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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Social Media Addiction and Psychological Distress among University Students: A Cross-sectional Comparative Study

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Abstract: Students across the globe use social media for communication, academic activities, and other important aspects of life. However, when social media is used compulsively and excessively, it can lead to addiction, which may be detrimental to mental health. Literature regarding the comparison of social media addiction and psychological distress is limited, particularly regarding comparisons between students from the Media and Communication Department and the Psychology Department in Pakistan. The study utilized a comparative cross-sectional research design to examine differences in the variables between students from the two departments. The inclusion criteria comprised an age range of 18 to 35 years, enrollment in either the Media and Communication Department or the Psychology Department, and social media use for at least one year. The study utilized standardized questionnaires to measure the variables. Correlational analysis revealed significant relationships among the variables. Moreover, mean differences indicated no significant differences in social media addiction and psychological distress between students from the Media and Communication Department and those from the Psychology Department. The findings may reflect similarities in awareness and patterns of social media use among students from both groups. Further research is recommended to investigate these differences using larger and more diverse samples.

Keywords: Social Media Addiction, Psychological Distress, Media and Communication Department, Psychology Department, Students

Introduction

In this era of technology, young adults are increasingly inclined toward social media use, where they form online relationships, discuss academic matters, and utilize these platforms for business purposes (Bharucha, 2018; Gottfried & Park, 2025; Khan et al., 2024; Sharma, 2022). However, once social media use becomes excessive, it may impair occupational, social, practical, and academic functioning. Individuals may find it difficult to refrain from using social media, experience irritability when not using it, constantly think about using it, and experience cravings to use it. Such symptoms may indicate addictive social media use, which can interfere with daily adaptive functioning. Furthermore, inadequate digital literacy may increase vulnerability to cyberattacks and online threats (Azizi et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2014; Hassan et al., 2024; Imtiaz et al., 2026; Imtiaz & Elbedour, 2025; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Shahid et al., 2024).

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Studies have demonstrated the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress. The psychological distress is the accommodation of depression, anxiety and stress, comprising symptoms like sadness, lack of pleasure in daily activities, fatigue, negative thinking, suicidal thoughts and attempts, nervousness, feeling on edge, feeling under pressure, perceiving mental resources inadequate to overcome the obstacles or deal with it, etc. (Cromby et al., 2017; Parikka et al., 2025; Ridner, 2004; Shahid et al., 2025). A previous study conducted in Pakistan by Shahid et al. (2024) on college and university students between the ages of 18 and 30 revealed that social media addiction associated with aggression was statistically significant, indicating that as social media addiction increases, so does the level of depression. Similarly, another recent study conducted on college and university students aged 18 to 30 reported that problematic use of digital media is associated with psychological distress, and the reason for this is due to upward social comparison among excessive digital media users (Shahid et al., 2026).

The present study is theoretically grounded in the Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model, which demonstrates the development and sustainability of problematic Internet-use behaviors via interactions among personal features, mood responses, cognitive processes, and executive control or functioning (Brand et al., 2016; Brand et al., 2019). In the context of this framework, individual susceptibilities and emotional experiences may affect responses to social media-related stimuli, whereas cognitive biases, craving, and reduced executive control can lead towards the excessive and addictive use (Brandtner et al., 2021; Wegmann & Brand, 2019). Continuous problematic social media use may be associated with psychological issues like depression, anxiety, and stress (Shannon et al., 2022). Therefore, the I-PACE model provides an appropriate theoretical basis for assessing social media addiction and psychological distress among university students.

Although there is ample literature regarding the relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress, when it comes to the comparative study of psychology field students and media department students, the literature is very rare, particularly in the cultural context of Pakistan. This study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature to provide literature for academia and come up with useful implications.

Objective

1. To examine the difference between media and communication department students and psychology department students with respect to the variables of social media addiction and psychological distress.

Hypothesis

H1. There are significant mean differences in social media addiction and psychological distress between students of the Media and Communication Department and the Psychology Department.

Method

Research Design and Sampling Technique

The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational design, which allows assessing the variables at a single point in time and provides concurrent validity with the study's purpose due to the survey approach. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to collect the data, as the target population was university students between the ages of 18 and 35 who use smartphones and are active on social media in the media and psychology department; the purposive technique was therefore most appropriate.

Participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants were examined using frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. The mean age of the participants was 24.96 years (SD = 4.09). Regarding department, 127 participants (52.0%) belonged to the Media and Communication department, whereas 117 (48.0%) were from the Psychological department. In terms of gender, 129 participants (52.9%) were women

and 115 (47.1%) were men. Regarding residence, 93 participants (38.1%) were from Lahore, 68 (27.9%) from Faisalabad, 50 (20.5%) from Quetta, and 33 (13.5%) from Islamabad.

Questionnaires

The following questionnaires were utilized in the study.

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale was used for assessing social media addiction. The scale comprises 6 items with Likert ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5); the Cronbach's alpha of the scale in this study was 0.71, which is satisfactory.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) was utilized to measure psychological distress; the scale comprises 21 items, and its Likert range is from 0 to 3. A higher score indicates a higher level of psychological distress. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in this study was 0.90, which is excellent.

Ethical Consideration

The study followed the APA 7 ethical guidelines; for instance, departmental permission was obtained before collecting the data, and participants were approached with the consent form, demographic questionnaire, and study instruments. First of all, the participants were provided with the consent form, which clearly demonstrated voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without any aversive consequences. Once the participants signed the consent form, they were given the study demographics and study instruments, which they completed in 15 minutes on average. After the collection of data, it was entered into the IBM SPSS software for analysis purposes. It is noteworthy that the data were collected physically; therefore, only the universities where the authors lived were accessible for the data collection purpose.

Results

Table 1

Correlational Analysis (N = 244)

Variables	SMA	PD
Social Media Addiction	-	.28***
Psychological Distress		-

Note. *** p < .001

The above table shows a significant and positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress.

Table 2

Mean Comparison between Students of Media and Communication Department and Psychology Department (N = 244)

	MaCD (N = 127)	PD (N = 117)			
	Mean (+SD)	Mean (+SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
1.Social Media Addiction	18.90 (4.78)	18.73 (5.19)	.26	.79	0.03
2.Psychological Distress	41.16 (12.97)	41.88 (12.82)	-.43	.66	0.05

Note. SD = Standard Deviation, MaCD = Media and Communication Department, PD = Psychology Department

Media and Communication students had a mean social media addiction score of 18.90 (SD = 4.78), compared with 18.73 (SD = 5.19) among Psychology students. For psychological distress, the means were 41.16 (SD = 12.97) and 41.88 (SD = 12.82), respectively. Neither difference was significant.

Discussion

The present study demonstrated a significant positive association between social media addiction and psychological distress (r = .28, p < .001), suggesting that students demonstrating more addictive social

media engagement also possess greater distress. This finding is aligned with a Pakistani study demonstrating that problematic social media use is associated with depression and adverse psychological issues among students (Bibi et al., 2024; Zehra et al., 2023). Likewise, Pakistani medical and dental students also revealed that a positive relationship exists between social media addiction and adverse psychological outcomes (Khalil et al., 2024). Similarly, an international study further reported that psychological distress correlates with problematic social media use among pupils (Sanchez-Fernandez et al., 2025). The finding supports the I-PACE model, in which emotional susceptibility, impaired cognitions, and less self-control enhance problematic digital-media use. Similarly, the result of the study is supported by Social Comparison Theory, as exposure to idealized online content elevates upward comparison, dissatisfaction with the current state, and a negative impression on the mind; recent evidence is aligned with the role of negative social comparison in correlating with social-networking-platform use and distress (Chen et al., 2023).

The independent-samples t-test revealed no significant differences in social media addiction. Media and Communication students reported a mean of 18.90 (SD = 4.78), while Psychology students demonstrated 18.73 (SD = 5.19), $t = .26$, $p = .79$, $d = .03$. Psychological distress was similarly comparable, with means of 41.16 (SD = 12.97) and 41.88 (SD = 12.82), respectively, $t = -.43$, $p = .66$, $d = .05$. The negligible effect sizes revealed minimal departmental variation. This may reflect Pakistan's digital environment, while social media supports academic coordination, communication, entertainment, and social interaction across disciplines. An indigenous study reported that among Pakistani students, the psychological consequences of social-media involvement vary across diverse groups in various departments (Dilawar et al., 2022; Mateen & Agha, 2023). Therefore, in a nutshell, disciplinary knowledge may not buffer against problematic use or distress. An international study also reported that psychological consequences may operate via individual mechanisms instead of academic specialization; nomophobia, for instance, has been identified as an underlying mechanism on the basis of which problematic social-media use is associated with psychological distress specifically among the pupils (Kumar et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The study aimed to address the gap in the cultural context of Pakistan between media and communication département and psychology department students, in comparison with respect to the variables of social media addiction and psychological distress of young adults aged 18 to 35. The cross-sectional correlational comparative study concluded that no significant difference was found between these two department students.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study utilized an English-version standardized questionnaire without adapting it to the Pakistani population, although English is the medium of education in Pakistan; not every university student is that fluent in English, and this might have affected the results. Therefore, future studies are suggested to use an adaptive version of the questionnaire. The purposive sampling technique is a non-probability technique, which may not give a representation of the population of media and psychology department students; therefore, stratified probability sampling technique is recommended for future studies for generalizability purposes. Future studies are recommended to add more departmental students like sociology, English, etc.

Implications

The study findings possess several essential implications for universities, mental health professionals as well as researchers. The positive relationship between social media addiction and psychological distress emphasizes the need for universities to enhance healthy and balanced social media use and elevate digital literacy among students. The counselling services of universities must integrate awareness and screening programs to highlight excessive social media use and related adverse psychological outcomes. The study demonstrated no significant difference between students of the media and communication département and the psychology department; this means preventive interventions must be designed for the larger population of university pupils rather than specific academic disciplines. Psychoeducational workshops can focus on

responsible social media use, self-regulation, as well as technology-related well-being of students. Additionally, the results provide a base for future studies using culturally adapted measures, probability sampling techniques, and students from other academic departments.

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