



Social Media Use and Mental Health Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Social media have stirred up the ways young people communicate, learn and interact with their peers in college. These platforms offer opportunities for networking, information and entertainment, but can lead to poor mental health if they are used too much or if there are issues. This study investigates the correlation between use of social media and mental health among college students with the emotional/psychological symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and self-esteem. A descriptive and analytical design based on secondary data was adopted, synthesising peer-reviewed studies, official reports, and institutional publications on social media use and mental health outcomes. The reviewed evidence indicates that excessive social media time is strongly correlated with increased anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms, whereas moderate use could be related to social connection and emotional support. Cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison and insufficient sleep emerged as important factors influencing poor psychological health. The study points to the need for awareness among college students about responsible use of social media, digital literacy and mental health awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the ubiquity of social media, there are fundamental changes in how people communicate, how they access information and how they hold social relationships. The social media, like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, and TikTok have become the immediate need of college student's day-to-day life [1, 2]. They provide plenty of benefits such as academic partners, focussing with professionals, entertainment and social interaction. However, with the growing hours online in social media, many have come to question its effects on the psychological well-being and mental health of young adults.

Considered one of the most active groups of social media users, students in college are high on access to Internet and digital literacy. Students experience a number of academic, financial, employment and social difficulties during this period as they move through the school system earlier into adulthood. Social media offers emotional support and a sense of belonging, but too much or problematic use can lead to anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, sleep problems, low self-esteem and less life satisfaction [3, 4, 5]. Moreover, digital harassment, the fear of being missed out, social comparison and a wrong lifestyle view have been shown to be major motivators, which affect students' mental health [6].

Various recent studies have yielded variable conclusions about the connection between the use of social media and mental health. Others claim that social media makes people more socially connected, supports peer support and helps gain access to mental health information. Others point to a link between long hours of screen time and high levels of psychological distress and emotional issues due to high social networking platform usage. These opposing results would suggest that social media can have positive

effects, as well as negative effects, and these are a function of how long someone has been using a social media site, how they are using it, the kind of media content consumed, and one's coping strategies.

The association of mental health with social media use is especially important because mental health has a direct impact on students' interpersonal relationships, academic performance, and quality of life [7]. Schools are becoming more aware of the necessity to look at promotion of digital wellness in conjunction with standard mental health care. Understanding social media usage patterns that positively or negatively relate to mental states can inform the development of support systems at universities, including effective Social Media Awareness campaigns, Counselling Services, and digital literacy initiatives.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Past ten years, there has been a lot of research on social media and mental health. Social networks offer communication, education, social support but their overuse has a negative effect on psychological well-being.

Excessive use of social media by adolescents and young adults was linked to higher risks for depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, a systematic review reported by Keles et al. [8]. Likewise, Huang found in their meta-analysis that psychological well-being was significantly negatively correlated with time spent online on social networking sites [9].

Young adults who reported heavy social media usage were more likely to report social isolation than low users, according to Primack [10]. The researchers had proposed that virtual relationships can sometimes be a substitute for the meaningful connections in the real world, resulting in feelings of loneliness.

Vannucci et al. reported some studies indicating that there is a correlation between increased social media use and increased anxiety levels among college students [11]. They highlighted the importance of ongoing socialization in the Internet leading to emotional burden (FOMO).

Twenge and Campbell found that greater screen time coupled with digital media relationship were correlated with lower happiness ratings, lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms for adolescents and young adults [12].

Valkenburg et al. suggest that social media affects individuals in different ways [13]. Some students are negatively impacted by more social support and connectedness through social media usage, while others are positively affected.

In sum, past investigation suggests that moderate and purposeful use of social media can be positively correlated while excessive and problematic use can be negatively correlated with mental health outcomes. More studies of college students within other educational and cultural settings are still necessary to capture these connections in other settings.

2.1 STUDY DESIGN

The present study used descriptive and analytical research design which involved secondary data collection to study the relationship between social media use and mental health of the college students. A secondary approach was chosen because it allows a thorough overview of already collected empirical evidence from a wide range of valid and reliable sources without having to gather primary data with the target participants. The work used refereed journal articles, books, the works of conferences, official reports and publications and reports from well-known firms such as Pew Research Centre, UNESCO, UNICEF, American Psychological Association (APA), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Further literature was drawn from the reputed academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Science Direct, Springer Link, Wiley Online Library, Taylor & Francis, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. Studies from 2018 to 2026 were taken into thought to ensure connection and timeliness of the review. The keywords used for the orderly search were social media use, mental health, mental wellbeing, college student, social media addiction, anxiety, depression, and stress, fear of missing out (FOMO) and digital well-being. analysis that was not scholarly, English-language, peer-reviewed, and only those that examined college or university students were included, whereas other types of studies, such as editorials, opinion papers, unpublished manuscripts, and studies lacking methodological detail, were excluded. Data collected through the literature search was analysed with descriptive content analysis and thematic analysis to identify and compare the emerging themes of the pattern of social media use, social media addiction, anxiety, depression, stress, sleep quality, academic performance, self-esteem, social comparison, cyberbullying and psychological well-being. Multiple studies were reviewed and analysed for any similarities and differences, and for gaps in the research. It was only high quality, academic sources that

were used and evidence was cross-referenced between multiple sources to ensure the credibility and reliability of the study. People were not involved in this research, and no ethical approval was needed, since this was a research using only secondary data which is publically available. All sources, however, were, however, adequately identified and cited following APA 7th edition rules to guarantee the originality and credibility of the work. It has been a very good method, which has rooted strong and evidence-based bases to understand how the social media consumption made an impact to college student's mental health and has helped in providing meaning to the development of the conclusions and suggestions that need to be considered in making any future research and practices.

2.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

2.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This study fills the gap in the literature to summarize the latest available evidence regarding social media and mental health in college students. The results help to support theories like the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Comparison Theory and the Cognitive-Behavioural Model of Problematic Internet Use that helps understand how online interactions impact psychological wellness. The study also identifies that social media is a complex phenomenon, meaning that its impact is not only through the technology, but also based on frequency, purpose, and ways of using it.

2.2.2 Educational Implications

Acknowledging the impact of online social media on the academic and psychological development of the students in the educational institution. Digital literacy and mental health education can be incorporated in the college or university curriculum to build responsible online behaviour among the students. There can be an increased awareness of the dangers of social media addiction, cyberbullying, and excessive use of social comparison by faculty and student counsellors and the encouragement of healthy screen-time. The push for healthy screen-time, the promotion of balanced use of digital platforms, and the education of students about social media dangers due to addiction, cyberbullying, and excessive social comparison can take place with the encouragement of faculty and student counsellors.

2.2.3 Practical Implications

The work gives the student, parent, educator, counsellor, and healthcare professional practical suggestions. We need to debate with students how they use social media each day, cheer them to be aware of their screen time, and ensure that they focus on useful activities that promote their mental and physical health. Parents and guardians need to be open and transparent with students about technologies and their emotional health. All mental health practitioners can look to include digital behaviours in counselling and intervention programs.

2.2.4 Policy Implications

The results indicate that it is important for schools and policymakers to establish policies on digital well-being to ensure proper social media behavior in schools. Instruct universities to set up recognition campaigns, counseling service and workshops on online safety, cyber bullying prevention, stress management and wellness related to digital technologies. Educational institutions, healthcare providers, and technology companies can work together and with parents to improve the online environment. The governance of algorithmic content curation also deserves attention, because the automated systems that decide what students see online raise questions of justice, accountability and the future of work that intersect with digital well-being [14].

2.3 LIMITATIONS

While this study produced and contained a thorough review of the existing literature, the research has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration when making conclusions.

This is done by relying on secondary data.

All the study data was sourced from secondary (from previously published articles in journals, government reports, institutional publications) and this data was collected from these sources. Therefore, the conclusions pertain to the quality, accuracy and reliability of the original studies and no primary data was gathered to confirm these results.

No survey, interview or experiment was conducted with college students, as a result of which the findings of this study cannot be directly used to show the patterns of social media use, or mental health issues, among adults currently attending college. The conclusions are made from only synthesized findings of research.

There were methodological differences among the studies in the review with respect to design, sample size, measurement instruments, geographic location, and statistical methods. The results may not be consistent and comparable because of these different methods.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each of the reviewed studies employed varying instruments, scales, and measures for social media use, social media addiction, feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, and psychological well-being. The lack of uniformity in the measurements reported could partly account for the differences in results.

The present study used analysis of secondary data, bringing valuable insights about the relationship between the use of social media and mental health in college students. However, the rapidly changing nature of digital technology, and the ongoing emergence of social media platforms, offers great potential for further research. To draw more definitive conclusions linking mental health outcomes to social media use, future research needs to utilize primary data sources including surveys, interviews, and/or longitudinal studies. Other possible comparisons researchers might make include across countries, cultures, schools and schools serving different demographics to enhance generalizability of conclusions. Given the different features and how users utilize individual social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), further research is necessary to understand the unique psychological impact of each platform. Further studies on how new technologies, such as AI, VR, AR, and algorithmic creation of new content affect students' mental health would be beneficial. The implications for assessing interventions for reducing anxiety, depression, stress, and problematic social media use include digital well-being interventions, social media literacy programs, counselling services, mindfulness-based interventions, and screen-time management efforts. Moderating and mediating variables like self-esteem, emotional intelligence, resilience, personality, family support, peer relationships, academic pressure, and digital literacy needs to be explored to better understand the relation between social media use and mental health in future research. Moreover, it would be beneficial to use mixed-methods research to gain more in-depth understanding of the students' lived experiences, motives and coping related to the use of social media. Standardized measurement instruments could also help improve the consistency and comparability of future research with regard to the development of instruments to measure social media addiction, digital well-being, and fear of missing out (FOMO), online social comparison and psychological health. Overall, further investigation in this area can help shape evidence-based educational practices, policies, and mental health interventions that facilitate responsible social media use and increase the psychological health of college students.

4. CONCLUSION

The current research investigated the association between Social Media usage with mental health status of college students by systematic review of secondary data derived from peer-reviewed journals, academic databases, government documents and reports of reliable international organizations. The results show that social media has become a part of the students' lives and they feel it has a significant role in communication, in learning as well as in entertainment and networking in professional fields. Although using social media responsibly and in balance can have positive aspects such as having better access to educational tools, to be more socially connected and to raise awareness about mental health problems, problematic and excessive use can only be linked consistently to negative psychological consequences. The articles examined reveal that extended screen time, social comparisons, FOMO syndrome (fear of missing out, or noticing others looking more at ease than them), cyberbullying and addiction to social media are factors that create increased anxiety, depression, stress/sleep issues, loneliness, diminished academic performance and a decreased sense of self-worth for college students. The study also emphasizes the fact that the effects of social media are not always good or bad, but are very time-dependent, that is, due to the frequency, duration, purpose and quality of its use. The study highlights the importance of a multi-sector approach, including between education, policy, parents, mental health professionals and tech companies, to champion digital well-being, online good practice and the provision of mental health services. Digital education enterprise would be beneficial in universities, such as educational programs and courses on responsible social media use, guide services, and digital education awareness campaigns aimed

at promoting healthy social media habits and balanced screen use. In summary, promoting overall and mindful social media usage is crucial for safeguarding the psychological health, academic achievement, and well-being of college students in the age of social media.

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