as a coping mechanism was associated with reduced mental well-being and higher levels of loneliness. These findings underscore the detrimental effects of using SNSs as a form of escapism and its potential to exacerbate mental health issues. In the present study, escapism through social media was negatively and significantly associated with mental well-being and task-oriented coping (supporting H_3). The negative association with the mental well-being suggests that individuals who engage in SNS use as a means of escapism tend to report a lower level of

general well-being. The WEMWBS is a broad measure of psychological well-being, which includes elements such as optimism, self-confidence, energy, and life satisfaction. A negative correlation indicates that increased use of SNSs for escapist purposes is associated with reduced feelings of mental well-being, supporting the idea that escapism via SNSs may be an indicator of general dissatisfaction and low quality of life. This finding is in line with previous studies that have found PSMU to be associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as reduced life satisfaction and increased risk of depression (e.g., Kross et al., 2013; Satici & Uysal, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2015; Vannucci et al., 2017).

The negative correlation between escapism through social media and task-oriented coping suggests that individuals who resort to using SNSs for escapism are less likely to use proactive, problem-solving-oriented coping strategies. Task-oriented coping refers to strategies that involve direct and active coping with sources of stress, such as planning, finding solutions, and taking concrete actions to deal with difficulties. A negative correlation in this context suggests that the use of SNSs as a form of escapism is associated with a lower propensity to confront problems directly, preferring instead to avoid or ignore sources of stress (Baker et al., 2016; Satici & Uysal, 2015). These findings are particularly significant because they highlight a pattern of less adaptive behavior associated with the use of social media for avoidance purposes. Instead of actively facing difficulties, individuals who take refuge in SNS use tend to avoid problems, which can possibly lead to a cycle of procrastination and inaction that further worsens their psychological well-being (Baker et al., 2016; Satici & Uysal, 2015).

It is also interesting to note that no significant association was found between escapism through social media and contact a friend-oriented coping (which refers to social distraction-oriented coping). This subfactor includes strategies that involve distraction through direct social interactions, such as talking to friends or participating in social activities (partially supporting H_2). The absence of a significant correlation between SNS use for escapism and social distraction-oriented coping may suggest that although individuals may use SNSs to escape their problems, they do not necessarily resort to direct social interactions as a means of distraction. In other words, their escapist behavior through SNSs does not result in more non-virtual social activities (i.e., face-to-face interactions) (Baker et al., 2016; Błachnio et al., 2015, 2016; Gentzler et al., 2011; Marino et al., 2018). This finding may indicate a distinction between virtual and real social escapism. That is, individuals who use SNSs for escapism may prefer more passive and less demanding modes of distraction than those that require direct social interaction. Potentially, this behavior could be due to the very nature of SNSs, which allows for more superficial and less demanding interaction than direct social interactions, allowing individuals to avoid confrontation or deep emotional involvement (Billieux et al., 2015; Geirdal et al., 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013; Satici & Uysal, 2015). Moreover, this may suggest that the use of SNSs for escapism is more related to a desire for isolation and avoidance of direct social relationships, rather than an attempt individuals to distract themselves through social engagement. This may explain why individuals who use social media in this way do not report an increase in social distraction activities (Błachnio et al., 2015; Geirdal et al., 2021).

The fact that no significant association was found between escapism through social media and social distraction-oriented coping (i.e., contact a friend-oriented coping) emphasizes the distinct nature of virtual versus actual social avoidance. This result suggests that for individuals who use SNSs as a form of escapism, distraction does not necessarily result in increased direct social interactions, but rather in more isolated and passive behavior. Therefore, the present study offers further insights into the different ways in which

individuals may try to manage stress and the implications these choices may have on their psychological well-being (Billieux et al., 2015; Przybylski et al., 2013).

Looking at the results as a whole, all three study hypotheses were confirmed, except for the association between escapism and social distraction-oriented coping. The findings highlight a complex picture in which the use of social media for escapism is associated with various negative aspects of psychological well-being and specific coping modalities, emphasizing the importance of considering the underlying motivations for SNS use in well-being assessments and intervention strategies (Andreassen et al., 2017; Akyol et al., 2021; Baker et al., 2016; Billieux et al., 2015; Błachnio et al., 2015; Casale & Fioravanti, 2015; Fordjour et al., 2019; Geirdal et al., 2021; Gentzler et al., 2011; Marino et al., 2018; Przybylski et al., 2013; Satici & Uysal, 2015).

Limitation and Future Directions

The findings of the present study should be interpreted while acknowledging specific limitations. Firstly, the participants consisted solely of a small self-selected convenience sample from the broader Italian population, predominantly comprising females, which are not generalizable to all Italian adults and may have distorted the results. This gender imbalance may have influenced the findings because previous research suggests that escapism and social media use can exhibit gender-related differences in patterns and motivations (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2017; Rollero et al., 2019; Tifferet, 2020). Consequently, the generalizability of the present study's results to the broader Italian adult population, particularly to males and underrepresented groups, is somewhat limited. The overrepresentation of females may have also introduced a bias in the interpretation of escapism-related behaviors, potentially distorting the understanding of the phenomenon from a gender perspective.

Secondly, there is a possibility that social desirability biases may have influenced participants' responses when completing the survey. Thirdly, because the study was cross-sectional in nature, it was not possible to examine test–retest reliability. Therefore, future research efforts employing larger and more representative samples of Italian participants are warranted to validate the initial results of the present study. For instance, studies incorporating nationally representative samples with more equal numbers of males would enhance generalizability. More specifically, future studies should aim to recruit more balanced and representative samples, ensuring adequate representation of males and females, as well as other demographic subgroups. Stratified sampling techniques or targeted recruitment strategies could be employed to achieve this. Additionally, the use of larger, more nationally representative samples could provide more robust insights into how escapism manifests across different gender groups within the Italian context..

Moreover, future research with larger and more representative samples is necessary to validate the factorial solution proposed in the present study. Longitudinal studies with a large, diverse sample size should consider investigating the relationship between the variables examined in the present study in more detail. Further research could explore the relationship between escapism through social media and other psychological constructs, such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social connectivity. Investigating these relationships would likely provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of escapism behavior on overall well-being. Finally, future studies should consider carrying out analyses on the possible difference of the ESMS among those in different age ranges (e.g., adolescents, young adults etc.) and different educational levels.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrated that the Italian version of the ESMS exhibited robust psychometric properties and is an appropriate instrument for the assessment of SNS-related escapism behavior among Italian adults. The translation and adaptation process supported reliability and validity of the ESMS in the Italian context, demonstrating that the scale effectively captured the intended construct (i.e., escapism through social media use). The Italian ESMS may be employed in research settings to explore the prevalence, correlates, and psychological impacts of SNS-related escapism among Italian-speaking populations, thereby contributing to cross-cultural comparisons and enhancing the generalizability of findings. In clinical contexts, the scale can be used to screen for maladaptive escapism behaviors associated with SNS use, guiding therapeutic interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects associated with problematic engagement in social media as a coping mechanism.

The application of the ESMS may facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals use SNSs as a form of escapism, offering valuable insights for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. For mental health professionals, the ESMS can be used as an instrument to identify individuals who are using SNSs to escape from real-world stressors, thereby informing treatment plans that address the root causes of this behavior, such as unmet emotional needs or poor coping skills. Educators can use the insights gained from the ESMS to develop educational programs that raise awareness regarding healthy SNS use, teaching young people (e.g., students) how to manage their online activities in a way that does not interfere with their psychological well-being. Policymakers can leverage the data obtained from studies using the ESMS to inform public health strategies and regulations aimed at reducing the potential harms associated with problematic social media use, such as implementing guidelines to promote healthier SNS use in online environments.

The ESMS can also play a pivotal role in identifying individuals who may be at risk of developing PSMU due to escapism, enabling the development of targeted interventions to address underlying issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. By pinpointing those who exhibit high levels of escapism through SNS use, clinicians can design personalized therapeutic approaches that not only reduce PSMU but also tackle the psychological distress driving this behavior. This could include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to reframe negative thought patterns, stress management techniques, or mindfulness-based interventions to enhance emotional regulation. Early identification and intervention using the ESMS may ultimately help prevent the escalation of PSMU into worsening mental health conditions, promoting overall well-being within the population.

Appendix

Italian version of Escapism Social Media Scale (ESMS)

Con il termine social network, si intendono piattaforme come *Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X, Twitch*, etc. Scala a 7 punti dove 1 rappresenta "*Fortemente in disaccordo*" e 7 rappresenta "*Fortemente d'accordo*".

    1. I social network mi aiutano ad evadere/fuggire temporaneamente della realtà.

2. I social network mi aiutano a evadere/fuggire dalle problematiche e dalle situazioni stressanti della vita.
3. I social network mi aiutano a evadere/fuggire da cose/situazioni spiacevoli e preoccupanti.
4. I social network mi fanno sentire come se fossi in un altro mondo, diverso da quello reale.

Declarations

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