



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF USERS AND NON-USERS

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Abstract:

The present study examined the influence of social media use on mental health and psychological well-being by comparing social media users and non-users among college students. The research was conducted in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar District, Maharashtra, India. A total of 60 college students aged 18–25 years participated, comprising 40 active social media users and 20 non-users. Participants were selected through simple random sampling. Levels of depression and psychological well-being were assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996) and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS; Ryff, 1989), respectively. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and independent-samples t-tests. Results indicated that social media users exhibited significantly higher depression scores than non-users. Conversely, non-users reported significantly higher levels of psychological well-being compared to their user counterparts. These findings suggest that social media engagement may be associated with poorer mental health outcomes and reduced eudaimonic well-being in this college student population.

Keywords: social media, mental health, college students, depression, anxiety.

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Introduction:

The proliferation of social media platforms—Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X has transformed interpersonal communication, particularly among emerging young adults aged 13–24. In India, 90% of college students own smartphones, and 88% use social media for at least 3 hours daily. Distinctions between active (e.g., posting, commenting) and passive (e.g., scrolling, viewing) use are crucial, as both contribute to mental health outcomes but through different pathways. At the same time, research has increasingly linked high levels of social media use with mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, and reduced subjective well-being (Keles et al., 2020; Vannucci et al., 2017). While many studies examine heavy users, comparatively fewer explore how non-users differ from regular users in psychological health. Non-users provide an important contrast group that may help isolate the direct influence of social media exposure on well-being.

Comparative studies highlight stark differences. Active users report higher anxiety and self-harm risks, while passive users experience increased loneliness and negative self-image. In contrast, non-users or those taking breaks show improved mood and well-being; for instance, a four-week deactivation enhances subjective well-



being by 25-40% of psychological intervention effects. Problematic social media use correlates moderately with depression ($r = 0.273$), anxiety ($r = 0.348$), and stress ($r = 0.313$) in youth. Exposure to upward social comparisons on platforms yields negative effects on mental health ($g = - 0.21$), body image, and well-being.

Although negative effects predominate, social media also offers benefits for some users. It can strengthen social connections, reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues, and provide emotional support—particularly during periods of isolation, such as pandemics. Mindful and active use, when practiced in moderation, can foster a sense of belonging and enhance self-esteem in balanced contexts.

Review of Literature:

Multiple studies have found associations between social media use and mental health difficulties. Keles et al. (2020) reported consistent links between problematic use and increased anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults. Similarly, Vannucci et al. (2017) found that frequent use correlates with elevated anxiety and stress in college populations. Non-users may experience better emotional regulation and reduced cognitive overload. Tromholt (2016) found that participants who temporarily refrained from Facebook reported increased life satisfaction and positive affect.

The relationship between social media use and the mental health of college students has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in contemporary psychological and educational research (Carlos La-Rosa-Longobardi & Djamila Gallegos-Espinoza, 2024). The widespread adoption of social networking platforms has fundamentally reshaped interpersonal communication, information consumption, and identity formation among university-aged individuals. While these digital environments offer unprecedented opportunities for connection and self-expression, they also expose users to unique psychological risks.

Existing literature presents a nuanced perspective, identifying both protective and detrimental effects of social media engagement. Several studies emphasize its positive contributions, noting that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (now X) serve as vital tools for maintaining social relationships, accessing peer support, and facilitating emotional disclosure, particularly during periods of transition such as entering college (Berryman et al., 2018; Seabrook et al., 2016). These supportive functions have been associated with reduced feelings of isolation and enhanced overall well-being in moderate users.

Conversely, a substantial and growing body of evidence documents adverse mental health outcomes linked to heavy or problematic social media use. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies consistently report positive correlations between excessive platform engagement and elevated levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and diminished self-esteem among college students (Twenge & Campbell, 2019; Primack et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2021). Key mechanisms underlying these negative effects include upward social comparison triggered by curated online personas, exposure to cyberbullying or toxic discourse, fear of missing out (FOMO), sleep disruption due to late-night usage, and the cognitive overload resulting from constant notifications and multitasking (Fardouly et al., 2018; Elhai et al., 2019).



In response to these concerns, researchers have explored a variety of preventive and interventional approaches. Proposed strategies include digital literacy education, mindfulness-based social media use training, implementation of platform time-limit features, campus mental health awareness campaigns, and cognitive-behavioral interventions targeting maladaptive usage patterns (Hunt et al., 2018; Thai et al., 2023). Although preliminary results are promising, further longitudinal research is needed to determine the long-term efficacy of these initiatives.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1) To compare levels of anxiety among social media users and non-users.
- 2) To examine differences in psychological well-being between users and non-users.

Hypothesis of the Study:

- 1) Social media users will exhibit higher levels of anxiety than non-users.
- 2) Social media users will report lower psychological well-being than non-users.

Research Design:

A comparative, cross-sectional research design was used.

Sample:

The present study was conducted in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar District. Participants consisted of 60 college students aged 18–25 years, of whom 40 were users and 20 were non-users. The sample was selected randomly using a simple random sampling technique.

Variable:

Independent Variable

1. **Media:** Users and non-users

Dependent Variable

1. **Depression and Well-being**

Operational definition:

- ✓ **Users:** Engaging with social media daily for at least 3 hours.
- ✓ **Non-users:** No social media use in the past year or engaging with social media daily for at least 1 hour and less than one hour.
- ✓ **Mental Health:** Measured in this study as the level of depressive symptoms assessed by the total score on the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). Lower scores indicate better mental health.
- ✓ **Psychological Well-Being:** Measured as the overall level of eudaimonic well-being using the total score on Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale. Higher scores indicate greater psychological well-being.

Tool used:

- 1) **The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II;** Beck et al., 1996) is a widely used and well-validated self-report measure for assessing the severity of depressive symptoms. Originally developed by Aaron T. Beck, it consists of 21 items that evaluate cognitive, affective, and somatic symptoms of depression. The BDI-II has been extensively applied in educational and research settings to screen for and monitor depression among



students. Total scores range from 0 to 63, with each item scored from 0 to 3. In the present study, the BDI-II demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.927.

2) **The Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS; Ryff, 1989)** measures psychological well-being across six theoretically derived dimensions: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. Respondents indicate their agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores on each subscale reflect greater well-being in the corresponding dimension. In the current study, the PWBS exhibited strong internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

Statistical Analysis:

Descriptive statistics such as Means, standard deviations, and independent sample t-tests were conducted using SPSS.

Procedure:

Participants completed questionnaires after providing informed consent. Data were scored and statistically analyzed using t-tests to compare both groups.

Results and Discussion:

1) Social media users will exhibit higher levels of anxiety than non-users.

Table no. 1: Showing Mean, SD of users and non-users on anxiety.

| Media | N | Mean | SD | t value | Sign |
|-----------|----|-------|------|---------|------|
| Users | 40 | 23.15 | 8.14 | 5.81 | 0.01 |
| Non-users | 20 | 11.90 | 4.01 | | |

Table 1 reveals a significant difference in depression levels between students who use social media and those who do not. Social media users had a substantially higher mean BDI-II score ($M = 23.15$, $SD = 8.14$) compared to non-users ($M = 11.90$, $SD = 4.01$). An independent t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant, $t = 5.81$, $p < .01$. The results suggest that students who use social media experience significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms than their non-using peers.

The findings support previous research highlighting the negative emotional consequences of heavy social media exposure. Higher anxiety and depression among users may be attributed to Fear of missing out, cyber comparison, informational overload, and online social pressures (Vannucci et al., 2017). According to Keles et al. (2020), the effects of social media on mental health can be categorized into four distinct domains: time spent, activity level, investment, and addiction. Results revealed that all four domains were positively correlated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and overall psychological distress. Similarly, Nazari et al. (2023) reported a significant direct association between social media use and poorer mental health outcomes.



2) Social media users will report lower psychological well-being than non- users.

Table no. 2 shows the Mean and SD of users and non-users students on psychological well-being.

| Media | No | Mean | SD | t value | Sign |
|-----------|----|--------|-------|---------|------|
| Users | 40 | 158.40 | 10.81 | 4.71 | 0.01 |
| Non-users | 20 | 178.80 | 22.86 | | |

Table 2 illustrates a significant disparity in psychological well-being between students who use social media and those who do not. Social media users reported notably lower mean psychological well-being scores ($M = 158.40$, $SD = 10.81$) than non-users ($M = 178.80$, $SD = 22.86$), respectively. An independent t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, $t = 4.71$, $p = .01$. These results indicate that students engaging with social media tend to experience diminished psychological well-being compared to their non-using counterparts. Non-users demonstrated higher subjective well-being than users.

Twenge et al. (2018) observed that even moderate daily screen time (approximately 4 hours) was linked to reduced psychological well-being among adolescents. Notably, individuals with little to no screen use displayed the highest levels of well-being, whereas non-users and very low users showed no meaningful differences from each other. This pattern of superior well-being among non-users is consistent with Tromholt (2016), who found that a one-week abstinence from social media produced significant improvements in life satisfaction and positive affect. One possible explanation is that limiting exposure to the upward social comparison commonly encountered on social media platforms helps safeguard overall mental health and eudaimonic well- being.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that social media use is associated with higher levels of anxiety, whereas non-users show comparatively healthier mental profiles. These findings underscore the importance of digital well-being education and

mindful social media habits. Non-users demonstrated higher psychological well-being than users

Limitations:

- ❖ Sample size limited to one geographic region
- ❖ Self-report measures may introduce bias
- ❖ The cross-sectional nature prevents conclusions about causality

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