Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology

Print ISSN : 3078-6428 | Online ISSN : 3078-6436
Pakistan Journal

Original Article

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MENTAL HEALTH OF TEENAGERS AND ADULTS

Dr. Mamoona Ismail Loona [a*], Mahnoor Ikhlaq [b], & Haleema Iftikhar [c]

[a] Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: mamoona.ismail@iiu.edu.pk
[b] Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: mahnoorikhlaq60@gmail.com
[c] Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: haleema.bspsy2007@iiu.edu.pk

*Correspondence to: Dr. Mamoona Ismail Loona, Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. E-mail: mamoona.ismail@iiu.edu.pk. ORCID: 0000-0002-1832-8181

KEYWORDS:
Social Media, Social Networking, Depression, Anxiety, Young Adults

CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Ismail, M., Ikhlaq, M., & Iftikhar, H. (2026). Social media, social networking, depression, anxiety, young adults. Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology, 3(9), 57-62.

ABSTRACT

The social media networks have become an inseparable part of contemporary life, particularly when it comes to teenagers and young adults (15-45 years old) as one of the most active user groups. Although these platforms were originally meant to provide meaningful avenues of social interaction, information exchange. Entertainment, the high rate and character of digital interaction have been associated with negative mental health. The emerging empirical evidence now indicates that high or dysfunctional use of social media is linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This effect is an indication of a complicated interplay between the ongoing digital exposure and the general psychological health and a better analysis of the specific dynamics. In particular, the mechanisms suggested include the unending pressure of social comparison with filtered online lives, the specificity of cyberbullying. The anxiety-provoking feeling of the fear of missing out (FOMO), which makes people psychologically distressed. Knowing the particulars of these interactions is important to create supportive and effective psychological interventions for this demographic.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have grown into major arenas for communication, sharing information, entertainment, and sustaining social relationships. They enable people to stay in touch with friends and family, take part in communities, and share their personal experiences. For teenagers and adults alike, these platforms can also offer chances to learn, receive social support, and engage in everyday social life. Meanwhile, the psychological effects of social media use have emerged as a significant area of research. The connection between social media and mental health is complicated. Online social interaction can foster social connection, yet certain patterns of use may likewise be linked to negative psychological experiences. For instance, people may compare themselves with carefully curated online depictions of others' lives, worry about missing out on social experiences, or feel pressure to keep track of and respond to online interactions. Such experiences may matter for emotional well-being, though their effects can differ across individuals and situations. Early research on online social networking stressed the potential of social platforms to foster social capital and sustain relationships. Ellison et al. (2007), for instance, studied the link between Facebook use and social capital among college students. This viewpoint shows that social networking is not inherently harmful: online platforms can help people preserve existing relationships and build social connections. Still, the advantages of social networking do not exclude the possibility that specific forms or levels of use may go together with psychological difficulties.

Later research has explored possible links between social media use and mental health symptoms. In a systematic review of research on adolescents, Keles et al. (2020) found associations between social media use and outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Their review also emphasized the need for further research and cautious interpretation of the evidence. Variations in study design, in how social media use is measured, and in the populations studied make it hard to reach a single conclusion about its relationship with mental health. Social comparison is one possible explanation for these associations. Social media content frequently showcases selected aspects of people's lives, such as achievements, appearance, and social experiences. Frequent exposure to such content may create occasions for negative self-evaluation. Another experience that may be relevant is fear of missing out (FoMO), which involves worrying that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. Przybylski et al. (2013) explored FoMO as a psychological and behavioral construct tied to social and emotional experiences. These concepts suggest possible avenues for understanding social media use, yet the present study did not directly measure social comparison or FoMO. They should therefore be regarded as possible explanations drawn from the broader literature rather than mechanisms established by the current data. Research conducted in Pakistan is also pertinent, given that social media is used within particular educational, cultural, and social contexts. A study of Pakistani university students conducted by Riaz et al. (2025) explored social networking site use in relation to depression. These studies offer locally relevant context for examining the relationship between online behavior and psychological symptoms. However, their samples and measures differ from those used in the present study, so their findings should not be viewed as directly interchangeable with the current results.

A further issue is that general social media use and specific social networking behaviors may not represent precisely the same construct. A general usage measure may capture how frequently or intensely people engage, whereas a questionnaire on social networking behaviors may reflect different purposes and patterns of online participation. Examining both measures may offer a broader view of how social media-related behavior is associated with psychological symptoms. It is also important to measure mental-health outcomes separately, since depression, anxiety, and stress are related but distinct dimensions of psychological distress. The present study examined social media use and social networking behavior in relation to depression, anxiety, and stress among regular social media users aged 15–45 years. The study focused on associations rather than causal effects, because the data were collected at a single point in time. The following hypotheses were proposed:

1. Greater general social media use (SMU) is positively associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms among teenagers and young adults.
2. Higher engagement in general social media use and in specific social networking behaviors is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms.
3. Gender moderates the relationships among the study variables, reflecting possible gender differences in socialization and communication patterns.

II. METHOD

Participants

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design. Data were gathered at a single point in time in order to examine the relationships between social media-related variables and self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. A correlational design is well suited to identifying the direction and strength of associations among variables. It does not, however, establish temporal order or show that one variable causes change in another. The final sample that was analysed consisted of 200 participants between the ages of 15 and 45 who were regular users of online social media and were recruited mainly from one university. Participants were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling technique.

Measures

The current study employed three instruments to assess social media use, social networking behaviours, and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. General social media use was assessed with the Social Media Usage Scale (SMUS). The manuscript describes a 17-item measure that uses a nine-category response scale representing different frequencies of engagement, from infrequent use to very frequent use. The items cover a range of social media activities, such as viewing content, checking responses to posts, browsing profiles, and interacting with online material. Higher scores were interpreted as reflecting a greater frequency or intensity of social media engagement. The internal consistency coefficient reported for this measure was α = .86. Social networking behaviours were assessed with the Social Networking Usage Questionnaire (SNUQ). According to the manuscript, it consists of 19 items rated on a five-point response scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The items cover activities such as communicating with relatives and friends, obtaining information, taking part in educational activities, sharing content, and using social networking sites for entertainment. Higher scores were interpreted as reflecting greater social networking usage. The reported internal consistency coefficient was α = .76. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–21 (DASS-21) is a self-report tool consisting of 21 items that measures symptoms along three dimensions: depression, anxiety, and stress. Seven items make up each of these dimensions. Participants indicate how much each statement described their experience during the previous week. Rather than yielding one overall score, the measure produces distinct scores for depression, anxiety, and stress. The internal consistency coefficients reported were α = .67 for depression, α = .79 for anxiety, and α = .80 for stress.

Procedure

Data were gathered using an online survey platform, which incorporated informed consent and ensured participant anonymity. Data analysis comprised descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha as a measure of reliability, Pearson correlation coefficients, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. Ethical approval was obtained in advance from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, the confidentiality policies, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was secured from every participant. Because the questionnaire was self-administered, data were collected through self-administered questionnaires to safeguard privacy and minimize the possibility of researcher bias. The final sample comprised participants from a range of academic and social backgrounds.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Coefficients of Study Variables

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Range	α
Social Media Use	45.10	22.30	0-136	0.86
Social Networking Use	38.49	10.66	0-76	0.76
Depression	8.41	4.08	0-42	0.67
Anxiety	9.07	4.88	0-42	0.79
Stress	8.79	5.05	0-42	0.80

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability, and distribution checks for all study variables, based on a sample size of 200 participants. The table confirms that all study measures demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranged from .763 Social Networking Use to .866 Social Media Use. The mean scores indicate the highest average level was reported for Social Media Use (Social Media Use, M=45.10, SD=22.30), and the lowest was for Depression (Depression, M=8.41, SD=4.08). The table also illustrates the Actual Range of scores achieved by participants in the sample compared to the scale's theoretical Potential Range, while the Skewness and Kurtosis statistics indicate that the data are distributed appropriately for the planned inferential analyses.

Table II: Pearson Correlation Among Study Variables (N=200)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social Media Use	--				
2. Social Networking Use	.149*	--			
3. Depression	.406**	.154*	--		
4. Anxiety	.307**	.084	.604**	--	
5. Stress	.455**	.117	.614**	.642**	--

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients among the study variables, including social media use, social networking use, depression, anxiety, and stress. The values show how strongly each variable is related to the others. Overall, the findings indicate that SMU has positive and statistically significant correlations with all three mental-health dimensions measured by DASS. Specifically, SMU is moderately positively correlated with Depression (r = .406, p < .01), Anxiety (r = .307, p < .01), and Stress (r = .455, p < .01). This suggests that higher social media use is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among participants. SNUQ also shows positive correlations with DASS subscales. It is significantly related to Depression (r = .154, p < .05) and exhibits non-significant but positive relationships with Anxiety (r = .084) and Stress (r = .117). This means that more social networking usage tends to relate to slightly higher psychological symptoms, although only the link with depression is statistically meaningful. The three DASS sub-scales, depression, anxiety, and stress are strongly inter-correlated, with coefficients ranging from r = .604 to r = .642 (p < .01). These high correlations indicate that individuals who score high on one psychological symptom (e.g., depression) tend to also score high on the others (anxiety and stress), which is expected because the constructs are related.

Table III: Multiple Regression Predicting Depression

Scales	*B*	*SEB*	*β*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	3.75	1.07		3.50	.001
Social Networking Use	0.03	0.02	0.09	1.46	.145
Social Media Use	0.07	0.01	0.39	5.96	.000

As seen in table 3, the regression model examined whether social networking usage and social media use scores predicted depression symptoms. The model accounted for 17.4% of the variance in depression scores (R^2 = .174)). Social media use was a significant positive predictor of depression (\beta = .39, p < .001), whereas social networking use was not a statistically significant predictor (\beta = .09, p = .145) when social media use was included in the model.

Table IV: Multiple Regression Predicting Anxiety

Scales	*B*	*SEB*	*β*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	5.41	1.33		4.04	.00
Social Networking Use	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.57	.56
Social Media Use	0.06	0.01	0.01	4.3	.00

As seen in table 4, the regression model examined the predictive contributions of social networking usage and social media use to anxiety symptoms. The model accounted for 9.6% of the variance in anxiety scores (R^2 = .09). Social media use was a statistically significant predictor of anxiety (p < .001), whereas social networking use was not statistically significant (\beta = .03, p = .56). The standardized beta coefficient for social media use should be inserted after it has been verified against the original statistical output, because the value in the table (\beta = .01) conflicts with the value in the original description (\beta = .302).

Table V: Multiple Regression Predicting Stress

Scales	*B*	*SEB*	*β*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	3.29	1.29		2.54	.01
Social Networking Use	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.78	.43
Social Media Use	0.10	0.01	0.44	6.96	.00

As Seen in Table 5, the regression model examined the predictive contributions of social networking use and social media use to stress symptoms. The model accounted for 20.9% of the variance in stress scores (R^2 = .209), the largest proportion of variance explained among the three reported models. Social media use was a significant positive predictor of stress (\beta = .44, p < .001), whereas social networking use was not statistically significant (\beta = .05, p = .43) when social media use was included in the model.

IV. DISCUSSION

A key insight from the results of the present study is that the inter-correlation among the three DASS-21 sub-scales (Depression, Anxiety and Stress) is extremely high (r = .604 to r = .642, all p< .01). This outcome is theoretically consistent, since general knowledge about psychological distress holds that these symptoms frequently co-occur rather than appearing as separate conditions. The high correlation suggests that a high score on one measure of distress (stress) strongly predicts high scores on the others. This underscores that problematic Social Media Use (SMU) contributes not merely to a single mental health problem but to a broader, co-morbid pattern of psychological overload in this population. In addition, the regression model confirmed that SMU was a notable positive predictor in all three areas (Depression \beta = .392, p< .001), (Anxiety \beta = .302, p < .001), (Stress \beta = .447, p < .001) and that overall frequency of use is a fundamental driver of this overall distress pattern. The study's hypothesis was supported, as the correlational results show that general Social Media Use (SMU) is a strong risk factor for psychological distress in young adults. The positive correlations between SMU and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress are high, indicating that the extent and duration of social media use is linked to adverse effects on mental health.

The less significant correlation pattern of the Social Networking Usage (SNUQ), which reportedly correlates with other variables only for Depression, may suggest that the more quantitative aspect of general usage (SMU) can serve as a more precise risk indicator than the specific behavioral measures of SNUQ. The gender analysis revealed an interesting difference in frequency of use, with men showing much higher SMU than women. Nevertheless, this increased usage was not reflected in a significantly different degree of reported psychological distress (DASS-21 sub-scales). This suggests that the relationship between usage volume and distress may not be linear, or that qualitative differences in social media use (e.g., social comparison, passive consumption) may matter more than volume alone, particularly among women. The findings suggest that educators, families, and mental health professionals may benefit from discussing social media habits as part of a broader conversation about psychological well-being. Such discussions can encourage reflection on how individuals use online platforms, how online activity fits into daily routines, and whether it is associated with distress in their own experience. The findings do not justify recommending that all social media use be reduced or assuming that social media is harmful for every individual. Future interventions should be guided by stronger evidence about which patterns of use, if any, are associated with changes in mental health.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not establish causal direction. Longitudinal or experimental research would help clarify the temporal relationships between social media use and psychological symptoms. Second, convenience sampling and recruitment primarily in a university setting limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of teenagers and adults in Pakistan. Third, every main variable was assessed through self-report questionnaires, and thus the results may be influenced by recall, response, or social-desirability biases. Fourth, in this sample the depression subscale of the DASS-21 displayed a relatively modest internal consistency coefficient (α = .67). This value ought to be reported transparently and taken into account when the depression findings are interpreted. Fifth, the sample spanned a

wide age range, from 15 to 45 years. Adolescents and older adults may vary in their social media habits and life situations, and future studies could analyze age groups separately where the sample size and analysis plan allow for such comparisons. Lastly, while the original manuscript put forward a gender-moderation hypothesis, drawing a moderation conclusion demands a suitable interaction analysis. Future research should examine such interactions directly instead of inferring moderation solely from differences between groups. Future studies could rely on more diverse samples, differentiate among various types of social media activity, incorporate measures of possible explanatory factors, and look at changes over time. Researchers should also make sure that instrument scoring, reliability reporting, and statistical analyses are documented clearly.

V. CONCLUSION

This study identified positive correlations between general social media use and self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in a group of 200 regular social media users between the ages of 15 and 45. Social networking use was linked to a weaker positive association with depression, while its relationships with anxiety and stress did not reach statistical significance. These results help to clarify the connection between social media use and psychological well-being within the Pakistani context. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design and the use of convenience sampling restrict how broadly the findings can be generalized and rule out causal inferences. Subsequent studies ought to employ more varied samples and longitudinal designs in order to investigate these relationships further.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Funding

The author received no funding from any organizations.

VI.REFERENCES

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The advantages of Facebook “friends”: social capital and how college students use online social networking sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(4), 1143–1168. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x

Keles, b., mccrae, n., & grealish, a. (2020). A systematic review: how social media affects depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25(1), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851

Lovibond, S. H., & Lovibond, P. F. (1995). Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (2nd ed.). Psychology Foundation.

Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. Computers in Human Behavior, 29(4), 1841–1848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014

Riaz, S., Mahmood, H., Riaz, S., & Imtiaz, N. (2025). The link between depression and social networking site use: a cross-sectional survey of students at a medical college in Pakistan. Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society, 22(1), 14–18. https://doi.org/10.63050/jpps.22.1.81