Social Media and Students' Psychological Well-Being at University Level: Quantitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the effect of social media usage on the psychological well-being of university students. The study aimed to explore the extent of social media use among students and to determine its influence on their psychological well-being in an academic context. A quantitative research design was employed, and the population consisted of 71 students (31 male and 40 female) from the B.Ed. and HPE programs at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad. A self-developed questionnaire containing six indicators and twelve items was used for data collection, and the data were analyzed using simple percentage calculations. The findings revealed that social media negatively affected students' sleep duration and academic performance. A portion of students also reported feeling stressed due to social pressures associated with online behavior. However, the majority agreed that social media contributed positively to their life satisfaction. The study recommends that students avoid comparing themselves with others on social media, as such comparisons can lead to stress and dissatisfaction, and instead reduce screen time and engage more in reading activities to improve academic outcomes and overall well-being.

Keywords: Social Media, Psychological Well-being, University Level, Students

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms has expanded remarkably in recent years (Leong et al., 2019; Kemp, 2020). Social media can be conceptualized as "the websites and online tools that facilitate interactions between users by providing them opportunities to share information, opinions, and interests" (Swar & Hameed, 2017, p. 141). Essentially, it represents a mode of communication and content exchange enabled by digital technologies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, among others. As students increasingly engage with these platforms for both academic and recreational purposes, they are exposed to diverse forms of content and are

expected to cultivate digital literacy, particularly regarding the responsible and secure use of social media. When utilized constructively, social media has the potential to disseminate positive, innovative, and productive ideas that contribute to societal development. In this regard, it serves as a valuable resource for youth empowerment. However, excessive or maladaptive use of social media may also adversely affect students' psychological well-being.

Psychological well-being refers to an individual's overall subjective evaluation of their own life, encompassing both cognitive and affective dimensions (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012). It includes components such as happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Diener, 1984). Theoretical models of well-being integrate both top-down and bottom-up influences wherein individuals with inherently positive dispositions tend to interpret experiences more favorably (top-down), while the accumulation of positive experiences and the absence of negative ones enhance well-being (bottom-up) (Brief et al., 1993; Diener & Larson, 1993). Engagement with social networking sites often facilitates opportunities for social comparison. Persistent self-evaluation and comparison with others have been empirically linked to detrimental psychological outcomes (White, Langer, Yariv, & Welch, 2006). These platforms frequently enable users to contrast their personal experiences with the seemingly idealized achievements of others, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and depressive symptoms (Clark et al., 2018).

Recent empirical evidence suggests that the influence of social media on students' psychological well-being is contingent upon the amount of time dedicated to specific platforms and the nature of activities performed on them. Moreover, such research underscores the necessity of comprehensively examining both the constructive and adverse implications of social media use at the university level. Scholars increasingly emphasize the urgency of investigating how the duration and patterns of social media engagement shape students' psychological well-being.

Accordingly, the present research aims to explore the patterns of social media usage among university students and to assess its implications for their psychological well-being. Specifically, this study seeks to identify and analyze both the beneficial and detrimental effects of social media engagement on the overall psychological health of students in higher education settings.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

A substantial body of literature has previously examined multiple dimensions of social media; nevertheless, the core objective of the present study is to critically investigate the influence of social media usage on the psychological well-being of university students. This focus is grounded in the recognition that the diverse range of social media applications exerts multifaceted effects both facilitative and detrimental on students' mental health and emotional adjustment. In particular, the study endeavors to delineate the dualistic nature of

social media engagement by exploring how specific patterns of use contribute either to psychological enrichment or to psychological distress among students in higher education.

Empirical evidence suggests that students who engage with social media platforms in a constructive and goal-oriented manner are more likely to perceive these digital spaces as credible, resourceful, and supportive learning and communication tools. Conversely, unregulated or excessive engagement with such platforms often results in counterproductive outcomes, as students may become preoccupied with non-beneficial activities that divert their attention from academic responsibilities and personal growth. Consequently, fostering mindful and purposeful utilization of social media is essential to minimize its adverse psychological repercussions and to harness its potential as a medium for intellectual and social development.

Furthermore, this study aims to enhance awareness among both students and their parents regarding the psychological implications of social media use. By emphasizing the importance of balanced and responsible digital engagement, the research aspires to contribute to more informed behavioral practices and improved well-being among university populations.

The conceptual framework underpinning this research is derived from two seminal studies that have substantially informed the theoretical grounding of this investigation. The first was conducted by Debbie Moga (Spring, 2019), and the second by Nida Javed (2017). Together, these works provide a foundational empirical and conceptual basis for examining the intricate relationship between social media utilization and psychological well-being within the academic context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Social media exerts a profound influence on the psychological well-being of university students, shaping their mental health in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, constructive engagement with social media platforms can enhance psychological well-being by fostering social connection, emotional support, and access to informational resources. On the other hand, excessive or maladaptive use may contribute to psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and diminished life satisfaction.

The primary objective of the present research is to examine patterns of social media usage among students in the higher education context and to investigate its impact on their psychological well-being. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the extent to which social media engagement contributes to both the enhancement and deterioration of students' mental health at the university level.
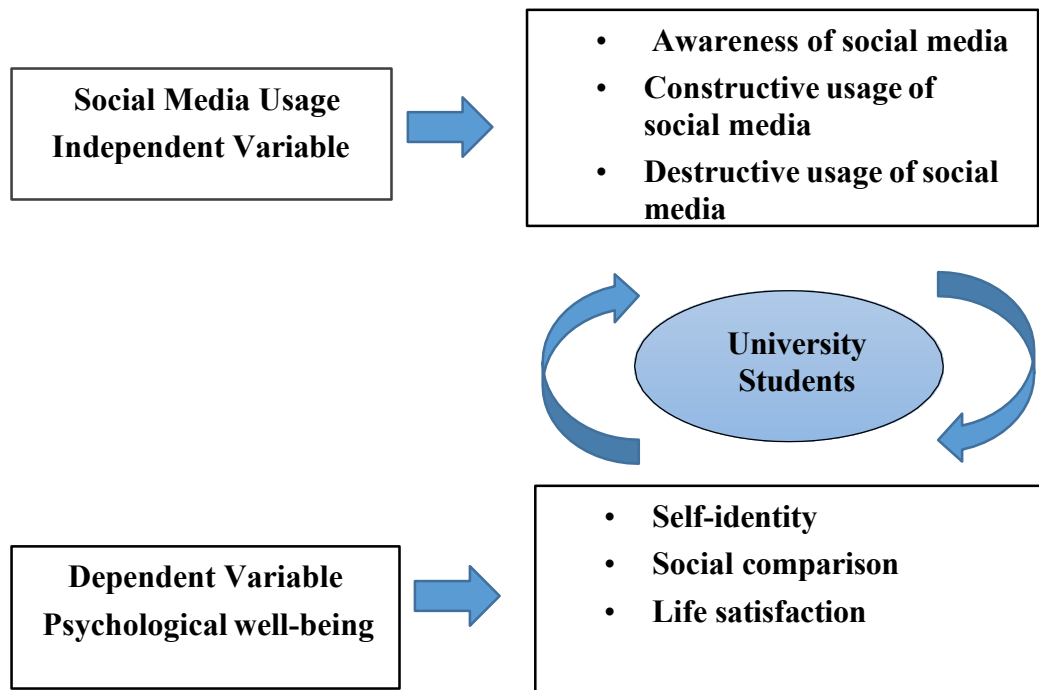
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of social media usage and its effects

Significance of the research study

The present research study holds considerable significance in multiple respects. Primarily, university students are regarded as the principal beneficiaries, as the study aims to enhance their awareness of the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being. Furthermore, this investigation explores both the positive and negative influences of social media engagement on the psychological well-being of university students. The topic is particularly important because, while social media can serve as a beneficial tool that fosters communication, emotional expression, and mental health improvement, it can also exert adverse effects—contributing to stress, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress when misused or overused.

In addition, the findings of this research are expected to broaden the understanding of teachers and parents regarding the dual nature of social media's impact on students' psychological well-being. By providing insight into both the constructive and detrimental consequences of social media engagement, the study may serve as a valuable resource for those seeking to manage or mitigate the negative outcomes associated with excessive social media use. Moreover, this research contributes to the growing body of literature addressing the implications of digital media on mental health and offers practical implications for promoting healthier and more balanced social media behaviors among students.

Overall, the outcomes of this study are anticipated to benefit not only university students but also their parents and educators, as it provides a comprehensive understanding

of how social media usage influences psychological well-being within the higher education context.

Review of the related literature

Tariq et al. (2019) analyzed the effects of smartphone use on the psychological well-being of school-aged children in Lahore, Pakistan, and found that prolonged exposure to smartphones was significantly associated with both behavioral and psychological problems. Their findings indicated that the increasing accessibility of social media through smartphones has further intensified these challenges by making the online world more easily available to children.

Vannucci and Ohannessian (2019) examined the role of social technology use in the psychological well-being of early adolescents. Their study revealed that higher levels of social technology use were associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, behavioral irresponsibility, family conflicts, and reduced emotional support from family and friends. Conversely, adolescents who reported lower levels of technology use exhibited few or no psychological problems. The authors concluded that excessive use of social technology was particularly problematic for children between the ages of eleven and fourteen.

Alkan and Doğan (2018) reported that there was no significant relationship between social media use and the well-being of secondary school students. They attributed this to the limited extent of social media use among students of this age group, suggesting that such minimal engagement neither enhances nor diminishes their psychological well-being. Furthermore, their analysis showed no significant differences in outcomes between male and female students.

Dhir et al. (2018) found that compulsive use of social media often leads to social media fatigue, which subsequently increases levels of anxiety and depression among students. Their study demonstrated that social media indirectly affects psychological well-being by creating a sense of fear of missing out and mental exhaustion resulting from continuous online engagement.

Weinstein (2018) observed that the relationship between social media and well-being is multifaceted and context-dependent. In some cases, social media use has positive outcomes, while in others, it produces negative effects. The author described this dynamic as an emotional balance that varies across individuals and social settings.

Khurshid and Haroon (2018) concluded that social media plays an important role in students' lives by enhancing their access to information and supporting their academic pursuits. They argued that media use is directly related to psychological well-being, particularly among young people such as university students.

Clark et al. (2018) emphasized that social media platforms offer extensive opportunities for users to evaluate their own lives through comparison with others. When individuals compare their personal experiences with the perceived achievements of others, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, envy, or depression. The study also noted that

users who passively browse content without active participation are more likely to suffer from the negative effects of social comparison. Furthermore, Clark et al. (2018) argued that users often fail to recognize that much of what they see on social media is idealized or exaggerated, which can distort their perceptions of reality and reduce their sense of well-being.

Mcdool et al. (2016) discovered that the use of social technology negatively affects students' overall well-being. Social media users reported lower levels of satisfaction with their academic life and general happiness, although their interpersonal relationships were relatively unaffected. The study also highlighted that female students experienced greater adverse effects than male students. The authors suggested that online identity formation is not an individual process but a socially constructed one, as young people continually modify and manage their online profiles to align with social norms, privacy expectations, and peer group standards. This view aligns with the findings of Peter, Valkenburg, and Fluckiger (2009), who argued that self-representation in digital spaces is shaped by collective social influences.

Several factors contribute to the concept of personal well-being, among which life satisfaction is one of the most significant. However, life satisfaction is often defined differently across studies. Sumner describes it as an individual's positive assessment and evaluation of life expectations (as cited in Prasoon and Chaturvedi, 2016), while Andrew views it as the ultimate outcome of a person's life experiences that reflect how successfully one's goals have been achieved (as cited in Prasoon and Chaturvedi, 2016). For the purpose of the present study, the definition proposed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) has been adopted. They define life satisfaction as a cognitive and evaluative judgment in which individuals assess their living conditions in relation to personal standards and the broader expectations of society.

Methodology

The present study employed a quantitative research design to systematically examine the relationship between social media usage and students' psychological well-being. A descriptive and quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate, as the study sought to explore patterns of social media engagement and its potential effects on mental and emotional health among students. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire, designed to obtain measurable and objective responses from the participants. This design enabled the researcher to analyze numerical data and identify trends and associations relevant to the study objectives.

The target population comprised students enrolled in teacher education and health and physical education programs within the social sciences discipline. Specifically, participants included those studying in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth semesters of their respective programs during the afternoon session. The total population consisted of seventy-one students, including thirty-one males and forty females, all of whom were selected as the

sample for the study. The entire population was included to ensure comprehensive data representation. In research, a sample refers to a subset of respondents selected from a larger group for the purpose of collecting and analyzing data, and in this case, the whole population served that function.

For data collection, a self-developed questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of six indicators and twelve items, designed to measure students' social media usage and its psychological impact. The instrument was distributed directly among the participants, and the completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher. The study was delimited to students from the social sciences faculty, specifically those enrolled in educational sciences and health and physical education programs across the identified semesters. These delimitations were established to maintain focus and ensure the feasibility of the research process.

Data analysis and presentation

The collected data was analyzed through simple percentage technique. The results of collected data are shown in the following tables:

Table No.4.1 *Awareness about social media*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
AS1	Social media made students life easier.	42	23	6	0	0
		-59%	-32%	-9%	0%	0%
AS2	Social media provides useful platform for academic group works.	32	32	4	2	0
		-46%	-46%	-6%	-3%	0%

Table No 4.1, first statement shows that 59% of students strongly agreed, 32% Agreed, 9% neutral, 0% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed. This meant that the social media made students' life easier. Statement no.2 shows that 46% of students strongly agreed, 46% Agreed, 06% neutral, 03% disagreed. This meant that majority of the students agreed that social media provides useful platform for academic group works.

Table No.4.1 *Constructive usage of social media*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
CS1	Social media has played a positive role in my life.	13	31	21	3	1
		-19%	-44%	-30%	-4%	-1%
CS2	I have a healthy sense of well-being regarding social media.	14	24	23	7	2
		-20%	-34%	-33%	-10%	-3%

Table No 4.2, first statement shows that 19% of students strongly agreed, 44% Agreed, 30% neutral, 04% disagreed and 01% strongly disagreed. This meant that the social media has played a positive role students' life. Statement no.2 shows that 20% of students strongly agreed, 34% Agreed, 33% neutral, 10% disagreed and 03% strongly disagreed. This meant that most of the students have a healthy sense of well-being regarding social media.

Table No.4.3 *Destructive usage of social media*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
DS1	Social media has affected my hours of sleep.	27	22	14	4	2
		-39%	-31%	-20%	-6%	-3%
DS2	Social media has a negative impact on my academic performance.	7	15	23	19	7
		-10%	-21%	-32%	-27%	-10%

Table No 4.3, first statement shows that 39% of students strongly agreed, 31% Agreed, 20% neutral, 6% disagreed and 03% strongly disagreed. This meant that the social media has affected students' hours of sleep. Statement no.2 shows that 10% of students strongly agreed, 21% Agreed, 32% neutral, 27% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed. This meant that the social media has negatively influenced on some students' academic performance.

Table No.4.4 *Self-identity*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
SI1	Social media has changed my personal goals.	16	17	17	11	10
		-23%	-24%	-24%	-16%	-14%
SI2	Social media has altered my personal beliefs.	8	14	31	15	3
		-11%	-20%	-44%	-21%	-4%

Table No 4.4, first statement shows that 23% of students strongly agreed, 24% Agreed, 24%

neutral, 16% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed. This meant that the social media has changed most students' personal goals. Statement no.2 shows that 11% of students strongly agreed, 20% Agreed, 44% neutral, 21% disagreed and 04% strongly disagreed. This meant that most of the students are agreed that social media has altered their personal beliefs.

Table No.4.5 *Social comparison*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
SC1	I feel stressed when, I compare myself with other people on social media.	11	13	18	14	15
		-16%	-18%	-25%	-20%	-21%
SC2	I feel stressed to behave in certain way because of social media.	12	13	20	16	10
		-17%	-18%	-28%	-23%	-14%

Table No 4.5, first statement shows that 16% of students strongly agreed, 18% Agreed, 25% neutral, 20% disagreed and 21% strongly disagreed. This meant that most of the students' feel stressed when, they compare their self with other people on social media. Statement no.2 shows that 17% of students strongly agreed, 18% Agreed, 28% neutral, 23% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed. This meant that most of the students feel stressed to behave in certain way because of social media.

Table No.4.6 *Life satisfaction*

Code	Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SD
LF1	Social media has improved my life satisfaction.	18	27	17	7	2
		-25%	-38%	-24%	-10%	-3%
LF2	I am comfortable being myself on social media.	21	25	17	5	3
		-30%	-35%	-24%	-7%	-4%

Table No 4.6, first statement shows that 25% of students strongly agreed, 38% Agreed, 24% neutral, 10% disagreed and 03% strongly disagreed. This meant that social media has improved students' life satisfaction. Statement no.2 shows that 30% of students strongly agreed, 35% Agreed, 24% neutral, 07% disagreed and 04% strongly disagreed. This meant that majority of the students are comfortable being their self on social media.

Findings

Data were analyzed using a simple percentage formula to address the research questions. The findings revealed that social media plays a significant role in students'

academic and personal development. The majority of participants agreed that social media simplifies life by enhancing communication, improving information access, and supporting collaborative academic activities. Students also viewed it as a valuable platform for exchanging ideas and engaging in group projects. However, a considerable number of respondents indicated that excessive social media use disrupts sleep patterns and negatively affects academic performance.

The results further showed that social media enables self-expression and helps students establish new friendships while broadening their social networks. Despite these benefits, it was also found that extensive social media use could lead to issues such as cyberbullying, social anxiety, and depression. Students who spend prolonged periods online were more likely to experience distraction, poor sleep quality, and reduced academic focus. Excessive use was also linked to lower academic achievement, as students often replaced study time with online engagement.

Additionally, the study revealed that social media influences students' thoughts, values, and lifestyles, shaping personality development through exposure to diverse ideas and cultures. It facilitates knowledge acquisition through online learning and cross-cultural interaction, encouraging intellectual growth. However, it also fosters social comparison, where individuals evaluate themselves against others, leading to either motivation or emotional distress. Responsible social media usage was found to enhance life satisfaction and psychological well-being, whereas overuse contributed to mental fatigue and decreased contentment.

Discussion

The overall findings suggest that social media has a dual effect on students' psychological well-being, functioning both as a beneficial academic resource and a potential source of stress. On the positive side, social media offers opportunities for collaboration, access to information, and social interaction, which contribute to students' emotional stability and academic success. Conversely, its excessive use may lead to anxiety, distraction, and psychological fatigue. Many students expressed that comparing themselves to others online heightened their stress levels and reduced self-esteem.

These findings are consistent with prior research. Vannucci and Ohannessian (2019) found that higher levels of social media use among adolescents were associated with greater emotional distress, while moderate use had fewer negative effects. Alkan and Doğan (2018) observed no significant correlation between social media use and well-being among secondary school students, indicating that the impact varies by age and intensity of use. Similarly, Khurshid and Haroon (2018) concluded that social media enhances students' knowledge and academic engagement, thereby improving psychological well-being. In contrast, Mcdool et al. (2016) found that excessive use reduced life satisfaction and academic motivation, particularly among female students. The present study aligns with these findings, suggesting that the effects of social media depend on its purpose and the level of self-

regulation exercised by users.

Conclusions

The study concluded that social media is an integral part of students' lives, influencing their academic and psychological experiences in both positive and negative ways. Most participants agreed that social media facilitates communication, supports teamwork, and improves access to educational content. When used constructively, it enhances emotional well-being and overall life satisfaction. However, overuse was associated with academic decline, sleep disturbance, and stress due to social comparison. Students who compared themselves frequently with others reported lower self-esteem and greater dissatisfaction. It is therefore recommended that students maintain a balanced approach to social media use, emphasizing self-discipline and academic priorities to sustain positive mental health.

Limitations

The study faced several limitations. Some respondents were reluctant to provide complete or candid responses, which may have affected data accuracy. Advanced statistical software such as SPSS was not employed, limiting the depth of data analysis. The research relied solely on close-ended questions, restricting qualitative insights. Additionally, the scope of the study was confined to a specific department within one faculty, which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the following recommendations are proposed:

Awareness and Guidance: Educators should raise awareness among students about the constructive and academic use of social media, integrating creative and task-based activities into learning.

Time Management: Students should regulate their time on social media and allocate more time to academic reading and productive learning, thereby reducing stress and improving performance.

Avoiding Social Comparison: Students should refrain from comparing themselves to others on social media, as such behaviors often lead to psychological strain and dissatisfaction.

Future Recommendations

Future research may expand to include participants from multiple faculties and academic disciplines to ensure broader generalization. Studies may also be conducted at the school and college levels to compare the effects of social media across age groups. Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to employ advanced statistical tools such as SPSS to yield more comprehensive and accurate findings.

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