

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE, PEER INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL COMPARISON IN ADOLESCENTS

Aasma Batool^{a*}, Isha Ashfaq^b, & Ayesha Ramzan^c

^aAssistant Professor of Psychology, Govt. Graduate College for Women, Baghbanpura, Lahore, Pakistan

^bGovt. Graduate College for Women, Baghbanpura, Lahore, Pakistan

^cGovt. Graduate College for Women, Baghbanpura, Lahore, Pakistan

*Correspondence to: Aasma Batool, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Govt. Graduate College for Women, Baghbanpura, Lahore, Pakistan.
E-mail: syedaasma98@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationships between social media usage, peer influence, and social comparison among adolescents. The study aimed to examine whether social media usage and peer influence significantly affect social comparison. Correlational research design was used, and data were collected from 300 adolescents (161 females, 139 males), aged 14 to 19 years, and from different educational institutions. Non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed. The assessment tools included a Demographic Information Sheet, Social Media Usage Scale, Peer Pressure Scale, and Social Comparison Scale. Reliability analysis indicated that all scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 70. Descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, Independent samples t-test, and Multiple Linear Regression Analysis using SPSS were used to examine the data. Results revealed a significant positive relationship between social media usage and social comparison, as well as between peer influence and social comparison. Regression analysis indicated that peer influence significantly predicted social comparison, whereas social media usage was not a significant predictor. Independent samples t-test analysis showed a statistically significant gender difference in peer influence, with males scoring higher than females, indicating greater susceptibility to peer influence among male adolescents. However, no significant gender differences were found for social media usage or social comparison. The findings highlight the important role of social media engagement and peer dynamics in shaping adolescents' self-evaluation. They indicate the need for awareness and guidance around responsible social media use. Such efforts can support healthier self-perceptions and overall well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a key developmental stage involving changes in social relationships, identity, and self-evaluation (Steinberg, 2014). During this period, peer relationships can shape attitudes and behaviors as adolescents seek social acceptance (Brown et al., 2009). Social media increases exposure to peers and idealized content, which may encourage social comparison (Valkenburg et al., 2011; Fardouly et al., 2016). Peer influence may further shape these self-evaluative processes through social norms and the desire for acceptance (Santor et al., 2000). Therefore, the present study examines the relationships among social media usage, peer influence, and social comparison among adolescents.

Peer Influence

Peer influence refers to the ways in which adolescents' attitudes and behaviors may be shaped by their interactions with peers and the desire for social acceptance (Brown et al., 2009). During adolescence, peer norms and expectations may influence how individuals behave and evaluate themselves in relation to others (Santor et al., 2000). Social media may further extend these peer interactions by increasing adolescents' exposure to others' opinions, behaviors, and social content. Therefore, peer influence may play an important role in adolescents' social and self-evaluative experiences.

Social Comparison

Social comparison is the process of evaluating oneself by comparing personal characteristics and abilities with others (Festinger, 1954). During adolescence, such comparisons become important as individuals develop their identity, self-worth, and perceptions of appearance (Jones, 2001). Social media provides frequent opportunities for comparison by exposing adolescents to peers, influencers, and idealized lifestyles, which may contribute to negative self-evaluation, body dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2009). Peer expectations and online feedback may further reinforce these comparisons, making social comparison an important aspect of adolescents' social experiences (Nesi et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory explains that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, beliefs, and characteristics with others. During adolescence, interactions with peers and exposure to social media may increase opportunities for comparison. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory complements this view by suggesting that adolescents learn through observing and imitating others, including peers and social media users, whose behaviors and feedback may influence their attitudes and actions. Katz et al.'s (1973) Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that adolescents actively use social media to fulfill needs such as communication, entertainment, information, and self-expression, increasing their exposure to others. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory further suggests that social group membership contributes to identity development, while peer norms and online interactions may shape adolescents' self-perceptions. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding the interconnected roles of social media usage, peer influence, and social comparison during adolescence.

II. METHOD

Participants

The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational design, which allowed for the assessment of the variables at a single point in time and was consistent with the survey approach. A purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data, as the target population consisted of university students aged 18 to 35 years who used smartphones and were active on social media from the Sociology, Psychology, and Media departments. Therefore, purposive sampling was considered the most appropriate technique for the study. A total of 270 students were approached in Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Rawalpindi from public and private universities. Of these, 230 participants completed the questionnaire and fulfilled the study criteria. The study included 230 participants, with no missing data. Participants had a mean age of 24.95 years ($SD = 4.12$), with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years. The largest proportion of participants was 28 years old (26.1%), followed by 20 years (24.3%) and 27 years (16.5%). Regarding academic department, 81 participants (35.2%) were from Psychology, 79 (34.3%) were from Sociology, and 70 (30.4%) were from Media. The sample consisted of 118 men (51.3%) and 112 women (48.7%). In terms of residence, 76 participants (33.0%) were from Faisalabad, followed by 68 (29.6%) from Lahore, 58 (25.2%) from Gujranwala, and 28 (12.2%) from Rawalpindi. Overall, the sample was relatively balanced across academic departments and gender, while participants were recruited from four major cities of Punjab and the surrounding region.

Measures

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS; Andreassen et al., 2016) was used for assessing the social media addiction. The scale comprises 6 items with items Likert ranges from very rarely (1) to very often (5), the Cronbach alpha of the scale in this study was 0.72 which is satisfactory. Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was utilized to measure the psychological distress; the scale comprises 21 items and its Likert ranges from 0 to 3. The higher score depicts higher level psychological distress. The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale in this study was 0.91 which is excellent.

Procedure

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the APA 7th edition. Departmental permission was obtained before data collection. Participants were approached with a consent form, demographic questionnaire, and study instruments. First, participants were provided with a consent form that clearly explained their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw from the study without any adverse consequences. After signing the consent form, participants were provided with the demographic questionnaire and study instruments, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. After data collection, the data were entered into IBM SPSS 27 version for analysis. It is noteworthy that the data were collected physically; therefore, only universities accessible to the authors were included in the data collection process.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Correlational Analysis (N = 230)

Variables	1	2
1. Social Media Addiction	--	.32***
2. Psychological Distress		--

***p < .001

The above table shows a significant and positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress.

Table II: Mean Comparison Between Students of Sociology, Psychology and Media Department (N = 230)

Variables	PD (n = 81)	SoD (n = 79)	MD (n = 70)	F	p	η^2
	M (SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)			
Social Media Addiction	19.08 (4.94)	18.25 (5.17)	18.74 (5.03)	.54	.57	.005
Psychological Distress	38.93 (12.67)	42.55 (12.73)	45.95 (11.69)	6.02	.003	.05

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare social media addiction and psychological distress among students from the Psychology, Sociology, and Media Departments. The results showed that there was no significant difference in social media addiction scores among Psychology students (M = 19.08, SD = 4.94), Sociology students (M = 18.25, SD = 5.17), and Media students (M = 18.74, SD = 5.03), F = 0.54, p = .57, η^2 = .005. In contrast, a significant difference was found in psychological distress scores among Psychology students (M = 38.93, SD = 12.67), Sociology students (M = 42.55, SD = 12.73), and Media students (M = 45.95, SD = 11.69), F = 6.02, p = .003, η^2 = .05.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrated a significant positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress indicating that students with higher levels of social media addiction also reported greater psychological distress. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that problematic social media use is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress among university students (Shannon et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2020). Similarly, previous research has indicated that excessive social media engagement may be associated with poorer psychological well-being and greater emotional difficulties among young people (Keles et al., 2020). The finding can be explained through Compensatory Internet Use Theory, which proposes that individuals may engage in excessive Internet use to cope with negative emotions, psychological difficulties, or unmet needs in their offline

lives (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). From this perspective, students experiencing psychological distress may turn to social media to temporarily escape from negative emotions, seek social support, or regulate their mood. However, excessive reliance on social media for coping may develop into problematic or addictive patterns of use, potentially maintaining or exacerbating psychological difficulties. The finding can also be understood through Social Comparison Theory, as frequent exposure to idealized content on social media may increase upward social comparisons and contribute to negative self-evaluations and psychological distress (Verduyn et al., 2020). Therefore, the significant positive association observed in the present study suggests that social media addiction and psychological distress are closely related among university students.

The findings also indicated that social media addiction did not significantly differ among Psychology, Sociology, and Media students, whereas psychological distress differed significantly across the three departments. Although the overall ANOVA was significant for psychological distress, the descriptive means showed that Media students reported the highest distress followed by Sociology students and Psychology students. This pattern may reflect differences in academic demands, technology exposure, or other contextual factors, although these explanations were not directly examined. In the Pakistani context, students across disciplines may experience social media similarly because digital platforms are widely integrated into academic communication, social interaction, and entertainment. However, differences in psychological distress may be associated with discipline-specific academic pressures or learning environments. Previous research has linked problematic social media use with psychological distress among university students (Ahmed et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of considering academic context when examining students' psychological well-being.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress and to compare these variables among university students from Psychology, Sociology, and Media departments in Pakistan. The findings demonstrated a significant positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress, indicating that students with higher levels of social media addiction also reported greater psychological distress. The results further showed that social media addiction did not differ significantly among Psychology, Sociology, and Media students. However, a significant difference was observed in psychological distress across the three departments, with Media students reporting the highest mean level, followed by Sociology students and Psychology students. Overall, the study highlights the relationship between problematic social media use and psychological distress among university students and suggests that these concerns should be addressed across academic disciplines. However, the study has some limitations. The use of English-language standardized questionnaires without specific cultural adaptation may have affected participants' understanding of some items, and the use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the inclusion of only three academic departments and the cross-sectional design restricts the broader applicability and causal interpretation of the results. Future studies should use culturally adapted and validated measures, probability-based sampling techniques, students from a wider range of academic disciplines, and longitudinal research designs. Such research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan.

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