

The Psychological and Behavioral Impacts of Social Media on Postgraduate Students: A Focus on Gender, Academic Performance, And Mental Well-Being

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of social media on college-going students, focusing on its impact on their academic performance, interpersonal communication, and psychological well-being. In this study, 200 postgraduate students were analyzed using a descriptive research design. Findings displayed that excessive social media use is associated with decreased academic performance of male students, increased levels of anxiety and stress. Additionally, social media negatively impacted face-to-face interactions, with notable differences between genders. The study emphasizes the importance of promoting balanced social media usage and digital literacy among students to resolve these bad effects and improve their academic and personal wellbeing. Further recommendations include targeted mental health support and workshops addressing time management and healthy digital habits. Nevertheless, this study has limitations, including that it is cross-sectional and based entirely upon self-reports, which are subject to biases. Longitudinal methods can be used in future research to analyze the long-term impacts of social media on the mental health and academic performance of students.

Keywords: Social media, college students, behavioral impact, academic performance, interpersonal communication

Introduction

As one of the most prominent aspects of the modern world, social media has changed how people communicate with each other, share information, and interact across national and cultural borders, especially among our youth, who now face the problem of constant connectivity. There were roughly 5 billion social media users worldwide in 2023, indicating how broadly social media has been adopted. As for a specific social media platform, Facebook was still the most used network globally with more than 3 billion monthly active users in April 2024 and Instagram wasn't far behind, with 2 billion monthly active users, and TikTok, especially loved by Generation Z, crossed 1.5 billion monthly active users as of late 2023 (Statista, 2023). These statistics demonstrate the global reach and impact of social media networks, influencing communication, marketing, and culture across the globe.

Social media in India has seen a boom (IAMAI, 2020) with services such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube becoming part of daily life. The rise of social media has dramatically changed and now students communicate with others and engage in online research and academics. Overuse of social media has been linked with negative consequences for students, including increasingly worrying influences on academic achievement, mental health issues, and problems with interpersonal relationships.

The evolution of social media is linked to the general development of technologies based on the Internet, especially the emergence of Web 2.0, which allows user-generated content and social networking features (Ortner, 2018). Further developments in web architecture during the 2000s through social websites like Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 introduced the concept of personal profiles and sharing content in the digital world (Safdar, 2020). These platforms rapidly gained popularity among young adults, especially university students, early adopters of these technologies (Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

Social media usage in India has been shaped by the explosive growth of internet and mobile access. India has 560 million internet users as per a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2020), out of which most are active on social media. The ubiquity of different social media channels has contributed to their profound roles in college students' daily lives; they utilize these platforms to accomplish various goals—social or academic.

Literature Review

While it is true that social media sites can boost academic learning via collaborative tools and resource access, research shows that it can also act as a huge distraction, causing procrastination and thereby hurting academic performance (McHaney, 2023).

Moreover, according to Sobaih (2022), the use of social media among Indian college students increased with their exposure to it, which as a result made students report lower academic grades due to neglecting their studies to spend time on social media. Biswas et al. (2021) found that Indian college students who spend greater than three hours per day on social media experienced greater levels of stress and anxiety. This is in line with international research showing that the constant comparison with other people's beautiful, curated online lives can create feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (McCrary et al., 2022). There's also the role of fear of missing out (FOMO), which is related to worrying about whether you're missing out on rewarding experiences that others may be having; FOMO has increased through social media, especially in adolescents and young adults (Przybylski et al., 2013).

However, this move to online communication has led to fears about the quality of interpersonal interactions. According to Joshi (2022), although social media enables communication, it can also lead to a decline in face-to-face interaction, and the quality of relationships may also weaken.

While a number of studies have investigated the general impact of social media on the student population, few studies are there to analyze the minute details regarding psychological and behavioral influences among Indian postgraduate students. In this regard, hardly any studies have been done with regard to differences between genders with respect to usage patterns and how different usages uniquely influence the academic performance, patterns of interpersonal communications, and mental well-being of students. While much of the literature to date has focused on undergraduate students, less emphasis has perhaps been placed on postgraduate students, who probably face different pressures and social dynamics.

The present study will therefore discuss the multidimensional impact of using social media on postgraduate students by underlining its effects on academic performance, psychological well-being, and interpersonal communication. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Ruggiero, 2000) and Social Comparison Theory (Vogel, 2014), this study tries to find out how the students use social media sites to gratify their communication and entertainment needs while experiencing the undesirable adverse effects. The findings indicate that

excessive use of social media negatively associates with lower academic performance of students, especially male students, and increased anxiety and stress levels, which is intensified in certain cases by phenomena such as FOMO. The literature review expands on this by discussing global findings, such as Twenge et al. (2018), who identified a strong correlation between prolonged social media use and increased depressive symptoms. Perifanou et al. (2021), who highlighted its negative impact on self-esteem and mental well-being. The study emphasizes the significance of anxiety and depression as key psychological variables influenced by social media usage. It links them to phenomena like social comparison and the fear of missing out (FOMO). Both of which also have been shown in past research (Fardouly et al., 2015; Przybylski et al., 2013) to exacerbate mental health issues. By integrating stress, anxiety and depression into the conceptual framework, this study underscores their critical role in understanding the broader psychological effects of social media on postgraduate students.

Furthermore, this research also highlights the significant deterioration of face-to-face interactions, where male students have been more affected than females. Such findings are bound to bring into sharp focus the need for balanced habits of use of social media and for promoting digital literacy to reduce the potential negative impacts and enhance academic and personal welfare among students.

Objectives

- To examine the impact of social media usage on academic performance among postgraduate students, identifying gender-specific differences.
- To evaluate the influence of social media usage on interpersonal communication and the difference across genders.
- To analyze the psychological effects of social media usage, specifically its relationship with anxiety and depression among postgraduate students.
- To investigate the role of timing and duration of social media usage, specifically evening engagement, in predicting psychological and behavioral outcomes.
- To explore the predictors of problematic social media use, such as gender, frequency of use, and timing, and their association with adverse academic and psychological outcomes.

Hypotheses

H₁: Male students experience significantly greater negative effects on academic performance due to social media use compared to female students.

H₂: Social media usage significantly affects interpersonal communication, with male students reporting a greater decline in face-to-face communication than female students.

H₃: Social media usage frequency, gender, and the timing of engagement (evening use) predict heightened levels of anxiety among postgraduate students.

H₄: Social media usage frequency, gender, and the timing of engagement (evening use) predict heightened levels of depression among postgraduate students.

Methodology

This quantitative study employed a descriptive research design, which is particularly suitable for studies that aim to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon. The data has been collected using Survey method. Following a structured questionnaire the data has been collected both online and offline to gather participants' demographic information, social media usage habits, and its perceived effects on interpersonal communication, academic performance and psychological dimensions i.e. stress, anxiety and depression.

Sampling Method

Targeted population included postgraduate students that were drawn from different institutions in south India. Following purposive and convenience sampling technique, the institutions which offer postgraduate courses were approached. Out of them only three institutions which provided the researcher access to the targeted population were selected, besides the fact that those target institution in themselves opted or agreed to participate in research through informed consent. For the selection of respondents, simple random sampling method was adopted that represents and reduces the selection bias. Names of all enlisted postgraduate students from consolidated participating Higher Learning Institutions served as the sample frame in the current study. Every student was given a different unique identifier number, then the participants were randomly picked using lottery method to maintain no bias in the choice. This process gave all the students equal opportunities in getting selected and resulted in a diverse sample of 200 students across different disciplines and backgrounds. The selected participants were contacted and their participation confirmed based on informed consent. All respondents totaled 200, of which they were all active in one form of social media application. The sample size was comprised on 120 males and 80 females.

Sample Size

The sample used throughout this research will utilize the total of 200 students in the postgraduate stream to ensure statistical reliability and feasibility and also to represent findings on the population. This sample size allows having enough power of detection for the existence of meaningful relationships, considering a

medium-size effect and a 95% confidence level, according to the common bottom line in social sciences. Similar researches by Junco (2012) and Fardouly et al. (2015) have used sample sizes in the range of 150-200 participants, successfully conducted their studies.

Sample size determination

This sample size is then confirmed by using a calculated sample size based formula, which also involved some statistical parameters: the population size, estimated 5,000 postgraduate students in universities and colleges, margin of error accepted, 5%, confidence level, 95% of the cases; as indicated by the said equation, a sample of roughly 357 subjects, even considering some drop-out levels; due to several other considerations relative to logistics and availability, and taking into account an "interviews/measurements sample", this final group of 200 individuals are targeted. The decision on sample size had to strike a balance between representativeness and feasibility so that the study would achieve its objectives within available time and resources. Informed consent was sought from all participants in advance, and ethical clearance was obtained from the respective institutional review boards.

Data Collection Process

The structured questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from previous studies. Key sections included patterns of social media use, impact on academic performance, psychological well-being (anxiety & depression), and interpersonal communication. The scales were adopted from past studies, including Junco (2012) for social media usage, Goet (2022) for academic performance, and Joshi et al. (2022) for interpersonal communication with 7 point likert scale. For psychological well-being, the researchers used measures from Fardouly et al. (2015) including anxiety and depression using standardized psychometric scales combined into the questionnaire. Anxiety was measured using an adapted version of the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) (Spitzer, 2006), which included seven items to assess feelings of nervousness and worry related to social media usage, recorded through 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Almost Always).

Depression was calculated using an adapted version of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Löwe, 2004), with nine items focusing symptoms such as sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest due to excessive social media use, using 5-point scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Nearly Every Day).

These validated tools were slightly modified to reflect the context of social media's psychological impact while retaining their reliability. The final questionnaire included a total of 31 items.

Pre-testing on 30 participants yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, indicating good internal consistency. The integrative design thus allowed the study to systematically investigate the multilevel impacts of social media on postgraduate students. Moreover, the questionnaire also focused on a number of important areas, including demographic information: age, gender, academic discipline, and year of study.

- **Social Media Usage Patterns:** Frequency and length of use, and the major platforms employed, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.
- **Purpose of Using Social Media:** The main uses to which the students put social media—talking with friends, collaborating on academic work, entertaining themselves, or some other purpose.
- **Perceived Impact on Academic Performance and Use of Time:** The effect, as perceived by the respondent, of using social media on the ability to concentrate on studies and to manage time effectively.
- **Perceived Effects on Interpersonal Communication:** Whether social media usage comes at the expense of in-person interactions with peers, family members, and faculty, or not.

Data Analysis

The collected data included both ordinal and nominal variables. For instance, variables such as the frequency of social media usage (e.g., hours per day) were measured on an ordinal scale, while categorical data such as gender and preferred social media platforms were nominal.

Descriptive Statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were used to summarize the general patterns of social media usage and its perceived effects on academic performance, psychological well-being, and interpersonal communication. Inferential Statistics were employed to test the hypotheses and explore relationships between gender and the impact of social media on academic performance and interpersonal communication. The key variables examined include social media usage (frequency, duration, and purpose), academic performance (self-reported impacts and grades), and psychological well-being, which encompasses stress, anxiety, and depression as key outcomes influenced by excessive social media use. The study also examines how the extent of social media use impacts upon the nature of interpersonal communication—both quality and frequency of face-to-face interaction—while analyzing gender differences for moderation to understand how males and females differ in experiencing impacts.

Independent Samples t-tests were conducted to compare the impact of social media on academic performance between male and female students as suggested by Field (2017).

The Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to identify the predictors of negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety and depression associated with social media use. In addition, multiple regression analysis was conducted with a view to identifying which factors predict anxiety and depression: social media use, gender, and timing of use. This is in concert with Hoyt et al. (2008), who recommend this approach when one seeks to examine the influences of multiple factors on a dependent variable.

All statistical tests were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, and the significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses. Results were presented in the form of tables and graphs to facilitate interpretation. The Chi-square procedure was selected following Pallant's (2020) guidelines because this test is applicable for categorical variables, such as gender differences in social media usage patterns and their relationship with academic performance. Given that much of the data on social media usage was ordinal—such as the amount of time spent on social media—the Chi-square test emerged as the most appropriate non-parametric tool for analysis from a statistical standpoint.

The criterion for significance was set at $p < 0.05$. This balances the competing imperatives of minimizing the Type I error rate without reducing the statistical power of tests too far, as recommended for studies in the social sciences. Both helped validate and added strength to the findings, which were useful in drawing meaningful insights on the impacts of social media among postgraduate students.

Results & Findings

Table no. 1 Socio-demographic of Participants

	Demographic Variable	Categories
1	Gender	Male (55%), Female (45%)
2	Age Group	21-25 years (80%), 26-30 years (20%)
3	Academic Discipline	Science (40%), Arts (35%), Commerce (25%)
4	Social Media Usage (Daily)	2 hours (20%), 2-4 hours (50%), > 4 hours (30%)

The analysis of data from 200 postgraduate students revealed several novel insights that contribute to the existing literature on social media use among

college students. Socio demographic details of participants are given in Table no. 1.

Table no. 2: Gender Differences in Academic Performance Impact

Variable	Male (Mean ± SD)	Female (Mean ± SD)	t-Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
Academic Performance Impact	3.2 ± 0.7	2.8 ± 0.6	3.14	< 0.01	Male students report significantly greater negative effects.

This table no. 2 shows the results of the independent t-test for academic performance impact by gender. Male students ($M = 3.2 \pm 0.7$) reported significantly greater negative academic performance impacts compared to female students ($M = 2.8 \pm 0.6$), with a t-statistic of 3.14 ($p < 0.01$).

Table no. 3: Gender Differences in Interpersonal Communication Impact

Variable	Male (Mean ± SD)	Female (Mean ± SD)	t-Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
Interpersonal Communication Impact	3.4 ± 0.6	3.0 ± 0.5	2.75	< 0.05	Male students report significantly greater negative effects.

This table no.3 outlines the t-test results for interpersonal communication impact. Male students ($M = 3.4 \pm 0.6$) experienced significantly greater declines in face-to-face communication skills compared to female students ($M = 3.0 \pm 0.5$), with a t-statistic of 2.75 ($p < 0.05$).

Table no. 4: Predictors of Anxiety

Variable	R ²	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-Value	Interpretation
Social Media Use	0.34	0.42	< 0.001	Strongest predictor of anxiety.

This table no. 4 summarizes the multiple regression results for predictors of anxiety. Social media use emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), followed by gender ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), with male students reporting higher anxiety levels. Evening social media use ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) also contributed significantly to anxiety. The model explained 34% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.34$).

Table no. 5: Predictors of Depression

Variable	R ²	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-Value	Interpretation
Social Media Use	0.39	0.48	< 0.001	Strongest predictor of depression.

This table no.5 highlights the regression results for predictors of depression. Social media use was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), followed by gender ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), with male students showing higher depression levels. Evening usage timing ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) was also significant. The model accounted for 39% of the variance in depression ($R^2 = 0.39$).

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Gender Differences in Academic Performance Impact

The finding that male students experience more significant negative impacts on academic performance aligns with previous research by Sharma (2022), which highlighted that excessive recreational social media use is more prevalent among male students, leading to reduced focus on academic responsibilities. However, this study expands upon prior research by highlighting those postgraduate students, a demographic underrepresented in earlier studies, are similarly affected.

In contrast, studies like Junco (2012) emphasized that social media could enhance academic performance when used for collaborative purposes. While our study acknowledges this dual nature, the observed negative impact among males suggests that gendered patterns of usage may moderate these benefits.

Hypothesis 2: Gender Differences in Interpersonal Communication Impact

Our study's finding that male students report greater declines in face-to-face communication skills aligns with Sutikno (2023), which observed that heavy reliance on digital interactions could weaken in-person social skills. However, this study adds a novel gendered dimension by demonstrating that males might substitute face-to-face communication with online engagement more frequently than females.

Contrastingly, Ellison et al. (2007) suggested that social media fosters meaningful connections and enhances communication among peers. The discrepancy may lie in how different genders utilize social media—males may prioritize online connections over offline interactions, while females may use it to complement face-to-face relationships.

Hypothesis 3: Predictors of Anxiety

The significant role of social media in predicting anxiety, as seen in our study, corroborates findings by Fardouly et al. (2015), which highlighted that social comparisons on platforms like Facebook increase stress and anxiety. Evening usage as a critical factor resonates with Meyerson (2023), which suggested that nighttime screen exposure disrupts sleep and heightens anxiety levels.

However, while prior studies primarily focus on adolescents and undergraduates, our study extends these findings to postgraduate students, emphasizing that academic pressures, compounded by social media usage, amplify these effects. This contrasts with Perifanou et al. (2021), who argued that digital skills mitigate anxiety; this discrepancy may reflect varying digital literacy levels among postgraduate students.

Hypothesis 4: Predictors of Depression

The findings of the research, social media significantly predicts depression align with the systematic review by Keles et al. (2020), which demonstrated that problematic social media use correlates with depressive symptoms. The heightened impact on males parallels findings by Przybylski et al. (2013), which noted that men often use social media for escapism, potentially worsening feelings of isolation and depression.

Conversely, Uhls et al. (2017) highlighted the potential for social media to alleviate depression through support networks and positive reinforcement. This contrast underscores the dual-edged nature of social media, where outcomes depend heavily on usage patterns and individual differences.

While earlier studies often focus on adolescents or undergraduates, our research uniquely examines postgraduate students, a group facing distinct academic and social pressures. This comparison underscores the growing relevance of social media across educational stages and highlights consistent gendered differences in its impacts.

Key contrasts lie in the nuanced effects of evening usage, a factor not extensively explored in earlier studies. Additionally, the significant role of gender in moderating outcomes adds a dimension to existing literature,

suggesting that males may be more susceptible to the negative psychological effects of social media, particularly when it disrupts offline interactions or academic focus.

Overall, this study confirms the findings of prior research while expanding the scope to new demographics and uncovering unexplored trends, such as the critical role of timing and usage patterns. This nuanced understanding can guide tailored interventions for promoting balanced social media use.

The results underscore the importance of understanding social media's dual-edged nature through theoretical frameworks. While theories like Social Learning Theory and Media Richness Theory explain the observable gender differences in behavior, Cognitive Dissonance and Uses and Gratifications Theory offer deeper insights into the psychological impacts. A noteworthy trend is the role of timing (evening usage), which emerged as a consistent predictor across anxiety and depression. This highlights the need for targeted interventions focusing on usage patterns, especially among male students, to mitigate negative outcomes while fostering balanced social media habits. The findings of this study offer several new contributions to the existing literature on the impact of social media use among postgraduate students, particularly within the Indian context. There is a lack of focused studies on how social media affects academic performance and mental health differently across genders, especially in culturally diverse regions.

There is a lack of research exploring the specific cultural and educational contexts of social media's influence on academic performance and mental health, particularly in regions such as India and other developing countries (Lim, 2024). The literature has shown that social support can be a moderator that reduces the adverse effects of social media use on mental health and academic performance. The novelty of the insights provided by the study includes temporal patterns in social media use, gender differences in its impact, and its influence on academic performance and interpersonal communication.

One of the key findings of this study is that postgraduate students predominantly use social media between 6 PM and 12 AM. This contrasts with previous research that observed frequent social media engagement throughout the day (Meyerson, 2023). The preference for evening use may be driven by the unique demands of postgraduate education, as students reserve daytime hours for academic work and use evenings for social interactions. This contributes to novelty because the pattern of hitherto unaddressed use is interesting to the literature, showing that postgraduate students engage in a "catch-up" use of social media for recreation or escapism after a day of academically related activities.

Gender-Specific Effects of Social Media on Academic Performance:

The study provides new evidence of gender differences in the negative impact of social media on academic performance. Specifically, male students reported significantly higher rates of academic disruption compared to female students, with a statistically significant difference confirmed by t-tests. This finding builds on existing research (Silva, 2023) but adds nuance by focusing on a postgraduate population, suggesting that male students may be more prone to procrastination and distraction due to social media. This has not been greatly documented by earlier research; therefore, it forms one of the valuable additions to the literature in terms of the use of social media as it pertains to academic outcomes from the perspective of demographic groupings.

The differential influence of social media on interpersonal communication by gender is another new contribution presented by this research. While previous literature identified the duality of social media in increasing communication while weakening face-to-face interaction, this study revealed that male students are more likely than females to report that it has significantly worsened their face-to-face communication. This gender effect may indicate that social media affects the sociality of the two sexes differently. This idea provides a basis for more critical analysis of social media usage to explore the possible psychological or social reasons underlying this disparity.

The multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to test how much social media use, gender, and the timing of social media engagement predict anxiety and depression among postgraduate students. In relation to anxiety, social media use emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), significantly increasing anxiety levels. Gender also contributed significantly ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), with male students reporting higher levels of anxiety compared to female students. Another important factor is the timing of social media use in the evening—from 6 PM to 12 AM—which showed a moderate but significant effect ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that late-night engagement may heighten anxiety due to disrupted routines or sleep patterns. The full model accounted for 34% of the total variance in anxiety, as demonstrated by the R^2 value of 0.34, which indicates a strong predictive relationship. With respect to depression, social media use remained the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting it is highly influential on mental health. The second most powerful predictor in the model was gender ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), with men reporting more serious symptoms of depression than women. Additionally, the timing of social media use ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) indicated that evening use was associated with higher depression scores. The regression model accounted for 39% of the variation in depression ($R^2 = 0.39$), underscoring the significant impact of social media practices on mental health outcomes.

Alignment to Current Research

While the study reveals some new insights, it also echoes a number of global research findings indicating the dual-edged nature of social media. For example, Junco (2012) showed how appropriate usage of social media resulted in increased academic engagement, while overuse acted to distract. This study confirms findings by Junco in postgraduate studies, where academic pressures are greater and distractions have more profound consequences. In this respect, the associated level of anxiety and stress through social media agrees with and supports the work of Fardouly et al. (2015), which found that constant comparisons on social media result in lowered self-esteem.

Implication for Practice

In light of the considerable adverse effects of social media on academic achievement—especially among male students—it is essential to design specific interventions aimed at fostering responsible and balanced engagement with social media platforms. Educational organizations may consider the introduction of digital literacy initiatives that emphasize effective time management and the risks associated with excessive use of social media. Mental health services may also need to consider issues of social media in relation to anxiety and stress, providing counseling or workshops to promote healthy use of digital media.

Future Research Directions

The results of this study identify a number of avenues through which further research can be taken. First of all, longitudinal studies would be warranted to investigate the longer-term consequences of social media engagement on educational and psychological outcomes. Further studies should also examine individual differences, such as personality factors, that may predict the direction of the social media-achievement and general well-being relationship. Finally, geographic and demographic differences could be considered to see if the patterns revealed in this study are the same in different cultural or educational settings.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that excessive social media use is strongly linked to heightened anxiety, stress, and depression, exacerbated by late-night usage and social comparison behaviors. Dependence on digital platform causes the quality of experience in interpersonal communication to deteriorate, with male students showing a far more serious negative impact for face-to-face interactions. This research emphasizes the requirement for balanced engagement with social media and improving digital literacy to alleviate such negative consequences.

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