

Association between Social Media Usage and Depression among University Students: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes the association between social media use and depression among university students, the purpose of the study is to investigate the connection between the use of SM and the degree of depression, evaluate the effect of various aspects of SM use on depressive symptoms, and propose evidence-based solutions aimed at encouraging healthy digital communication. The mixed-method research design was employed where a structured questionnaire was developed and 200 university students who were chosen by stratified random sampling were given the questionnaire and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis in SPSS. The findings reveal that the use of social media has a statistically significant positive relationship with depression ($r = 0.175$, $p = 0.013$) and that the regression coefficient of the social media use dimensions on the depressive symptoms is statistically significant (0.495), which also explains the 24.5% variability ($R^2 = 0.245$; $F = 64.151$, $p < 0.001$). The results have shown that qualitative nature of social media use like emotional investment and compulsive use is stronger as compared to the time wasted on the internet. The study finds that uncontrolled and unhealthy consumption of social media is a psychosocial stressor that negatively influences the mental health of students, and intentional and moderate use might mitigate these risks.

Keywords: Social Media, University students, Depression, Academic, Mental well-being

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1. INTRODUCTION

The utilization of social media (SM) has consistently risen over the previous ten years. It has become an omnipresent element of daily life and is swiftly proliferating. One of the recent studies found that students use different platforms by different degrees and purposes depending on their “gender, personality, and age”. There was also a relationship between the problems with maladaptive use of social media, especially on “Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook”, and the desire to socialize and create an image of more popularity among the users (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

The daily constant use of SM is causing concerns about its effects on the mental health of university students. The study reports that there is a relationship between the use of SM and depression (Alsunni and Latif 2021). On the other hand, it is emphasized that programs alleviate loneliness when applied to establish new contacts, but increase loneliness in cases where they are applied to

avoid social contacts and evade unwanted feelings. At this point, the goals of SM use among certain groups of people, including adolescents, need to be analyzed (Uzuncakmak et al., 2022).

Furthermore, students of universities prefer to communicate with peers via SM and rely on them to provide social support and spend considerable amounts of time on SM (Shensa et al., 2020). However, it is stated that social support in this mode of communication is little, decreases social interaction, and is associated with increasing feelings of loneliness and melancholy with the increase in the duration of use (Marttila et al., 2021). Therefore, it becomes necessary to clarify what motivates the use of SM by the young population and its association with social support, loneliness, and depression.

The connection between the usage of SM and depression among students in the university has been an increasingly popular issue within the academic community, particularly with regards to the pervasive level of digitalization and the

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significance of the online platform in the personal, academic, and social life of students (Haand and Shuwang 2020). University students are one type of population that has a high level of exposure to SM and which is especially susceptible to mental health issues because of academic stress, the formation of identities, financial pressures, and the process of entering adulthood. The wide spreadness of SM gives the impression of connectedness, exchange of information, and self-identification, yet the increasing use of the habit is one that has raised concerns on the potential adverse psychological effects (Sserunkuma et al., 2023). In the context of over or maladaptive use of SM, depression which is a state of constant sadness, lack of hope, low self-esteem, lack of interest in day to day activities have received extensive discussions. This tendency of the ever-growing empirical research body suggests that the relationship between SM usage and one's depression is multidimensional and relies on the degree of individual and situational factors (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Social comparison is one of the primary ways of how the use of SM is connected with depressive signs in university students. The SM tends to depict peers with curated and idealized pictures of their accomplishments, lives, and relationships (Almarzouki et al., 2022). Being subjected to it may lead to the development of upward social comparison, in which students compare themselves to more successful or happier people (Kolhar et al., 2021). In the case of university students, who are already subjected to the competitive academic environments and are uncertain of the future opportunities, recurring exposure to idealistic images, can further enhance the feelings of incompetence, failure, and low self-esteem. These negative self-assessments might eventually lead to depressive symptomatology (Bettmann et al., 2021). Empirical research has continuously indicated that students who regularly spend considerable time passively consuming the SM feed, i.e. scrolling through feeds rather than actively interacting with content are more likely to report depressive symptoms compared to students who use SM in more active and intentional ways (Primack et al., 2021).

The other dimension of association between SM use and depression one that should not be underestimated is the effect that it has on the interpersonal relationships and social support. Although it is widely advocated that SM facilitates the process of becoming more connected, it is possible to claim that the presence of an overabundance of online communication can undermine the face-to-face relations (Kolhar et al., 2021). University students who replace face-to-face social interaction with online

communication can be subjected to loneliness and social isolation, both of which are already proven risk factors of depression (Bettmann et al., 2021). In addition, online communication is occasionally superficial or transactional, and it does not include the emotional aspects that are required to offer the person substantial support in such moments of stress. Cyber bullying, exclusion, or non-response to posts are also examples of negative experiences on SM, which leads to an increased level of emotional distress among students as well as supports depressive emotions (Chen and Xiao 2022).

Sleep disturbance is also another important mediating variable between SM use and depression among university students. Socio-media use and exposure especially at the late-night hours may interfere with sleep habits by latentizing sleep, shortening sleep, and deteriorating sleep quality (Chen and Xiao 2022). Sleeplessness has been strongly linked to depressive symptoms such as exhaustion, miserableness, loss of focus, and emotional instability. University students who are compulsively checking SM can be prone to increased cognitive and emotional arousal, which cannot be easily detached and have restful sleep (Keles et al., 2020). In the long term, persistent sleep deprivation may be a cause of depression or a risk factor, which leads to the assumption that the effect of SM use on mental health may be indirectly mediated by lifestyle and behavioral factors (Kreski et al., 2021).

One should however appreciate the fact that not all relationships between SM use and depression are negative and they depend on the nature, intention, and context of use. According to some reports, SM may be protective and/or neutral, used to sustain supportive relationships and acquire academic resources or belong to communities that foster belonging and validation (Ivie et al., 2020). Online platforms can be a source of peer support and mental health information that otherwise cannot be accessed by university students who are stressed or marginalized. Thus, the interdependence between SM use and depression is dynamic and not deterministic (Vidal et al., 2020). Longitudinal and mixed-method studies in future ought to help capture causal processes, individual variations and the impact of digital literacy. Politically and practically, higher education institutions ought to encourage moderate and responsible SM use, implement mental health education in student support departments, and incorporate healthy offline interactions as the means of reducing the risk of depression and still enjoying the benefits of digital connectivity (Keles et al., 2020).

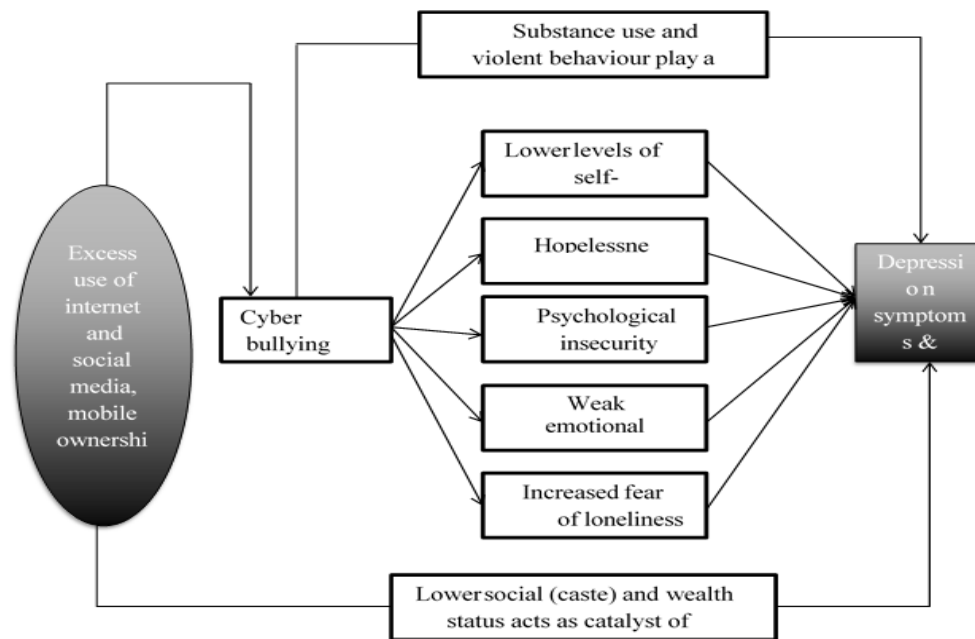


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Social Media Use and Depression Source: Maurya et al., (2022)

The empirical study looks into the relationship between SM use and depression in university students with a particular interest on how the degree of intensity, frequency and patterns of use of social networking sites are connected with mental health outcomes of students. The study aim at determining whether high or problematic SM use is largely associated with increases in depressive symptoms, and demographic and academic factors will also be taken into account to define whether the relationship between the two is shaped in a particular way. The study will make a contribution to the existing study on mental health and offer grounds to create preventive measures, awareness, and institutional interventions to help make online activities and mental health healthier and more beneficial among the university students. The study addressed the following objectives:

- To analyze the association between social media usage and levels of depression among university students.
- To examine the impact of dimensions of social media use on depressive symptoms.
- To suggest evidence-based recommendations for promoting healthy social media use and improving mental well-being among university students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

i. Social Media Usage

The use of social media has become ingrained in the lives of teenagers and young people in higher educational institutions and there is empirical evidence to show almost everybody among the young adults has adopted SM use. The study has found out that over 90 and above young adults are high users of SM, with smartphone penetration of up to about 97 percent among undergraduate readers, indicating the importance of digital connectedness in the younger generation (Bettmann et al., 2021). The

skyrocketing usage during the last twenty years has been accompanied by the growing interest in the mental health of students, in particular their depression and anxiety. The studies indicate that the more time is spent on SM, the upper the level of psychological distress is (although the power of the relationship depends on studies and the population) (Sallehuddin et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2020). These results indicate that the use of SM is a very important contextual aspect which influences the emotional and psychological experiences of students.

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights the fact that the use of SM is not necessarily bad and has to be placed in a larger behavioral and social context. According to a number of studies, SM may also have beneficial purposes, such as preserving relationships, having emotional support, and receiving educational information (Pang, 2020; Uzuncakmak et al., 2022). Most of the adverse mental health conditions linked to the use of SM usually surface when the use becomes excessive, compulsive, or becomes a replacement of offline social interaction (Marttila et al., 2021). In turn, scholars are coming to believe in a more subtle viewpoint that follows an adaptive and a maladaptive pattern of SM use instead of the overall use becoming a homogeneous risk factor (Ivie et al., 2020; Vidal et al., 2020).

ii. Dimensions of Social Media Use

Newer sources have now moved towards not just the amount of SM use but also the qualitative aspects of SM usage, as various patterns of SM use have been found to have a different kind of psychological impact. Keles et al. (2020) classify the use of SM into time spent, type of activity, level of emotional investment and addiction of which all of them exhibit a range of degrees of association with the state of depression and anxiety. There is empirical evidence that emotional investment and addictive behavior are better predictors of adverse mental health outcomes

compared to frequency or duration (Alsunni and Latif, 2021). On the same note, problematic SM use that is marked by compulsive checking, lack of control, and interference with daily duties have been cited numerous times to contribute to heightened depressive and anxious symptoms (Lopes et al., 2022).

Additionally, the active and passive use of SM has become the subject of a prominent discussion in the literature. Passive use, i.e. scrolling through feeds without actually interacting with them, has also been linked to increased rates of envy, loneliness, and depressive symptoms, though when used actively, it may lead to social connectedness given a set of conditions (Liu and Ma, 2020; Primack et al., 2021). Emotional dependency and SM use at night are also identified as the most significant aspects that lead to sleep disorders and emotional control, which indirectly leads to depression (Kaya et al., 2021; Bezerra et al., 2023). Put together, these results convey the message that the psychological effects of SM do not only occur as a consequence of being exposed to this medium but as to how, the reason and when people become online platforms users.

iii. Levels of Depression

The problem of depression in adolescents and college students has become a significant issue of public health, and the prevalence rates reveal that more than 30 percent of college students develop clinically significant depressive symptoms at some point in their academic years (Bettmann et al., 2021). Several articles report a positive relationship between SM usage and depressive symptoms, and students who use it more frequently or possess problematic patterns of use tend to report a higher score on the scale of depression (Sallehuddin et al., 2021; Haand and Shuwang, 2020). The Meta-analytic and systematic review data also support the fact that, even though the magnitude of such an association is often not big, it is observed across cultural and geographical settings (Ivie et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020).

However, the literature warns against causal interpretations which are simplistic. The fact that there is high heterogeneity in the studies means that social media use in isolation does not entirely explain high rates of depression and that a number of moderating factors such as self-esteem, social support, loneliness, and coping mechanisms have significant roles to play (Mofatteh, 2020; Uzuncakmak et al., 2022). There is longitudinal evidence indicating that depression can be both a cause and a consequence of heavy social media use and therefore there is a two-way relationship (Vidal et al., 2020). On that note, researchers stress the importance of putting levels of depression in the context of the greater psychosocial and developmental context instead of blaming them on digital behavior.

iv. Depressive Symptoms

The depressive symptoms of hopelessness, low self-esteem, emotional insecurity, loneliness, and suicidal ideation have undergone comprehensive scrutiny as far as

the social media engagement is concerned. Empirical evidence shows that greater rates of social media addiction and emotional investment have a strong correlation with depressive symptomatology, such as fatigue, feeling irritable and lack of concentration (Alsunni and Latif, 2021; Almarzouki et al., 2022). These symptoms are further exacerbated by cyberbullying victimization, negative online interaction, and social comparison processes, and especially by psychologically vulnerable students (Iqbal et al., 2022; Maurya et al., 2022). These results emphasize the power of online space as intensifiers of the already existing emotional distress.

Furthermore, depression symptoms can be shaped indirectly through the behavioral mediators that are directly related to the use of SM. Sleep disturbance is considered a key pathway because the quality of sleep is disturbed due to excessive nighttime use of social media, which deteriorates mood regulation and depressing symptomatology (Kaya et al., 2021; Bezerra et al., 2023). It has also been demonstrated that emotional issues including envy, social anxiety, and loneliness mediate the association between problematic SM use and depression (Liu and Ma, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2022). Combined, the literature indicates that depressive symptoms related to use of SM are multidimensional, as they are the result of interaction between psychological, social, and behavioral processes, and not digital exposure per se.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

i. Social Comparison Theory

The Social Comparison Theory which was first suggested by Leon Festinger, explains the manner in which people compare their own views, skills, feelings and general self-worth to that of others, especially in the circumstances where there is a lack of objectivity. According to the theory, individuals make two major comparisons upward comparison and downward comparison, in which individuals compare them against those who are seen to be better off and those who are seen to be worse off (Wheeler 2024). Although upward comparisons may be a source of motivation and self-enhancement, they also can trigger the development of inadequacy, jealousy and self-esteem when the difference in the comparison is considered impossible. On the other hand, downward comparisons can offer short term emotional relief and boost the self-esteem but can hamper the personal development. Nowadays, particularly in the context of social media, the Social Comparison Theory has become even more applicable as people are continuously bombarded with mediated, idealized images of other people and their successes, ways of life, and beauty (Hamdan 2023). These common and usually unrealistic comparisons might lead to distorted self-perceptions, even more pressure to conform to the imagined social norms, and negatively affect the mental health of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms (Tesser 2024). Altogether, Social Comparison Theory is an effective model that can be used to accept interpersonal judgments and influence self-perception,

feelings, and actions, especially in well-connected and image-focused social contexts (Suls and Wills 2024).

ii. Stress and Coping Theory

“Stress and Coping Theory” is the model, which was created by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, on the basis of the perception, interpretation, and response of stressful events in life, and stress is not an outcome of external forces but the interaction between a person and the environment. This theory suggests that stress is present when it is perceived that a person encounters a given situation that is perceived to be beyond the resources available to them and that poses a threat to their well-being (Frost and Meyer 2023). The model identifies two major processes of cognitive appraisal: primary appraisal where people evaluate whether an event is irrelevant, benign, or is stressful and secondary appraisal where people evaluate whether they can cope up with demands of the situation. The coping strategies can be broadly categorized into problem-focused coping which is the active approach to solving the stressor which involves planning, solving problems or seeking information and emotion-focused coping where the stressor involves regulating emotion by active coping strategies such as avoidance, acceptance and seeking emotional support (Biggs and Brough 2025). Coping is contextually-conditioned, person-specific, and highly situational-stressor specific, indicating that there is no universal adaptive coping strategy. In modern contexts, academic stress, and the exposure to social media, the Stress and Coping Theory offers an effective model of individual divergence in psychological stability, affective regulation, and mental health outcomes, with adaptive coping potentially helping to reduce stress and maladaptive coping potentially increasing anxieties, burnout, and depressive symptoms (Goel and Verma 2021).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is a mixed method study, which

incorporates the quantitative and qualitative methodology to study the association between the use of SM and depression among university students in the Delhi NCR region in a comprehensive way. Primary data was done using organized survey questionnaire whereas secondary data was obtained via journals and reports, and published studies.

➤ Sampling Design and Study Population

Stratified random sampling technique was used to make sure that sufficient representation of university students in various strata was done in Delhi NCR. The target population was that of university students and the sample size was 200 respondents, as this will increase the reliability and generalizability of the results.

➤ Data Analysis and Statistical Techniques

The data collected was converted into a form of data that was analyzed using SPSS (Version 27) and MS Excel. The data was summarized using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation and compared to test the hypothesis and investigate the correlation between SM use and depression levels by applying inferential statistics like correlation and regression analysis.

4.1 Hypothesis of the study

H1: There is a significant association between social media usage and levels of depression among university students.

H2: Dimensions of social media use have a significant impact on depressive symptoms among university students.

H3: Evidence-based strategies derived from empirical findings on social media usage and depression can effectively promote healthy social media use and improve mental well-being among university students.

4.2 Conceptual Framework

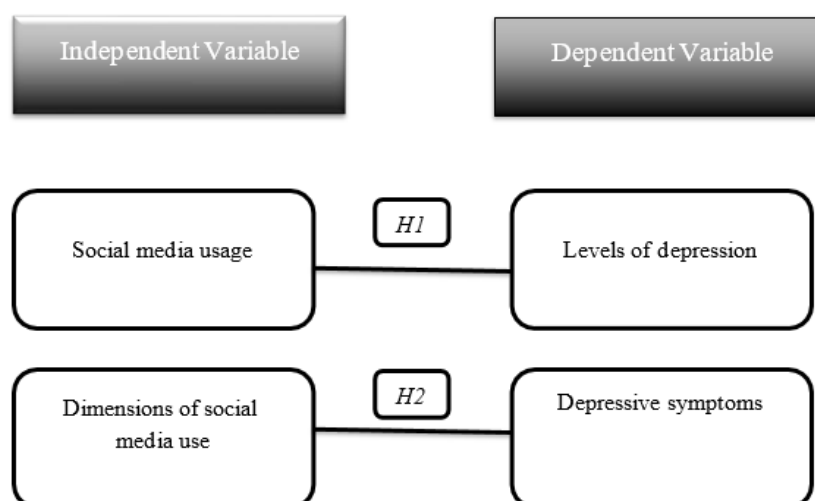


Figure 2: Conceptual Model

5. RESULT

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

S.NO.	Demographic Characteristics		N	%
1	Gender	Male	107	53.50%
		Female	93	46.50%
2	Age Group	Below 18 years	39	19.50%
		18–20 years	49	25%
		21–23 years	34	17%
		24–26 years	39	19.50%
		Above 26 years	39	19.50%
3	Course Level	Undergraduate	109	54.50%
		Postgraduate	91	45.50%
4	Year of Study	First Year	51	25.50%
		Second Year	52	26%
		Third Year	57	28.50%
		Final Year	51	25.50%
5	Daily Time Spent on Social Media	Less than 1 hour	55	27.50%
		1–2 hours	49	24.50%
		2–4 hours	53	26.50%
		More than 4 hours	43	21.50%
6	Purpose of Social Media Use	Academic	42	21%
		Social Networking	40	20%
		Entertainment	32	16%
		News & Information	45	22.50%
		Emotional Support	41	20.50%

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals a fairly even distribution of most important characteristics, which guarantees the strength of the data set to be analyzed in terms of its interpretation. Gender balance indicates that there is a non-significant difference between male respondents (53.5%) and the female respondents (46.5%). The age distribution is also varied, with the highest percentage of 25% under the 18 years bracket, then there is an equal number of those in the below 18 years, 24-26 years and above 26 years brackets (19.5% each), and the 21-23 years group has 17% of the overall participants. Academically speaking, undergraduate students make up marginal majority (54.5%), over and above postgraduate students (45.5), meaning that the students representing various academic levels were included. The distribution of year of study is fairly balanced, with 28.5 percent of the sample holding third-year students, 26 holding second-year, and 25 holding first-year and final-year student populations, respectively, and thus limits the bias based on year. Trends of day-to-day social media use show that there is a moderate use of

SM, with the biggest percentages (27.5 and 26.5) spending less than one hour and 2-4 hours per day respectively, and less than four hours (21.5) have excessive use. In terms of the reason people use social media, the participants display a complex engagement with the news and information being the most important (22.5%), academic purposes (21) slightly less important, and social networking (20), emotional support (20.5) and entertainment (16) which should indicate that social media is used with not only recreational purposes but also informational and academic ones by the study population.

➤ Result based on objectives

Objective 1: To analyze the association between social media usage and levels of depression among university students.

H1: There is a significant association between social media usage and levels of depression among university students.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Table

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Social media usage	10.8700	2.58000	200

levels of depression	9.3550	2.98219	200
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The descriptive statistics show that the respondents have moderate SM usage and moderate levels of depression. The average score of the social media use ($M = 10.87$, $SD = 2.58$) indicates that, on average, participants use social media at a fairly stable and moderate rate with a reasonable distribution of the scores around the mean, or there is a certain amount of inconsistency in how strongly

individuals use social media. In the same vein, the average level of depression ($M = 9.36$, $SD = 2.98$) indicates that the sample experiences a moderate level of depressive symptoms, with a degree of variation that is a bit higher than the one with social media usage. The similar standard deviations suggest that the individual experiences vary but the general distribution of the two variables is relatively constant among the 200 respondents.

Table 3: Correlations Table

Correlations			
		Social media usage	levels of depression
Social media usage	Pearson Correlation	1	.175*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.013
	N	200	200
levels of depression	Pearson Correlation	.175*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	
	N	200	200

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation analysis shows that there is a significant or strong relationship between the use of social media and the state of depression among the respondents which is statistically significant. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.175$, $p = 0.013$) shows a weak yet significant relationship, which implies that the reported depression levels also increase slightly when social media usage increases. Despite the fact that the relationship strength is not very high, the statistical significance at the 0.05 level proves that the identified relationship could have not been caused by chance in the sample consisting of 200

respondents. The implication of this finding is that although SM use by itself might not be a robust predictor of depression, it could be a contributory factor in combination with other psychological, social, or contextual factors.

Objective 2: To examine the impact of dimensions of social media use on depressive symptoms.

H2: Dimensions of social media use have a significant impact on depressive symptoms among university students.

Table 4: Model Summary Table

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.495 ^a	.245	.241	2.10353
a. Predictors: (Constant), Dimensions of social media use				

The model summary reveals that the regression model that investigates the effect of the dimensions of social media use showed low explanatory strength. The multitask correlation coefficient ($R = 0.495$) indicates the moderate positive relationship of the predictor variables with the DV. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.245$) indicates that the dimensions of social media use explain about 24.5 percent of the variance in the outcome variable,

which is considerable in terms of behavioral and social research studies with outcomes being influenced by a number of factors. The adjusted R^2 value (0.241) is very close to the R^2 , which means that the model is not overly inflated by the number of predictors in it. Moreover, the standard error of the estimate (2.10) indicates that there is a good degree of accuracy in the prediction of the model.

Table 5: ANOVA^a Table

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	283.859	1	283.859	64.151	.000 ^b
	Residual	876.121	198	4.425		
	Total	1159.980	199			
a. Dependent Variable: Depressive symptoms						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Dimensions of social media use						

Results of ANOVA prove that the regression model which evaluates the effect of dimensions of social media use on

depressive symptoms are statistically significant. The regression model produces a large F-value ($F = 64.151$)

with a significant level of $p = 0.001$, which means that the regression equation is a much better fit as compared to no predictors in a model. Regression sum of squares (283.859) against residual sum of squares (876.121) indicates that much of the variation in the depressive

symptoms is described by the predictor. The 1 and 198 degree of freedom findings confirm that the dimensions of the social media use have a significant role to play in the explanation of the difference in the depressive symptoms between the respondents.

Table 6: Coefficients^a Table

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.632	.625		7.416	.000
	Dimensions of social media use	.477	.060	.495	8.009	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Depressive symptoms

The coefficients table has evidently indicated the strong predictive value of dimensions of SM use on depressive symptoms. The coefficient of dimensions of social media use ($B = 0.477$, $SE = 0.060$) is not standardized, meaning that a one-unit change in the dimensions of SM use has a negative impact on depressive symptoms by 0.48 units other factors being equal. The moderate and positive effect size as indicated by the standardized beta coefficient ($= 0.495$) indicates that the SM use may be a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in the model. The t -value ($t = 8.009$) and the very significant p -value ($p < 0.001$) also confirm the strength of this relationship. Also, the constant value ($B = 4.632$, $p < 0.001$) is used to indicate the starting point of depressive symptoms under the condition of zero use of social media.

Objective 3: To suggest evidence-based recommendations for promoting healthy social media use and improving mental well-being among university students.

H3: Evidence-based strategies derived from empirical findings on social media usage and depression can effectively promote healthy social media use and improve mental well-being among university students.

The study aimed at converting empirical data into practical implementation strategies that could be used to promote a healthy social media users interaction and at the same time improve the mental health of university students. The results of empirical studies in the field of psychology and education prove that uncontrolled and overuse of social media is positively linked to an increase in the probability of depression, anxiety, sleep disorder, and a decrease in academic activity in students (Taibi et al., 2023). Evidence-based recommendations, in such a way, favor the encouragement of intentional and deliberate social media usage but not its total avoidance. The following strategies could assist students to critically assess the nature and effect of readings they consume: encouraging time-bound usage, promoting content literacy, and creating awareness of algorithms-based exposure (Fassnacht et al., 2022). The alignment of these strategies with well-established mental health promotion models, promoted by various organizations, including World

Health Organization, will make sure that the interventions are based on the international best practices of promoting psychological well-being (Worsley et al., 2022).

The universities have a very important role to play at the institutional level in operationalizing such evidence-based strategies. Empirical studies show that adding digital well-being classes to orientation and life-skills classes and counseling sessions would assist students in improving their self-regulation and coping skills (Wang et al., 2025). Other initiatives that can be used by universities to tackle digital detox problems include campus-wide digital detox campaigns, peer-support groups, and stress management and emotional resilience workshops. It has been demonstrated that, when given structured information as to how to be able to balance online and offline activities, students develop a better mood regulation, increased social connectedness, and are less prone to the depressive symptoms (Zewude et al., 2025). In these types of interventions, which are institutionally managed, the assistance of trained mental health practitioners is most beneficial, and the support of uniform policy frameworks that consider digital well-being as an important component of student well-being is essential.

On the personal level, evidence-based suggestions include self-monitoring, adaptive coping strategies, and social support systems in reducing the adverse mental health consequences of social media consumption. Empirical evidence supports the idea that the more students monitor their online activity, create personal limits, and take part in physical and social activities in real life, the less they are depressed and psychologically distressed (Luo 2023). Promoting help-seeking behavior, de-stigmatizing mental health discussions and eliminating stigma about counseling services enhance these results even further. Collectively, the hypothesis that evidence-based strategies derived from empirical findings can promote healthy SM use and improve mental well-being is strongly supported; as such strategies operate synergistically across individual, institutional, and societal levels to create a supportive digital and psychological environment for university students (Herriman et al., 2024).

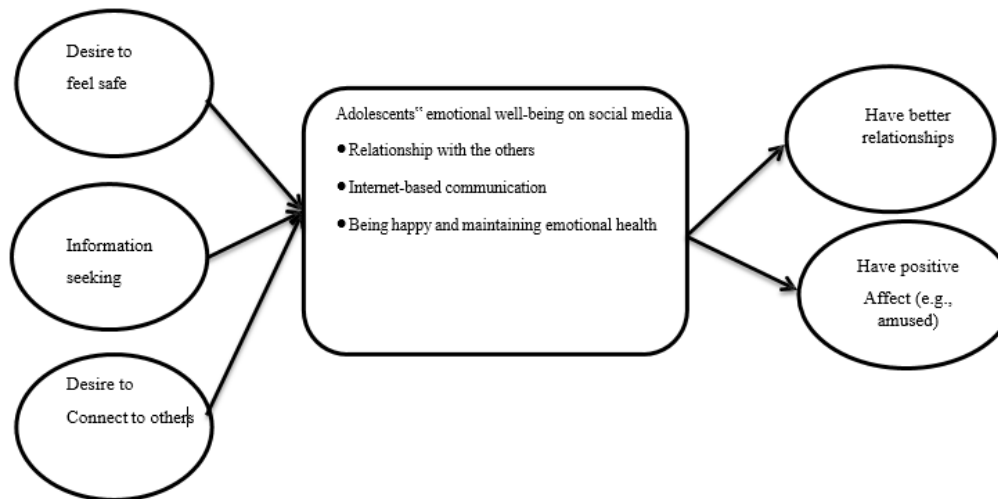


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework Linking Social Media Use and Mental Well-Being among University Students

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are closely consistent with the empirical and theoretical data presented in the reviewed article, which supports the thesis that the use of SM is closely related to the depressive symptom development in the students of the university. In accordance with the Uses and Gratifications model and Social Comparison Theory, the findings indicate that heavy and emotionally attached use of such devices as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat exacerbates upward social comparison, consequently, diminishing self-esteem and raising levels of inadequacy and hopelessness (Kircaburun et al., 2020; Bettmann et al., 2021). The observed positive and strong relationship between the use of SM and the level of depression is reflected in the previous studies by Haand and Shuwang (2020) and Sallehuddin et al. (2021), who have recorded the same trends in the populations of various universities in distinct socio-cultural settings. Besides, the impact that dimensions of SM use have on the manifestation of depressive symptoms is significant, which supports the evidence that emotional investment, passive consumption, and compulsive engagement, and not simply time spent online, are vital factors in the development of an adverse mental health outcome (Alsunni and Latif, 2021; Lopes et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the argument that problematic ways of using social media are psychosocial stressors in the already stressful academic setting of higher education.

Further, the discussion describes a number of mediating and reinforcing mechanisms found in the literature that is useful in explaining the identified association. According to the previous study, the intensive use of SM negatively affects the “quality of sleep, impairs the quality of face-to-face social interaction, and diminishes the quality of perceived social support”, which are all defined predictors of depression (Kaya et al., 2021; Chen and Xiao, 2022). The results are also aligned with the data that indicate victimization of cyber bullies with depression, loneliness, and social anxiety worsen depressive symptoms in heavy social media users (Iqbal et al., 2022; Maurya et al.,

2022). Notably, the study under consideration also emphasizes the fact that the correlation between the use of social media and depression is not linear, but depends on the intent, setting, and personal coping abilities (Ivie et al., 2020; Vidal et al., 2020). This subtle implication is the reason why it is devoted to the preventative measures based on evidence, which includes awareness of responsible use and increased digital literacy and reinforced mental health support systems in the institutions. In general, the discussion proves the idea that one should pay attention to the qualitative nature of using social media to minimize the depressive symptoms and enable students to experience the benefits of using digital connectivity.

7. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is a strong and significant correlation between the usage of the SM and depressive symptoms among the university students and that the psychological consequences of use of digital media are dependent more on the nature and magnitude rather than on the exposure or exposure. The findings of the study demonstrate that affectively dedicated and disadaptive schedules of using social media contribute to heightened vulnerability to symptoms of depression by reinforcing negative social comparisons, diminishing self-esteem, sleep disturbances, and decreasing the quality of offline social interaction. At the same time, the results do not refute the fact that the use of SM as such is not dangerous; when implemented in any way that has a sense in regard to academic tasks, information exchange, and social assistance; it can be a valuable asset rather than a psychological menace. This delicate understanding allows focusing on the importance of contextual and individual factors of mental health outcomes that suggest the importance of coping skills and emotional regulation of students, as well as self-monitoring dispositions in mediation effects of the effect of online activity. Additionally, the study highlights the necessity of a sensible and attentive attitude to the use of SM, which should be supported by institutional policies and

interventions related to digital well-being, psychological resilience, and independent incorporation of online and offline life so that the overall well-being and mental health of university students could also increase.

➤ Limitation

Although it has contributed to it, the study has a number of limitations, which need to be mentioned. The cross-sectional research design also limits the possibility to form causal conclusions about the social media use and depression as the observed associations at a particular time may be affected by any unknown or reciprocal variables. The use of self-reported information can create bias in the response such as social desirability and recall errors that could impact the accuracy of self-reported SM usage and depressive symptoms. Also, the sample was limited to students of one university in a particular geographical area and this can restrict the extension of the results to other students of different cultural, institutional, or socio-economic backgrounds.

➤ Implication

The study has significant implications to universities, mental health practitioners, and policy makers. The proved interconnection between the use of SM and depression makes it clear that digital well-being needs to be incorporated into student-supporting activities, which encompass counseling services, orientation programs, and life-skills education. The institutions may apply these findings to preventive intervention designs that strengthen meaningful and responsible usage of social media, effective sleep habits, and face-to-face socialization. On a grander level, the results will demonstrate the applicability of the notion of digital behavior at defining the mental health of students as a critical variable, therefore, affecting the development of evidence-based policies and awareness campaigns that may reduce its impact on mental distress and enhance the overall well-being in the context of higher education.

➤ Future Research Direction

The future research should employ longitudinal and experimental research designs to further cover causal processes and time dynamics of SM and depression among university students. Further study is able to explore the implications on the platform-specific, active and passive pattern of engagement and the role played by mediating factors, such as self-esteem, loneliness, coping strategies, and regulation of emotions. It would have increased the applicability of the results by diversifying the study across different cultural and institutional settings and give the chance to compare between cultures. Furthermore, the combined method involving the utilization of qualitative information can provide a more nuanced view of the lived experience of the students and the perception of the social media to be used in more context-specific and focused ways of fostering mental health in the digital age.

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