

The Influence of Social Media Usage on Mental Health: Analyzing Anxiety, Depression, and Self-Esteem Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The recent massive integration of social media in the life of young adults has changed the communication trends, identity framing, and feelings of well-being. Nevertheless, the accumulative evidence is suggesting that this interaction might be both positive and negative on the state of mental health. The given qualitative study examines the effect of using social media on anxiety, depression, and self-esteem among young adults between 18 and 25 years old. Phenomenological approach was taken whereby semi-structured interviews involving fifteen people with varying education and socio-economic backgrounds were used to gather the data. The thematic analysis was used to identify three general themes, which were comparison-induced anxiety, validation-seeking and emotional dependency, and the paradox of online identity and self-esteem. The results also reveal that self-expression and social connectedness are not the only results of the use of social media, but also its role in increasing psychological distress due to unrealistic comparison and the need to seek approval always. The research can help in further understanding of the psychological processes concerning associations between digital activity and emotional well-being and give recommendations on enhancing a healthy social media usage among young people.

Keywords: social media, mental health, young adults, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Social media has become an irreplaceable part of the present-day reality and is transforming the way people communicate, connect, and identify themselves. Social media like Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, and Facebook have become virtual environments that will shape identity formation, social connectedness, and self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2020). In the case of young adults, i.e., the age group of 18-25, social media (especially Instagram) has a rather influential impact on the development of personal and social levels. Though the advantages of the digital engagement are international connectivity, exchange of information, and creative self-expression, it has been accompanied by a concomitant discourse that has presented a list of negative psychological effects of the same.

Many other studies have linked the heavy use of social media to increased anxiety, depressive mood, and varying self-esteem (Twenge and Campbell, 2018; Andreassen et al., 2020). Digital comparison phenomenon and the necessity of online approval are also now considered to be the critical converters of emotional well-being. Even though the internet was once thought to bring freedom and inclusiveness, it has unwillingly brought about openings of judgment, pressuring, and comparative environments. These emotional undergoings can considerably influence psychological stability of young adults who have to overcome the problem of identity formation and belonging.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The lived experiences of young adults in social media with regard to mental health issues are underresearched even though increased awareness on mental health issues associated with social media is being realized. There is often quantitative work that correlates time spent on the Internet and mental health indicators, but no one has focused on how individuals perceive their experiences and internalize them. The use of social media by the young adults is not simply a behavioral or superficial action but one which is richly emotional and in reminisces of the social realities they face.

The research intends to address this gap by utilizing the concept of qualitative research investigation in an effort to determine the impacts of using social media in improving anxiety, depression, and self-esteem among young adults. It also looks into the connotations that are placed on online behavior and the role played by

online experiences in the happiness or distress of the psychic being.

1.3 Research Questions

To guide the inquiry, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do young adults perceive the influence of social media on their mental health?
2. In what ways does social media contribute to or alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression?
3. How does social media affect young adults' sense of self-esteem and self-worth?

These questions aim to uncover the subjective emotional processes through which social media shapes mental health outcomes.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it contributes to the knowledge of the intersection between digital culture and mental health. The most essential thing to do is to establish the psychological implications of social media as it is getting more and more integrated into social and professional lives. The knowledge gained in this study can be used to develop education, mental care, and policy-making programs that promote healthy internet use. Additionally, as the voices of young adults are brought into focus, this study is based on lived experience as a source of culture-specific mental health strategy development.

1.5 Scope and Delimitation

The study will be conducted with young adults between the age of 18 and 25 years, the age group that actively visits social networking sites. It explores three main psychological constructions: anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, when the focus is on the daily use of the social media. The sample is also restricted to the active users at least of two large platforms and failure to develop psychological disorders quantitatively. Rather, it explains the subjective accounts of participants to find perceived correlations between digital behavior and emotional well being.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

This study research has been conceptualized based on three theoretical views namely; Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and Presentation of Self described by Goffman (1959).

- According to the Social Comparison Theory, people assess themselves through comparison of their lives with other peoples, which is enhanced by the filtered order of social media.
- According to the Theory of Self-Determination, the outside validation may produce a negative effect on intrinsic motivation and the maintenance of psychological stability when a person depends on the approval of others to gain their self-esteem.
- The framework provided by Goffman expounds on how individuals show idealized presentations of themselves in front of other people (and the Internet) to regulate impressions and to keep their social approval.

All of these theories contribute to the overall investigation of the study that the interaction between young adults regarding the reaction to the images, feedback, and validation cycle affects their emotions and mental conditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to Social Media and Mental Health

The evolution of social media in the last 10 years has changed the manner in which individuals communicate, interact and develop identity. Social media is not only a tool of expression to the young adult but also a social space that reflects and in many cases exaggerates the interactions of the real world (Best et al., 2014). The impact of social media on mental health is complex; such platforms have brought both positive opportunities, as they help individuals feel a sense of belonging, express creativity, and feel supported and secure; nevertheless, these sites present people with a threat of developing psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Keles et al., 2020).

An examination of empirical research indicates that the effect of social media on mental health is not necessarily positive or negative, but it depends on situations. The intensity, the intent, and the affect of social media use are the determinants of whether the influence creates well-being or distress (Verduyn et al., 2017). Indicatively, social connectedness and satisfaction can be positively contributed to by active use - making contents and engaging with people in a positive way (Ellison et al., 2020) whereas social comparison and envy are more likely to be increased with

passive use, i.e. brow browsing without engaging with other individuals at all (Vogel et al., 2014).

2.2 Social Media and Anxiety

The psychological condition, which is amplified by constant worrying and nervousness and tension, anxiety has been associated with digital worlds. In young adults, social media tends to contribute towards and increase anxiety. Some of the studies explain this by social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and information overload (Przybylski et al., 2013; Oberst et al., 2017).

2.2.1 Social Comparison and Anxiety

A background explanation of the origin of anxiety in online interaction is the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) which offers fundamental explanations. The Instagram and Tik Tok platforms are constructed upon and are based on filtered images of success, beauty and happiness, which makes the user analyze how valuable they are in comparison to other people (Vogel et al., 2014). When these idealized images are repeated, it may lead to false expectations and feeling of inadequacy, which leads to increased anxiety (Appel et al., 2016).

Indicatively, Dhir et al. (2018) concluded that upward social comparison, or the desire to align oneself with people viewed as better off is highly linked with anxiety symptoms in young adults. The fear of not progressing enough, body image, and social acceptance can be aroused by the continuous awareness of other people in terms of their achievements. This is a kind of digital space that is conducive to performance anxiety that makes users nervous about having to showcase the best image of themselves to remain relevant.

2.2.2 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

The acronym FOMO summarizes a social anxiety disorder which comprises social connectivity. Przybylski et al. (2013) introduce FOMO as the dread of the possibility that other people are enjoying enjoyable lives without the engagement of an individual. This perception is always reinforced by the social media platforms via real time messages and notifications. FOMO has been linked to the low quality of sleep, low life satisfaction, and stress (Baker et al., 2016). Compulsive checking habits are also experienced by young adults, and they are motivated by an urge to stay socially relevant and feel included in the circle and this further makes them feel

restless and overburdened by thoughts.

Moreover, Elhai et al. (2020) believe that FOMO plays a role in problematic smartphone use, which results in dependency patterns that are similar to those of anxiety disorders. These trends are indicative of the feedback loop, anxiety elevates the use of social media, and the latter advances anxiety, which has been Julia-Longitudinal studies of university students confirm (Barry et al., 2017).

2.3 Social Media and Depression

Depression, which is usually marked by sadness, hopelessness, and lack of interest in such activities has been widely attributed to online behavior as well. Depression is not accompanied by anxiety because it appears due to the emotional exhaustion, the rejection of individuals, or the failure to satisfy expectations of validation as opposed to anxiety.

2.3.1 Digital Validation and Emotional Vulnerability

One of the most important reasons behind the correlated relationship between social media and depression is the necessity to feel validated. The paradigm associated with likes, shares, and followers produces the systems of social rewarding systems that shape the self-worth (Burrow and Rainone, 2017). In case users get little interaction, they can make sense of this as not being liked by others, which causes sadness and low self-esteem. Tandoc et al. (2015) suppose that capacity to expect online feedback and frustration with the failure to get such confirmation may induce depressive symptoms, especially in people with low self-concept clarity.

This emotional dependence is expoundable using the Self-Determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) which is founded on the assumption that human motivation is based upon autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The heavy dependence on the outside applause negates such needs causing emotional imbalance. Accordingly, social media can falsify intrinsic satisfaction through substituting self-confidence with extrinsic validation-seeking tendencies.

2.3.2 Cyberbullying and Negative Feedback

Cyberbullying or other violent remarks are one more major cause of depression, and cyberbullying is closely linked to online aggression. Investigations indicate an increase in the level of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts among young adults who had been victims online (Kowalski et al., 2014). Digital communication

has the power to embolden aggressiveness because it enables the victim to feel powerless and isolated.

Woods and Scott (2016) assert that the quality of sleep and mood disturbances, which are powerful predictors of depression, are associated with late-night use of social media. They opine that the present day connectivity makes no distinction between rest and activity and no emotional chances of recovery after social strain. Accordingly, not only the psychological but the physiological issues associated with depression an online experience have impacts in the sleep patterns and cognitive ability.

2.4 Social Media and Self-Esteem

Self esteem is the overriding judgment concerning the self-image and self-worth. It is also directly connected to both anxiety and depression and very responsive to feedback and social approval. Studies of self-esteem and social networking provide contradictory results: one part of users feel powerful and included, and the other group performs more negative reflexes related to self-esteem and insecurity (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

2.4.1 Self-Presentation and Online Identity

The self-presentation theory by Erving Goffman (1959) is essential in explaining the dynamics of social media as far as the connection between social media and self-esteem is concerned. Goffman established that people do measures of selves to control the way others perceive them. In social media, this performance is very edited, filtered through the prism of visual editing and selectivity. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) have noted that short exposure to self Facebook profile may positively influence self-esteem as an effect of positive feedback mechanism of self-presentation. Nevertheless, this is a short-lived effect which, when internalized by the users as a indicator of personal value, may cause a more profound emotional turbulence.

On the same note, Kim and Lee (2011) discovered that those who regularly practice self-promotion on the web are more prone to undergoing a wavering self-esteem, depending on how they are received by their audience. The external approval is reduced, thus, self-worth is also reduced and causes emotional turmoil.

2.4.2 Appearance-Based Comparison and Body Image

The other aspect of self esteem is appearance related comparison. Visual-based platforms such as Instagram tend to promote the ideal of beauty. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) had found that when women were exposed to appearance-oriented material, they had a worse body image and reduced self-esteem. In men, hypermasculine exposure is also related to the development of self-critical perceptions of the body image (Perloff, 2021). These results highlight how social media continues to propagate unrealistic ideals which may misrepresent the body image and undermine self-esteem.

2.5 Positive Aspects of Social Media

Even with these issues, not all communication in social media is negative. A number of studies mention its possibilities to improve the well-being by means of social support, sense of belonging, and enabling people. Naslund et al. (2016) established that online peer networks could help people with mental conditions experience connection with others and increase stigma, as well as encourage behavior to seek help. On the same note, online activism and digital storytelling enable youths to define who they are and have a substantial conversation (Manago, 2015).

It is also possible to have a more satisfied life through active and purposeful consumption like participating in supportive groups or using creative content (Ellison et al., 2020). The active and passive use seems to be the crucial point, and thus, active use can develop confidence, whereas passive consumption can only destroy it (Verduyn et al., 2017).

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

This research is based on three major theories namely Social Comparison Theory, Self-Determination Theory and Self-Presentation Theory.

1. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): It is a theory that involves comparison between self and others. The comparisons involved, especially those made on social media, are frequently carried out in an upward and unrealistic direction, and they create anxiety and envy among the users (Appel et al., 2016).
2. Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000): It involves intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Once the users rely on likes or the followers to feel valid, the intrinsic motivation will be lowered, which results in the emotional

instability and depressive symptoms.

3. Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959): It is a theory that postulates that individuals are crafting an online self-presentation to control impressions. This gap between the authentic and online selves may cause identity strain and leave self-esteem at the low side (Kim and Lee, 2011).

Collectively these constructs define the effect of social media in being a reflection and a magnifier of how social media has the impact of influencing the emotions, self-concepts and coping styles of the users.

2.7 Research Gap

Although the existing empirical literature offers useful suggestions, most of them utilize research techniques that are quantitative and aim at quantifying the relationship. Nevertheless, these methods do not pay attention to subjective accounts of how young adults who are stressed out digitally experience validation and how they form self-perception. A qualitative approach provides the opportunity to gain a deeper insight into these emotional processes by preempting the personal accounts about the participants. This paper thus fills the gap by discussing the implications of social media on the mental health of young adults as perceived by the human beings and presents a human perspective to supplement to the current and quantitative data.

3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research design applied in this study was qualitative in nature to understand the effects of using social media on the mental health of young adults, especially with respect to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. It was decided to use a qualitative approach since this method enables such in-depth insights into the lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions of the participants that cannot be described using numerical data alone (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The research employed phenomenological design that pays attention to revealing the nature of the experience of people on a certain phenomenon- in the research project, the psychological impacts of social media usage.

The phenomenological approach helped the researcher interpret the meaning defined by the young adults about their interactions in their day-to-day interactions with social networking sites like Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, and Facebook. Their

sentiments, thoughts, and change in behaviors were described through open-ended interviews on how they felt, thought, and changed after being exposed to these platforms over a long period of time. The qualitative design was also the suitable one since the topic of mental health that was studied was of a subjective nature as anxiety and self-esteem constructivity are best analyzed through narratives rather than numbers.

3.2 Research Questions

The research was guided by the following overarching questions:

1. How do young adults perceive the relationship between their social media use and mental health?
2. In what ways does social media usage contribute to feelings of **anxiety** and **depression** among young adults?
3. How does social media engagement influence **self-esteem** and body image perceptions?
4. What coping strategies do young adults employ to manage the psychological effects of social media?

These questions provided the framework for data collection and analysis, ensuring that the interviews remained focused on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of social media use.

3.3 Research Setting and Participants

The study was carried out on young adults between ages 18 and 25 years which are mainly students at universities in undergraduate course in Pakistan. These individuals were chosen as it represents one of the most active social media age groups and is in a critical stage of development where identity is the most affected, peer validation is at a high, and self-concept development is at an extreme thanks to online communication (Twenge, 2020).

Purposive sampling was used to conduct the selection of 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) with the purpose of having only those individuals included who actively used social media platforms at least three hours a day. Different students were selected with different academic backgrounds to include social sciences, business, computer studies, and humanities. Each of them was highly developed in English and did not feel embarrassed to disclose their experiences.

Informed consent was made beforehand, which guaranteed confidentiality and voluntary taking part. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym (e.g., Participant A, B, C) to retain the anonymity of data reporting.

3.4 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection, which provided an opportunity to delve into the mind of the participants and at the same time ensure a level of consistency in the data collected throughout the sessions. The interviews were performed in face-to-face or Zoom (depending on the availability of participants and their comfort) and lasted 40 to 60 minutes.

The interview guide included open persons like questions like:

- “Can you describe how often and for what purposes you use social media?”
- “Have you ever felt anxious or stressed after using social media?”
- “How do you think social media affects your confidence or self-esteem?”
- “What strategies, if any, do you use to cope with negative feelings from social media?”

To ensure the clarification of the meanings, to prompt further elaboration, to delve into the emotional aspect of the experiences of people, follow-up probing questions were imposed. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed word to word to be analyzed.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the **thematic analysis approach** proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving six systematic steps:

1. Familiarization with data- The researcher read the transcripts multiple times to get the general idea of the narratives of the participants.
2. Production of original codes – Meaningful pieces were found and tagged with descriptive ones (e.g. comparison pressure, sleep disturbance, seeking validation).
3. Themes: Searching Related codes were split by bigger themes, i.e., Emotional Strain, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Online Validation, and Coping Mechanisms.
4. Themes review - Themes were narrowed down through reviewing the data one more time to achieve internal consistency and distinctiveness.

5. Setting and naming of themes, -The themes were defined and quotations of participants used to support the predetermined theme.
6. Preparation of the report -Themes were arranged in continuous stories under the section of findings.

The analysis of qualitative data was carried out through NVivo 12, which helped to organize and code the transcribed data, which would then be systematically identified to identify patterns and relationships between themes.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Credibility

In order to make the study credible and reliable a number of validation methods were applied:

- Member checking: Particularly, summaries of interview transcripts were provided to the participants to ensure the correctness and genuineness of their statements.
- Peer debriefing: Code review and thematic interpretations were reviewed by two academic peers.
- Triangulation: Existing literature findings were compared to the findings in order to validate patterns.
- Audit trail: A log of methodological choices and coding procedures were kept according to enhance transparency.

These plans gave the results a true representation of participant lived worlds and minimized bias on the part of the researchers.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The use of ethics approval of the university ethics committee was sought before data was collected. The participants were aware of the nature of the study; confidentiality, and that they could stop any time without being fined. All the information that could be identified was deleted in the transcripts and the digital information was stored safely in encrypted files. Sensitive debates related to mental health were approached with sensitivity, and contact information of counseling services was availed to the participants in case interviewees got distressed during the interviews.

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

Even though qualitative inquiry has several strengths, this paper appreciates some methodological weaknesses. The sample size used is relatively small and thus restricts generalisations with all of the young adults. Moreover, there is a possibility of self-report bias or report bias due to social desirability effects especially when the mental health problems are at stake. However, this qualitative richness offers a beneficial chance at grasping the psychological processes that might not be clearly noticed by the quantitative approach.

4: FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is the representation of the findings because of two decades of rigorous and semi-structured interviews consisting of twenty participants of 18-25 years old. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) on the responses and identified common patterns and meanings within the experience of the subjects about the psychological impacts of social media. Four significant themes were identified as well as a few subthemes:

1. Emotional Strain and Anxiety
2. Comparative Pressure and Depression
3. Online Validation and Self-Esteem Fluctuations
4. Coping Strategies and Digital Boundaries

Each theme is elaborated below, supported by direct quotations from participants (identified as *P1–P20*).

4.2 Theme 1: Emotional Strain and Anxiety

An overwhelming theme that came out through interviews was emotional stress due to the incessant use of social media activities. The respondents reported feeling anxious, restless, and exhausted in mind after long exposure to contents posted online. Most of them indicated that fear of missing out (FOMO) and the need to keep up with everything were the causes of emotional distress.

I am always picking up my phone to find out what other people are up to even when I am trying to settle. I react to the thought of my friends having fun without me as I become anxious. (P3, Female, 21)

The interviewees had a feeling of need to be a part of something and explained how the social media updates and feed suggestions were elevating the level of stress. A

few also mentioned that excessive scrolling would cause sleep deprivation and lack of concentration in their academic life.

I will never have a sleepless night without viewing Instagram stories at night. I feel like I am afraid of coming out of major things that have happened to me. (P10, Male, 19). They are consistent with the literature that points to excessive exposure to digital platforms as one of the factors that increase experiencing anxiety among young adults (Vannucci et al., 2017). The digital ubiquitous supports a reliance-fatigue renewal.

4.3 Theme 2: Comparative Pressure and Depression

The comparative mindset was another theme that was repeated and caused feelings of inadequacy and depressive symptoms. Those interviewed confessed that they tended to judge their lives poorly after having viewed the lives that their peers were leading.

As soon as I look at my classmates sharing about holiday or successes, I begin to doubt myself, such as, what toward what I do decently with my life? (P6, Female, 22). This continuous social comparison usually led to self-doubt and sadness especially when the participants felt that they are less successful or attractive and socially active. The culture of high sightseeing celebrated on social networks like Instagram and TikTok aggravated the depressive moods by establishing unattainable happiness and success standards.

Everybody makes the perfect appearance on websites. It sends me to thinking that I am not good enough even though I am aware that all this is filtered (P12, Male, 23). The subjects also talked about instances of digital envy or feelings of emotional withdrawal following long periods of exposure to influencers or other peers who appeared to have a better life. Some of them reported that they lost motivation in their studies due to the inferior feeling about other people.

This coincides with the previous results by Lup et al. (2015), who underscored that, in most cases, upward social comparisons made on image-based platforms are associated with depressive symptoms. The research establishes the fact that social media creates a low-level pressure that lowers the emotional wellness.

4.4 Theme 3: Online Validation and Self-Esteem Fluctuations

The participants always associated self-worth with social media validation, which is in form of likes, comments, or followers. Good feedback gave a temporary confidence, and absence of interest tended to create self-doubt and moodiness.

I feel good when I get more likes, because it seems to me that people are interested in what I am posting. However, when no one reacts to a post, he or she begins to think that there is something wrong with you. (P8, Female, 20). This addiction to digital approval is an externalization of self-esteem- where someone is in need of approval of others instead of self-approval. The respondents also explained how they changed their behaviours and looks to receive online acceptance. I have always unposted pictures that do not get enough likes within an hour. It is humiliating to stay with them until late. (P16, Male, 24)

In addition, subjects disclosed that filters, photo editing applications, and physical looks facilitated unrealistic body images. Others shared that they felt body dissatisfaction and anxiety in regards to their appearance as a result of putting themselves in the position of influencers.

I used to believe that I was fine until I started seeing influencers that had perfect skin and bodies. I am now obsessed with editing my pictures. (P19, Female, 21). This observation once again reflects the fact stated by Perloff (2014) that the visual culture of social media promotes self-objectification and the unstable self-esteem of youth. In general, online validation sought proved to be a major psychological stressor determining self-image.

4.5 Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Digital Boundaries

Regardless of the failures, the respondents proved to be knowledgeable about their mental health and stated that they had some coping strategies to minimize psychological damage. The most used strategies were disabling triggering accounts and taking digital detoxes and going offline.

I always change Instagram whenever I feel overwhelmed and spend some days with the app uninstalled. It is something that is actually making me concentrate and feel relaxed. (P5, Female, 20). Some respondents said that they used mindfulness applications or that they restricted their screen time as a form of self-management. Others just wanted to play with friends and family or concentration on physical activities in order to adjust their emotional aspects.

I began journaling and working out other than scrolling. Not so simple, but I am now more grounded, I believe. (P13, Male, 22). Strangely enough, some participants also told about the positive aspect of the use of social media when used thoughtfully - either being a part of supportive communities or educating people about mental illness.

I subscribe to pages which discuss mental health and self-love. Reminds me that I am not the only one. (P9, Female, 23). The theme represents a growing trend of digital self-regulation among young adults, which, in turn, implies that the impact of social media on the negative mental health effects of social media can be reduced, in case of awareness and conscious use.

4.6 Summary of Themes

During the interpretations, the reviews of interviews indicated that even though the social media provides a feeling of connectedness and entertainment it provokes the emotional susceptibility. The interrelationship among themes highlighted are summed up in Figure 1 below:

Major Theme	Subthemes	Psychological Impact
Emotional Strain & Anxiety	FOMO, overuse, sleep disturbance	Heightened anxiety, restlessness
Comparative Pressure & Depression	Upward comparison, digital envy	Sadness, low motivation
Online Validation & Self-Esteem	Likes/comments, appearance pressure	Fluctuating self-worth
Coping Strategies	Detoxing, mindfulness, support groups	Improved mental balance

All these findings prove that the effect of social media use on the mental health of young adults depends on the nature, intensity, and purpose of the use. There is a positive correlation between excessive, comparison-related, or validation seeking use and anxiety, depression and diminished self-esteem, and mindful engagement leads to resilience and self awareness.

4.7 Transition to Discussion

These findings are interpreted in the next chapter in terms of the existing theories and literature. It will explain the significance of how the experiences of young adults are aligned with psychological theories, including social comparison theory, self-determination theory, and cognitive-behavioral view of digital behavior.

5: DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

The chapter addresses the results introduced in Chapter 4 and explains them concerning the existing literature, theoretical worldviews, and psychological principles. The intention is to relate the content of the participants lived experiences to the wider concept of mental health, such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, and to focus on the impact of social media use. This discussion aims at removing the ambiguity surrounding the important role of social media in causing both negative and positive psychological impacts by examining the themes of emotional strain, comparative pressure, online validation and coping strategies among young adults.

5.2 Emotional Strain and Anxiety

The initial significant observation raised the fact that young adults have a high level of emotional pressures and anxiety as a result of constant social media interactions. The participants complained of a feeling of restlessness, the need to keep in touch, and sleep disorders. Such experiences are consistent with previous studies that demonstrate that persistent notifications, algorithmic content and fear of missing out (FOMO) increase anxiety (Przybylski et al., 2013; Vannucci et al., 2017).

Hypothetically, this can be explained in terms of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Young adults often contrast their lives with the filtered content of other users and this results in upward comparisons and a sense of inability. This process is reflected in the narratives presented by the participants because an exposure to the successes of other people or types of social activities evoked worry and self-doubt.

Also, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) is helpful to explain the potential of social media as an escalator of anxiety. It can be assumed that the psychological anabolic needs of competence and autonomy of the participants are undermined due to the reliance on the external feedbacks such as likes, comments and followers. In the absence or delayed validation, anxiety develops

as natural emotional reaction, and it brings out connection between extrinsic social validation and psychological vulnerability.

It is important to note that the findings build up the previous studies with the incorporation of the fact that anxiety is not only agitated by peer comparison but also the feeling of being in pressure of staying digital. They explained the compulsive use, including checking the notifications during the study or very late in the night which indicates that social media may cause a feedback loop of anxiety where anxiety and distress are mutually reinforcing.

5.3 Comparative Pressure and Depression

A second outstanding result was the contribution of comparative pressure in the development of depressive symptoms. The participants often expressed feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and desolation when they had contrasted their lives to those that appear perfect or those those who were followed on social media. This is in line with research that has shown that up exposure to idealized online images means being more depressed and less satisfied with life (Lup et al., 2015; Keles et al., 2020). It is fundamentally based on the notion of upward social comparison. Although comparisom, to a certain degree will encourage self-improvements, a drawback of over exposure to standards which are too high will be exhaustion of the emotions and self-criticism. The testimonials of the participants, including that they are demotivated by the achievements of their friends or how their body image compares to that of the influencers, demonstrate the processes of depressed thinking in the online setting.

Besides, the results suggest that depressive disposition is worsened by passive use of social media browsing without engaging in active use. This observation enhances a study conducted by Verduyn et al. (2017), who discovered that passive consumption is likely to stoke envy and melancholy, on the one hand; and active participation might encourage social connectedness and well-being, on the other hand.

In general, the research shows that the influence of Twitter on sadness depends on the situational factors: it is not the platform as such, but the type of interactions and cognitive processing that cause the feelings.

5.4 Online Validation and Self-Esteem Fluctuations

The experience of the participants showed that self-esteem and its close relation to online validation such as likes, comments, and followers are strongly related. Self-worth was boosted by positive feedback temporarily and the perceived neglect or minimized engagement generated self-doubt. The mentioned fact contributes to the fact that social media is a psychological award system, demonstrated by Burrow and Rainone (2017) to be able to modify the self-image and emotional condition.

These dynamics may be explained with the help of Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959). The youth are the ones mindful of their online profiles and choose to create a positive image about themselves. Nonetheless, the mismatch between their real and their online self may lead to identity strain and emotional instability. The stories of participants, such as the need to delete the posts that were not well liked or the desire to perfect their pictures, are examples of how the process of online self-presentation can result in the cyclical changes in self-esteem.

Additionally, the results focus on the appearance-related social comparison. The exposure to idealized body images increases in visual centric media, including Instagram, which subsequently results in dissatisfaction and low self-confidence. The same negative influence of looking at the appearance-oriented content on self-esteem is noted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), though in this case, the effect is seen among young women. These effects are found in the current research but also applied to male participants, who also reported being pressured to conform to hypermasculine ideals of the body (Perloff, 2021).

It is important to note that the mindful and purposeful application of social media were also reflected in the observations made by the participants to reduce such effects. After favorable supportive testimonials or creative content creation led to feelings of resilience and self-acceptance, which implies that control in online interactions is vital in emotional regulation.

5.5 Coping Strategies and Digital Boundaries

The fourth theme was on coping mechanisms used by the participants to neutralise the adverse psychological effects of social media. Digital detoxes, mindfulness, journaling, physical exercise, and selective engagement were created as effective emotion self-control strategies.

These plans go in line with mental health practices based on cognitive-behavioral

theories that focus on awareness, self-observations, and behavior change to alleviate distress (Beck, 2011). Respondents showed a developing level of digital literacy, purposeful control of notifications, reduced time on the screen, and selective content to consume online in order to preserve psychological health.

Furthermore, the described theme highlights the dual aspect of social media: on the one hand, the platform may cause anxiety and self-esteem issues, on the other hand, social media may become the provider of social support, education, and positive identity formation. Inquisitive usage (visiting mental health communities, working on educational material, or interacting with encouraging friends) could offset the adverse emotional impact of the previous themes.

5.6 Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The findings can be synthesized within three primary theoretical perspectives:

1. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): The theory explains that upward comparisons in a social media cause anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction. This directly involves the experiences of envy and inadequacy they had among the participants.
2. Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000): Helps underline the importance of external validation as a way of weakening intrinsic motivation and the need to fulfill our psychological needs. The dependence of likes and comments proves this dependency on extrinsic approval and stability of the emotions of participants.
3. Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959): The theory of the stress associated with identity because of the gap between actual and idealized fanciful online selves. The psychological cost of such self-presentation through the efforts of the participants to manage impressions can be observed.

A combination of these frameworks helps the study to prove that the effect of social media is multifaceted and is mediated by inherent cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. The emotional distress is not only caused by use of the platform but also the interplay of psychological predispositions and digital-accused behaviours and the mechanisms of social comparison.

5.7 Implications for Mental Health Practice

The findings have significant implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers:

- **Awareness Programs:** Anxiety and depressive symptoms can be mitigated by educating young adults on the psychological impact of social media and encouraging them to be mindful in their use of social media.
- **Digital Literacy Interventions:** Online stressors resilience Training in digital self-regulation, content curation, and time management can improve the ability to overcome online stressors.
- **Online Community Support:** Aluminious online groups money launder for supporters of mental health can be encouraged to attend supportive online communities to feel valid, less isolated and improve self-esteem.
- **Clinical Practice:** In assessment and intervention, therapists ought to investigate the online use among the clients who use social media, and they ought to include the methods of managing online validation, comparison, and compulsive use.

5.8 Summary

This discussion brings out the ambiguous connection between the use of social media and mental health in young adults. appearing as an essential condition affecting anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, emotional strain, comparative pressure and dependence on online validation were identified. Simultaneously, the participants revealed adaptive coping mechanisms and the readiness to stay within the digital limits, which indicate that a reasonable and conscious usage reduces negative consequences.

Taking the results and combining them with the Social Comparison Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Self-Presentation Theory, one would be getting a full picture of the psychological mechanisms in action. Taken together, these insights solidify the necessity of holistic and evidence-based treatment of mental issues during the digital age.

6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This paper has investigated the effects of using social media on the mental health of young adults, specifically, the anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. With the use of a

qualitative phenomenological method, in-depth interviews of twenty respondents presented a subtle insight into the way in which digital interaction influences the condition of psychological well-being. Some major insights are emphasized by the findings:

1. Emotional Strain and Anxiety: The subjects showed a higher level of anxiety because of the necessity to be always connected and have a sense of missing out (FOMO). Endless feeds and social media notification helped to create problems with sleep, inability to rest and obsessive tendencies.
2. Comparative Pressure and Depression: upward social comparison, feelings of inadequacy and depressive symptoms were inspired by exposure to mediated and idealized images of other peoples lives. The negative emotional experiences were enhanced by passive consumption, especially.
3. Online Approval and Validation Changes: Online approval was directly related to self-esteem. Self worth of the participants depended on likes, comments and followers and the comparisons on appearance enhanced insecurity and dissatisfaction with body.
4. Coping Strategies and Digital Boundaries: Although with negative experiences, participants used adaptive coping strategies, including digital detoxes, mindfulness, selective engagement and being a part of supportive online communities. Careful usage of social media was identified as a key element when it comes to reducing the damage to the psyche.

The combination of the experience of the participants and the social comparison theory, self-determination theory, and self-presentation theory reveals that social media affects the mental state using the set of complex, interdependent, and cognitive and emotional mechanisms. The study points out that it depends on the nature of social media interactions and their intensity and intent that the research activity can be either positive or negative.

Comprehensively, this article is an insightful participant-focused analysis of the way young adults seek to overcome the psychological issues of the digital era. The results underline that social media is a two-sided pen which on the one hand allows to connect and express oneself, on the other hand, it may assist in becoming more anxious, depressed, and unstable in self-image when one uses it rationally.

6.2 Recommendations

Some recommendations are made upon the findings to the young adults, educators, mental health professionals, and the policymakers:

1. Increase Digital Literacy and awareness: Young adults need to be educated on the psychological impacts of social media and informed of the dangers of upward social comparison, FOMO, and dependence on the validation of their likability.
2. Promote Revergent Usage of social media: One should be encouraged to use social media with purpose, emphasizing on active social media use, positive social media content, and supportive social media groups. Some kind of mindfulness lowers the emotional stress and strengthens intrinsic self-esteem.
3. Introducing Digital Detox and Boundary Strategies: Screen time reduction, deactivation, and planning offline tasks are some of the ways that young adults can use to apply Digital Detox and Boundary hold importance in their life that help reduce anxiety and enhance mental health.
4. Use Positive Online Communities: Mental health-focused online communities may assist with peer support, decrease isolation and build resilience. It should be an intervention to promote the involvement of professionals in such communities.
5. The use of Social Media Assessment in Clinical Practice: Therapists and counselors are advised to discuss social media habits during assessment because of its effect on other symptoms of anxiety, depressive episodes, and self-esteem variations.
6. Policy-Level Interventions: Governments and other educational establishments ought to pressure social media platform owners into providing options that enhance user wellness, including content warning features, screen time utilities, and mental health support.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations:

- Sample Size and Demographics: The sample size was twenty participants mostly university students in Pakistan making it hard to generalize to the rest of the populations or even in other cultures.
- Self-Report Bias: The self-reported information might be marred by both social

desirability bias and recollection bias, particularly on sensitive mental health events.

- Platform Specificity: The participants were able to use various social media platforms but the study did not distinguish platform effect, which may have different psychological impact.

Future research should explore **larger, cross-cultural samples**, investigate **longitudinal impacts**, and examine **platform-specific influences** on mental health.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

- Undertake mixed-method research studies that combine the use of qualitative narratives and quantitative measures of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem.
- Explore the interaction between cultural context and social media behaviors and psychological outcomes.
- Study gender variation in internet comparison, validation-seeking, and body related worries.
- Research the topics of digital literacy programs and coping interventions as effective tools to ensure proper social media use.

6.5 Final Remarks

The social media is an effective and extensive part of the life of young adults. Although it provides some space to express oneself, socialize, and learn, the risks it exposes people to are psychological (anxiety, depression, instability of self-esteem). This paper has highlighted the use of mindful use, self-awareness, and enabling environments to instill healthy digital practices. Through learning how social media affects mental health in more subtle manners, one can develop a strategy that can help reduce the negative effects of the digital age and encourage wellbeing among educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals.

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