



Social Media Addiction, Anxiety, and Academic Performance Among Young Adults

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: Aug, 2018 Available Online: Sep, 2018 Keywords social media addiction, anxiety, academic performance, young adults, university students, problematic social media use,	Social media has become an essential component of communication, education, entertainment, and identity formation among young adults. Despite its benefits, uncontrolled and compulsive social media engagement may develop into problematic use characterized by preoccupation, loss of control, withdrawal, mood modification, and interference with everyday responsibilities. This narrative review examines the relationships among social media addiction, anxiety, and academic performance in young adults. Existing research indicates that problematic social media use is associated with heightened anxiety, fear of missing out, social comparison, disturbed sleep, reduced concentration, procrastination, and academic distraction. These factors may contribute to lower academic engagement and performance. However, the relationship is complex and potentially bidirectional: anxious students may use social media as a coping mechanism, while excessive social media exposure may reinforce anxiety through constant connectivity, negative feedback, cyber bullying, and comparison with idealized online presentations. Educational use of social media may offer benefits when engagement is purposeful and controlled. The review concludes that universities should promote digital literacy, time-management skills, psychological support, sleep hygiene, and responsible platform use rather than relying exclusively on restrictive approaches. Longitudinal and culturally sensitive research is required to clarify causal pathways, particularly among university students in developing countries such as Pakistan.

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Introduction:

Social networking platforms have substantially changed how young adults communicate, acquire information, form relationships, and participate in academic communities. University students use platforms such as Facebook, Integra, Tick tack, YouTube, What Sapp, Snap chat, and X for social interaction, entertainment, news, collaborative learning, and professional networking. When used constructively, these platforms may facilitate peer support, access to educational resources, group communication, and the rapid exchange of academic information. Nevertheless, continuous access to social media may encourage habitual checking, prolonged scrolling, multitasking, and emotional dependence on online feedback. Problematic social media use differs from ordinary or frequent use because it involves impaired control and meaningful interference with personal, academic, psychological, or social functioning. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, for example, assesses

dimensions such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Large-scale research has also found that at-risk users may report poorer self-esteem and elevated psychological symptoms. Young adulthood is a particularly important developmental period because individuals face academic pressure, career uncertainty, changing relationships, identity development, and increasing independence. Social media may provide temporary relief from these pressures, but excessive dependence on it can displace sleep, study, exercise, face-to-face relationships, and adaptive coping strategies. Systematic reviews have reported consistent associations between problematic social media use and anxiety, depression, stress, and psychological distress, although the predominance of cross-sectional research prevents firm conclusions regarding causality. This article provides a narrative synthesis of five major dimensions of the topic: the nature of social media addiction, its association with anxiety, its influence on academic performance, the mechanisms connecting these variables, and possible preventive and institutional responses.

Nature and Characteristics of Social Media Addiction:

Social media addiction is generally described as persistent and compulsive engagement with social networking platforms despite negative consequences. Affected individuals may spend excessive time thinking about social media, experience repeated unsuccessful attempts to reduce usage, and feel restlessness or irritability when access is restricted. Social media may also become a primary method of regulating boredom, loneliness, sadness, stress, or insecurity. The concept should be applied carefully because high-frequency use does not automatically indicate addiction. A student may spend several hours online for educational, professional, or social purposes without experiencing functional impairment. In contrast, another student may spend less time online but demonstrate loss of control, emotional dependence, disrupted sleep, academic neglect, and interpersonal conflict. Therefore, the motivations, context, emotional consequences, and degree of impairment are more informative than screen time alone. Problematic social media use may be reinforced by notifications, personalized recommendations, short-form videos, variable social rewards, likes, comments, and continuously updated content. Such features encourage repeated checking because users cannot predict when socially rewarding information will appear. For young adults, online approval may become closely connected with self-worth, belonging, attractiveness, popularity, and social identity. Research involving adolescents and young adults has identified a subgroup of users who exhibit elevated addiction symptoms together with psychological difficulties. However, prevalence estimates vary according to the population, measurement scale, platform, cultural environment, and threshold used to classify problematic behaviour.

Social Media Addiction and Anxiety:

Anxiety is characterized by excessive worry, tension, apprehension, physiological arousal, and difficulty controlling distressing thoughts. Social media addiction may contribute to anxiety through several interconnected processes. Constant notifications can create a perceived obligation to remain available, while delayed responses may be interpreted as rejection or social exclusion. Exposure to conflicts, disturbing news, online criticism, and cyber bullying may further intensify emotional distress. Fear of missing out is another important mechanism. Young adults may worry that others are enjoying rewarding experiences, developing relationships, achieving academic success, or accessing opportunities from which they are excluded. Consequently, they may monitor social media repeatedly, including during lectures, study periods, meals, and bedtime. This checking temporarily reduces uncertainty but can reinforce the anxiety that originally triggered the behaviour. Social comparison also affects psychological well-being. Users commonly share selected achievements, celebrations, travel experiences, attractive photographs, and positive life events. Comparing everyday reality with idealized online presentations may produce feelings of inferiority, envy, dissatisfaction, or failure. Reviews of Facebook-related research have identified social comparison and envy as important mechanisms linking platform use with negative emotional outcomes. Research among emerging adults has found that greater social media use is associated with higher anxiety symptoms. However, the direction of the relationship may be bidirectional. Individuals who already experience social anxiety, loneliness, or insecurity may

prefer mediated communication because it offers greater control over self-presentation. Over time, reliance on online interaction may reduce opportunities to practice face-to-face communication and healthy emotional regulation. Sleep disturbance represents an additional pathway. Night-time checking, emotional involvement, screen exposure, and the anticipation of online responses may delay sleep and reduce sleep quality. Studies of adolescents and young adults have associated intensive or emotionally invested social media use with poorer sleep, lower self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Influence on Academic Performance:

Social media addiction may affect academic performance by consuming time that would otherwise be allocated to reading, assignment preparation, revision, class participation, and sleep. Students may intend to check a platform briefly but remain engaged because of recommended videos, conversations, notifications, or rapidly changing content. Repeated episodes can accumulate into substantial academic time loss. Academic multitasking is particularly problematic. Students may alternate between lecture material, social media messages, entertainment content, and online conversations. Every interruption requires attention to be redirected and the academic task to be mentally reconstructed. Even when total study time appears adequate, fragmented attention may reduce comprehension, memory consolidation, critical thinking, and the quality of written work. Early research reported that Facebook users had lower self-reported grade-point averages and spent fewer hours studying than non-users. Subsequent research found that the amount of time spent on Facebook was negatively associated with overall GPA, although different online activities produced different outcomes. Information sharing and academically relevant communication may be beneficial, whereas entertainment-driven and socially distracting use may undermine performance. Problematic smartphone and social media use may also contribute to procrastination. Students experiencing anxiety about an examination or difficult assignment may turn to social media for immediate emotional relief. Avoidance reduces discomfort temporarily, but incomplete work later produces greater anxiety, guilt, and academic pressure. This cycle can gradually connect social media use with both emotional distress and declining academic achievement. Sleep loss further weakens academic functioning by reducing alertness, concentration, memory, motivation, and attendance. Research has found relationships among problematic smartphone use, stress, reduced academic performance, and lower satisfaction with life. Nevertheless, the associations should not be interpreted as proof that social media directly causes poor grades because personality, self-control, family environment, financial stress, prior mental health, and study habits may influence both online behaviour and academic achievement.

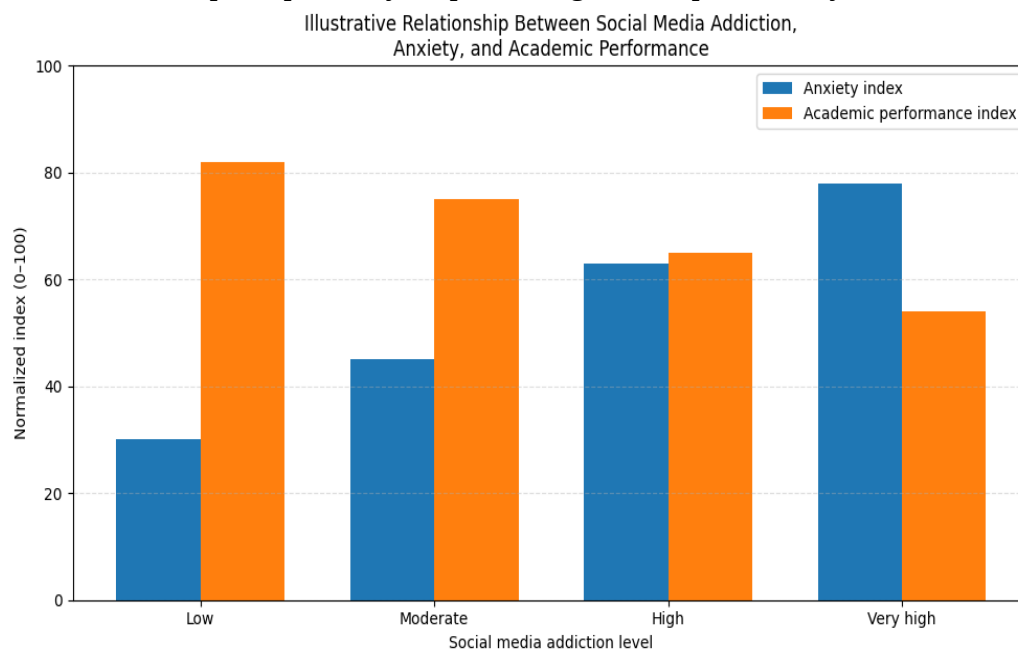
Mechanisms and Moderating Factors:

The relationship among social media addiction, anxiety, and academic performance can be understood as a reciprocal process. Academic stress may encourage avoidant social media use; excessive use may then reduce study time and sleep; weaker academic preparation may increase anxiety; and heightened anxiety may stimulate further online avoidance. Without intervention, this pattern can become self-reinforcing. Individual differences influence the strength of these relationships. Students with limited self-control, low self-esteem, high impulsivity, loneliness, perfectionism, social anxiety, or weak time-management skills may be more vulnerable. Students who depend heavily on online validation may also react more strongly to negative comments, limited engagement, delayed replies, or comparisons with successful peers. The type of platform activity is equally important. Active and purposeful use, such as discussing coursework, contacting teachers, joining study groups, or accessing instructional material, may support academic development. Passive scrolling, late-night use, repeated checking, and comparison-oriented browsing are more likely to produce negative consequences. Therefore, examining only daily screen time may hide important differences between constructive and harmful usage. Family support, peer relationships, socioeconomic conditions, digital literacy, academic workload, and institutional expectations can moderate outcomes. In Pakistan, affordable smartphones and mobile internet have expanded digital participation among university students. At the same time, limited student counselling services, stigma surrounding psychological support, academic competition, and employment uncertainty may encourage some students to depend on social media for coping and reassurance. Gender

and cultural expectations may also shape online experiences. For some individuals, social media offers social support and self-expression that may not be readily available offline. For others, appearance-related comparison, harassment, reputation concerns, or family restrictions can increase emotional pressure. Consequently, interventions should be culturally sensitive and should avoid treating all social media use as uniformly harmful.

Prevention and Institutional Responses:

Prevention strategies should emphasize self-regulation and digital well-being rather than requiring students to withdraw completely from social media. Students can be encouraged to disable non-essential notifications, establish social-media-free study periods, keep smartphones away from their study areas, and use website-blocking applications during examinations or assignment preparation. Effective time-management techniques can also help students divide academic tasks into focused working intervals followed by planned breaks, while social media use should be limited to predetermined periods instead of occurring whenever notifications appear. Monitoring weekly screen-time reports may help students identify harmful patterns, including late-night browsing, excessive short-video consumption, and repeated checking during lectures. Maintaining good sleep hygiene is equally important, and students should reduce stimulating social media activity before bedtime, charge devices away from the bed, follow consistent sleeping schedules, and avoid responding to non-urgent notifications during the night. Since anxiety can both contribute to and result from problematic social media use, students should be taught healthier coping strategies such as physical exercise, relaxation techniques, journaling, structured problem-solving, and face-to-face social interaction. Universities can support these efforts by incorporating digital well-being into student orientation programmes, counselling services, study-skills workshops, and mental-health campaigns. Counsellors should also assess problematic technology use when students experience anxiety, sleep disturbances, poor concentration, procrastination, or declining academic performance. Where significant impairment is present, cognitive-behavioural strategies may help students recognize emotional triggers, challenge unhelpful beliefs, control avoidance behaviours, and rebuild balanced daily routines. Faculty members can further reduce digital overload by using consistent communication channels, setting reasonable response-time expectations, and designing purposeful online learning activities, while peer-led programmes may be particularly effective because young adults often respond positively to practical guidance provided by fellow students.



Note: Values are illustrative and synthesized to visualize patterns reported in the literature; they are not results from a single empirical sample.

Summary:

The prevention of social media addiction and its negative effects on anxiety and academic performance requires a balanced approach that promotes healthy digital habits rather than complete avoidance of social networking platforms. Social media has become an important part of students' academic, social, and personal lives, so prevention strategies should focus on helping young adults use these platforms in a controlled, purposeful, and responsible manner. Students should be encouraged to develop self-regulation skills by limiting unnecessary screen time, disabling non-essential notifications, avoiding repeated checking of social media applications, and creating specific periods in which mobile phones and social networking platforms are not used. Establishing social-media-free study sessions can improve concentration, reduce distractions, and help students complete academic tasks more efficiently. Keeping smartphones away from the study desk and using website-blocking applications during examinations, lectures, or assignment preparation may also reduce impulsive use and support better academic engagement. Effective time management is another important element in preventing problematic social media use. Students can divide large academic tasks into smaller and more manageable sections and complete them during focused study intervals followed by short planned breaks. Social media should be accessed at predetermined times rather than whenever a notification, message, or recommendation appears. This approach can help students maintain control over their online activities and prevent short periods of checking from turning into extended scrolling sessions. Monitoring weekly screen-time reports may also help students understand how much time they spend on different applications and identify patterns such as excessive short-video consumption, late-night browsing, frequent checking during lectures, or prolonged use during examination periods. Once students become aware of these habits, they may be more capable of setting realistic limits and making healthier decisions regarding their digital behaviour. Sleep hygiene is also essential because excessive social media use, especially during the night, can reduce sleep duration and quality. Students should be encouraged to stop using highly stimulating social media content before bedtime, maintain regular sleeping and waking schedules, charge their devices away from the bed, and avoid responding to non-urgent messages during the night. Adequate sleep supports attention, memory, emotional stability, motivation, and academic performance. In contrast, sleep deprivation can intensify anxiety, reduce concentration, increase irritability, and make students more dependent on social media as a form of escape or emotional relief. Therefore, improving sleep habits may reduce both psychological distress and excessive online engagement. Because anxiety can be both a cause and a consequence of problematic social media use, students should also be taught healthier coping strategies. Physical exercise, relaxation techniques, deep breathing, mindfulness, journaling, structured problem-solving, face-to-face communication, and social support from friends and family can provide alternatives to using social media for emotional regulation. Students who experience loneliness, academic stress, fear of missing out, or social comparison may turn to social media for temporary reassurance, but this relief may be short-lived and may reinforce repeated checking. Developing healthier coping mechanisms can help students manage difficult emotions without becoming excessively dependent on digital platforms. Universities have an important role in promoting digital well-being. Digital literacy and responsible social media use can be included in student orientation programmes, mental-health campaigns, counselling services, and study-skills workshops.

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