

Excessive Use of Social Media and Mental Health

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i4.1173>

Abstract

This research study investigated the relationship between excessive use of social media and mental health. This is a quantitative study that collected the data through structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was filled in from 300 students of different colleges and universities in district Swat. The data was gender balanced. It was identified that screen addiction causes stress among students who excessively use social media because giving more time to social media basically negatively affected their academic performance and also other daily life activities due to which stress was caused. Of total respondents, 27 percent revealed that they rarely feel stressed while 7 percent said that they feel stressed quite often. Those who revealed that they feel stress rarely was basically due to variation in time which they specify for the use of social media while among the 7 percent respondents there was no variation in time.

Key Words: Mental Stress, Academic Performance, Social Media

Introduction

The emergence of social media is one of the peculiarities of the twenty-first century. Starting with early networking applications like Friendster and MySpace and moving on to modern global giants: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Tik Tok and X (previously Twitter), digital platforms have transformed modalities of communication, access to knowledge, and community building (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). These technologies have long since ceased to be peripheral, and have become part of the everyday experience especially among the youth. The Web 2.0 technologies are interactive and users can create and share content in real time thus changing communication as a model of passive consumption to an active model. Using social media has become part of education, friendship, leisure, and even career aspirations and this is the case in young adults, especially in the university setting. Students use social media to learn academic materials, exchange lecture notes and professional networks and use the same media to entertain and interact with their friends (Alonzo et al., 2021). This dichotomy has formed the basis of the definition of social media as a two-edged sword; both advantages and its drawbacks exist, and they define student life empowering and even detrimental to the learners.

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International studies offer solid-grounded evidence that heavy social media consumption can have a harmful impact on mental health. Keles et al. (2020) and Alonzo et al. (2021) conducted systematic reviews and found that the more time one spends on social media, the more susceptible one is to developing anxiety or depression and insomnia. However, this is not a consistent relationship. The most harmless or even beneficial types of active and purposeful use (belonging to an academic group, utilizing an online friendship based on support, etc.) are in comparison to the most harmful types (passive scrolling and image-focused usage, e.g., Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.) (Fardouly et al., 2020). Recent researches show that the most minimal daily social media exposure of 30 minutes can positively affect mood and sleep quality and is consequently a perspective to show that a part of the negative impact is adjustable (Nazari et al., 2023). The COVID-19 crisis was another source of this dualism: social media served as a source of life in education and socialization and increased the effects of isolation and exposure to fake news and digital burnout (Bezerra et al., 2023). These international trends highlight the importance of the contextual studies that are to embrace cultural and institutional variables. Psychologists single out a number of routes that social media affects well-being. Perhaps the most powerful mechanism is social comparison: students are often exposed to idealized images of student performances, looks, and lifestyles, which makes upward comparison that undermines self-esteem and increases anxiety possible (Fardouly et al., 2020). The other important mechanism is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Uninterrupted exposure to the activities and updates of the rest of the world develops a sense of exclusion which triggers compulsive checking and excessive use of the internet. FoMO is highly correlated with sleeping problems, academic lack of concentration, and stress among students (Elhai et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Disturbance of sleep alone is a mediator that has been well documented. Sleep is disrupted by use of blue light once in a lifetime, emotionally stimulating communication, and decreases sleep hours, thus worsening depression and anxiety symptoms (Alonzo et al., 2021). These effects are further aggravated by cyberbullying and misinformation. Aggressive communication, cyberbullying, and exposure to misinformation are factors that receive into chronic stress, and an addiction to platforms as an emotional coping factor and as a form of compensation is often nurturing, as well as strengthening poor mental-health results (Kardfelt-Winther, 2014). The South Asian digital growth has been phenomenal. Young people in the region have come to interact with platforms at the same level as more prosperous countries with low priced smartphones and data plans. Nevertheless, South Asia does not have proper mental-health facilities, online-digital-literacy-programmes, and strict rules governing online-safety, thus posing a unique threat (Nazari et al., 2023). The social media has overtaken 70 million users in Pakistan (PTA, 2024). Facebook, Whatsapp, YouTube, Tik Tok, and Instagram are leading. To the university students, these platforms are not only essential in communication but also information acquisition, political awareness and even earning income. However, access and the complete use of these platforms is often dictated by gender norms and cultural constraints. Women students, especially, have to deal with the limited mobility and cyberbullying, which restrain their online engagement (Iqbal and Hussain, 2024). The responses to the policy are highly reactive, which mostly implies short-term prohibition or limitations instead of long-term policies like digital literacy and mental-health assistance. Such loopholes in governance also increase the vulnerability of students and also limit them to use social media productively.

Research Methodology

The research study adopted cross-sectional survey research design due to the need to establish the relationship between social media and mental health among the students of the University of Swat. The paradigm of positivism guided the research as structured methods were employed to gather numerical data which could be statistically analyzed to find patterns and associations between variables such as social media usage, addiction predictors, and mental health outcomes such as

stress, anxiety, and self-esteem. The case study was carried out at the University of Swat, Charbagh, District Swat, and the target population of the study was about 8,000 students enrolled in the academic session of 202425. A sample of 300 students was then chosen out of this population basing on proportionate stratified random sampling to represent the various departments and academic programs. Primary data were gathered with the use of a structured questionnaire, which was created upon the examination of the proven methods used by other researchers, evaluated by specialists, and piloted on 30 students prior to implementation. The questionnaire was divided into five parts that contained the demographics, social media use habits, perceived effects, indicators of mental health, and addiction behaviors. The information was gathered face to face during the school time, with informed consent, which guaranteed the confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary respondents. Peer-reviewed journals, books, policy reports, and past research provided secondary data that gave the theoretical and conceptual framework the necessary strength. Data were coded, entered and analyzed through SPSS version 26 and the main statistical tool used to describe the distribution of responses and to identify prevalence patterns through the use of the percentage analysis which was supported by frequency tables, bar charts and pie charts. Ethical considerations were also followed and they included informed consent, confidentiality, protection against harm, and cultural sensitivity. The research has interesting descriptive data, but the research is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the study, a self-reported source to data collection, one-institution focus, and lack of clinical diagnostic instruments. In spite of these constraints, the methodology provides a strict and clear structure that can be adopted to meet the objectives of the study and provide significant results on the nexus between social media usage and mental health among the university students.

Data Analysis

Many researchers have founded a significant relationship between mental health a problems and excessive use of social media. Excessive use of social media sometimes causes addiction in people and this screen addiction results in huge stress because of losing the power to function different activities of life in a proper way. This research study was conducted on university students, the findings of which are discussed in the following passage.

Stressed or nervousness during the last month

		Do you feel Stressed/nervous during the last month			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	139	46.3	46.3	46.3
	Rarely	82	27.3	27.3	73.7
	Sometime	30	10.0	10.0	83.7
	Often	21	7.0	7.0	90.7
	Very often	28	9.3	9.3	100.0
	Total	300	100.0	100.0	

The above table outlines the perception of the respondents on the question whether or not they felt stressed or nervous during the last month. The importance of the given variable in the scope of modern scholarship may be viewed as rather high, as stress in college students has become a crucial public-health issue with heavy outcomes of academic achievements, psychological comfort, and quality of life. University years are the transitional ones and are characterized by academic burden, social acclimatization, finances and future career insecurities, which in turn may be the reasons behind higher levels of stress. Given the limited mental-health resources, knowledge concerning the prevalence and trends of stress among student groups is vital in the development of specific interventions and support services. In the present research, the 300 respondents provided valid

responses to the question. The form of the percent column and the valid percent column is the same and this affirms the fact that there are no missing or invalid responses. The cumulative percentage advances to the next categories of responses and this may end at 100 per cent showing the total and dependable data on the variable. The results reveal that there is a complicated trend in the occurrence of stress among the respondents. The relatively high percentage of stress was recorded as a percentage of students who indicated very low levels of stress with a number of 139 (46.3) respondents claiming that they were never stressed or felt nervous over the past month. This is the highest number of people who responded to the question separately and also indicates that an almost-half of the sample is effectively coping with their emotional well-being, at least on the self-reported frequency of stress. Also, 82 respondents (27.3%) said they rarely experienced stress which distorted cumulative percentage of stress experienced by many to 73.7 per cent of the entire sample. This means that close to three-quarters of the respondents have never or rarely experienced stress. Nevertheless, there was a significant minority that described higher rates of stress occurrence. In particular, 30 respondents (10%) noted that they felt stressed sometimes, 21 respondents (7.0) felt stressed often, and 28 respondents (9.3%) felt stressed very often. These three categories make up 79 respondents, which is 26.3% of the total sample. As a result, in a significant proportion of cases, about one-fourth of students are stressed at least occasionally and very frequently. Very often and often categories combined to give 49 respondents (16.3%) which is a significant subgroup where stress is a normal aspect of life.

These results are congruent with and inconsistent with the literature on student stress and mental health. The very large majority (73.7 per cent never or hardly ever) of people who report having had minimal stress also seems optimistic when compared to those who report prevalence worldwide. Nonetheless, empirical studies always supply evidence that stress perception is highly circumstantial and mediated by a great number of factors. Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) discovered in their systematic review of the impact of social media on mental health that the factors of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents depend on a variety of factors, and these factors include sleep quality, social comparison, and online experiences. Their contribution reiterates the fact that stress cannot be studied in a vacuum but should be analyzed as a part of the wider ecosystem of digital and social forces. The finding that 26.3% of students in this sample also state that they sometimes experience stress is consistent with the results that a large section of the youth population is reported to undergo quantifiable psychological stress. According to the World Health Organization (2022), in its Mental Health Atlas several gaps in the provision of mental-health services are registered in the world, and especially countries with low and middle incomes have acute deficits. In the Pakistani setting, a critical review published in the reference list, *Transforming the mental health landscape in Pakistan* (2024), states that he had hardly 0.19 psychiatrists per 100 000 population which is very low to say the least forcing most people with mental-health issues to lack access to professional treatment. It is against this background that the 26.3 percent of the students who said they have frequent stress is a big percentage of youths who might be failing to cope in the absence of proper support networks.

Close attention should be paid to the correlation between stress and other variables that are investigated in this paper. Previous studies indicated that 80 percent of the study participants noted addictive social-media behaviors, three-quarters of them admitted to spending more time than they intend, and three-quarters of participants felt uncomfortable without social media. The literature is highly linked to these patterns of problematic use and the stressful nature of these patterns. Andreassen (2015) reported that the addictive use of social-media is always associated with a high level of stress, anxiety, and poor psychological well-being. Likewise, Kuss and Griffiths (2018) also found that problematic use of social-networking-sites causes the stress-related physiological responses and can develop a loop where people use social media to deal with stress, which causes users to feel more stressed due to excessive use. The moderate levels of stresses to be found in the

present report (where only 16.3 per cent. found themselves in a state of stress often or very often) are in curious contrast to the high rates of addictive behaviour that also consume other parts of the research. This trend can be indicative of a number of possibilities. There is a possibility of students undergoing what Kardefelt-Winther (2014) defines in his compensatory model of internet-use, using social media as a stress-coping mechanism towards underlying stressors without necessarily being aware of the stress or reporting it. Instead, in a study of social-media fatigue, Dhir et al. (2018) discovered that not all users experience related emotional distress when they use social-media compulsively and, in the short term at least, with the related consequences.

In terms of development, the results need to be placed within the framework of the developing adulthood. In his classic text on emerging adulthood, Arnett (2015) describes the late teens to the twenties, as a time of identity exploration, turmoil, and narcissism. Although such developmental tasks may indeed cause stress, Arnett also argues that most of the emerging adults go through this developmental stage with great success and become more resilient. This pattern of normative developmental course, where the majority of youths have the mental capacities to confront transitional issues, could be manifested by noting that almost three-quarters of students do not report ever or very often experiencing stress. In the context of the Pakistani, locally grounded scholarship provides a much needed contextual framing. The study by Iqbal and Hussain (2024) investigated the correlation between social media use and mental health in university students and indicated that, although psychological distress is notable, its expression and reporting are subject to cultural dimensions like the family support, religious coping, and connectedness to the community. These safeguarding factors probably explain the high number of students who report little stress despite the academic pressures and the high rate of problematic social media usage.

Bezerra et al. (2023) provided a systematic review of social media and mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and found that the stress trajectories in response to individual differences, availability of social support, and underlying mental issues vary significantly. Their results indicating that 26.3% of students were frequently stressed are consistent with the fact that a significant part of young adults will be susceptible to psychological distress despite the population-level measures looking positive. The implications of the findings to the policy of the university and students support services are also important. Even though most of them show good coping with stress, the 16.3 percent who report that they experience stress regularly or beyond is a priority group to be influenced. Woods and Scott (2019) proved the relationship between digital engagement and psychological outcomes to be mediated by the quality of sleep, and that interventions based on sleep hygiene, especially a decrease in the number of late-night social media users, can have a significant impact on stress reduction. On the same note, Vannucci, Flannery, and Ohannessian (2020) also found correlations between the frequency of social media checking and symptoms of anxiety in emerging adults and concluded that the frequency of the use patterns could moderate the effect of the latter and reduce stress among vulnerable students.

Altogether, the examination of 300 respondents showed that 139 (46.3) never experienced stress, 82 (27.3) experienced stress rarely, 30 (10.0) experienced stress sometimes, 21 (7.0) experiences stress very often, and 28 (9.3) experienced stress very often. Therefore, 73.7% claimed that they had never or rarely felt stressed, 26.3% said that they felt stressed either occasionally or very frequently. These statistics demonstrate that the vast majority of students report the negligible stress levels, however, a salient minority of students have regular psychological discomfort and are in need of specific treatment. Combining the obtained results with the existing literature, the findings demonstrate the multifaceted interplay of developmental transitions and digital engagement patterns, cultural protective factors and personal vulnerability. The relatively low prevalence of stress in most of them must be an indication of resilience, sufficient coping resources, or the lower academic tracks when major pressures have not built up yet. On the other hand, the large minority of students who report frequent stress especially in the setting of the

underdeveloped mental health care system as noted in the transforming Pakistan mental health landscape analysis points to the need to establish accessible, culturally relevant mental health promotion and intervention programs on college campuses. These efforts ought to address the reported correlations between problematic social media use and stress, promote digital wellness, enhance peer support systems, and make sure that the students who are subjected to regular stressful situations can have easy access to professional help.

Conclusion

It was founded in this research study that mental stress is positively associated with screen addiction and excessive use of social media, however, this mental health problem is not common among all students. Students who used to spend most of their time on using social media by scrolling the screen and not performing their daily life activities properly, showed indicators of mental stress. One of the most notable results is associated with the paradox of high indicators of addiction and relatively low emotional distress. Although 80% of the surveyed identified as being addicted to social media, 75% of those surveyed admitted that they spent more time on a platform than intended and 81% said that they felt uncomfortable when social media were unavailable, 10.7% said that social media use brought them anxiety or frustration. This trend can be supported by the study of Kardefelt-Winther (2014), who argues in favor of the compensatory internet use, and Dhir et al. (2018) who discusses social media fatigue and argues that students can find their use a habitual overuse, without necessarily feeling that this use is emotionally distressing. Addiction recognition seems to be behavioral and not affective as it is a conscious awareness of dependency but it does not involve negative emotional attribution. Likewise, a finding that 82 percent feel pressure to make social comparison on social media the mechanism which is well-known and was widely reported by Vogel et al. (2014) and Fardouly et al. (2018) coincides with low anxiety reporting, which suggests that students might habitualize processes of comparison or have the psychological resources protecting them against its adverse impact.

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