

Research Paper

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the relationship between social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness among college students aged 18-22 using a correlational research design. A sample of 150 participants was selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected using three established scales: the Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS), the Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale through google forms. The relationships between the variables were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The findings showed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between social media addiction and social anxiety, a weak positive correlation between social media addiction and loneliness, and a similar correlation between social anxiety and loneliness. These results indicate that greater social media addiction is associated with elevated levels of social anxiety and loneliness, and that social anxiety is also linked to heightened loneliness.

Keywords: *Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety, Loneliness, College Students*

Social media, while offering benefits such as instant global communication, rapid information dissemination, and platforms for activism, has also become a growing concern due to its addictive nature. Though it enhances personal and professional interactions, its negative impacts are increasingly evident. Many users face issues like reduced self-esteem and distorted body image, influenced by unrealistic portrayals of life. Additionally, excessive usage can disrupt sleep patterns, and cyberbullying has emerged as a serious problem, causing emotional harm. These negative effects highlight the complexity of social media's role in modern life.

Social media addiction, now recognized as a form of behavioral addiction, parallels the mechanisms of other addictions like gambling and substance use. Defined as an excessive

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Received: October 23, 2024; Revision Received: December 02, 2024; Accepted: December 07, 2024

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

reliance on social networking platforms, it has profound psychological and social consequences. The addictive nature of social media stems from factors like instant gratification, fear of missing out (FOMO), and curated content, which foster compulsive use. This growing issue is particularly prevalent among younger populations and can lead to negative effects such as altered sleep, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Addressing social media addiction requires early intervention, mental health programs, and policies that encourage healthy digital practices. By raising awareness and promoting balanced social media usage, society can mitigate its harmful impact on mental health.

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a debilitating mental health condition marked by an intense, irrational fear of social or performance situations, where individuals fear being judged, embarrassed, or humiliated. This persistent anxiety can severely impact daily functioning, leading to avoidance of social interactions, which further exacerbates feelings of isolation and impairs relationships. Often developing in adolescence, SAD can have long-term consequences on a person's academic, professional, and personal life if left untreated. Early identification and treatment, particularly through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and sometimes medication, are crucial to preventing the disorder from escalating into more severe mental health issues like depression or substance abuse. Addressing SAD early can significantly improve social functioning and overall well-being.

Loneliness, though distinct from social anxiety, also has profound impacts on mental and physical health. It is characterized by a sense of social isolation and can be categorized into emotional, social, and existential loneliness. Emotional loneliness stems from a lack of close, intimate relationships, while social loneliness arises from feeling disconnected from a larger community or network. Existential loneliness, on a deeper level, involves a sense of detachment from the world and questions about meaning and purpose. Loneliness has been linked to increased risks of anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, and even physical health issues like cardiovascular disease. Despite the rise of digital communication, loneliness has paradoxically increased, highlighting the need for community-based interventions, mental health support, and programs that foster meaningful connections.

Recognizing and addressing both social anxiety and loneliness is critical, as both can significantly undermine an individual's quality of life. Increasing awareness, reducing stigma, and promoting early intervention can help those affected seek treatment. Psychological therapies like CBT, community engagement programs, and social initiatives can help mitigate these issues and support healthier social connections. By tackling these growing concerns, society can work toward fostering a more connected and mentally healthy population.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To assess the relationship between social media addiction, social anxiety and loneliness among college students.

Objectives

1. To assess the level of social media addiction, social anxiety and loneliness among college students.
2. To evaluate the correlation between social media addiction and social anxiety among college students.

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

3. To explore the correlation between social media addiction and loneliness among college students.
4. To assess the correlation between social anxiety and loneliness among college students.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is a positive correlation between social media addiction and social anxiety among college students.
- **H2:** There is a positive correlation between social media addiction and loneliness among college students.
- **H3:** There is a positive correlation between social anxiety and loneliness among college students.

Research design

The study uses a **correlational research design** to explore the relationship between social media addiction, social anxiety and loneliness among college students. This design helps to identify whether the variables are related, without changing or controlling them. While it doesn't show cause and effect, it helps in understanding patterns and connections between the variables.

METHOD

Inclusion criteria

- Participants who are currently pursuing any degree in any university/ college (both UG and PG).
- Participants who are in the age range of 18 - 22.
- Participants who use social media.
- Participants who have intermediate knowledge in English and can comprehend each given item.

Exclusion criteria

- Participants who do not use social media regularly.

Sample

The sample encompasses of students pursuing any degree in college between the age of 18 – 22

Sample size

150 (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007)

Sampling method

Purposive sampling which is a non-probability sampling method is used for selection of participants.

Statistical tool

Pearson's correlation coefficient

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

Tools Used

- Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS) (Şahin, Cengiz ,2018) – 29 items
- Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30) (Caballo V. E, et al.,2012) – 30 items
- UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, D., et al.,1978). – 20 items

Tools description

Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS)

The Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS), developed by Şahin and Cengiz (2018), is a 29-item self-report scale designed to measure the degree of addiction to social media platforms. The items assess various dimensions of social media use, such as preoccupation with social media, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse.

- **Reliability:** The scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.94, indicating that the items are highly correlated and reliably measure the construct of social media addiction.
- **Validity:** The SMAS was validated through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, which confirmed its multidimensional structure. The scale also showed good criterion-related validity, as it correlates positively with other established measures of internet and social media use disorders. This ensures that the scale accurately measures social media addiction and is applicable for both research and clinical assessments.

Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ – A30)

The Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30) is a psychometric tool developed to assess social anxiety levels in adults. It consists of 30 items, covering five key areas of social anxiety: speaking in public or performing, interactions with the opposite sex, assertive self-expression, being observed by others, and interpersonal interactions in formal settings.

- **Reliability:** The SAQ-A30 has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.85 to 0.94 across its subscales, indicating that the questionnaire is a reliable measure of social anxiety symptoms.
- **Validity:** The scale shows strong construct validity, confirmed through factor analysis. It has also demonstrated good concurrent validity by correlating with other established measures of social anxiety, supporting its accuracy in measuring social anxiety across different contexts and populations.

UCLA Loneliness Scale

The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a widely used tool developed to measure subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Originally developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978) and later revised in 1980 and 1996, the scale contains 20 items that assess various aspects of loneliness, including feelings of social connection, isolation, and relational satisfaction. Respondents rate items on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "Never" to "Often," reflecting how frequently they experience feelings associated with loneliness.

- **Reliability:** The UCLA Loneliness Scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically ranging from 0.89 to 0.94, indicating high reliability. Test-retest reliability is also strong, showing consistency in responses over time.
- **Validity:** The scale has high construct validity, correlating strongly with other measures of loneliness and related constructs such as depression, social support, and

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

life satisfaction. Its strong criterion validity has been confirmed in numerous studies, establishing it as a gold standard for measuring loneliness in both research and clinical settings.

Procedure:

Participant Selection and Sampling Method

Participants for this study will be selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique aimed at selecting individuals who are specifically relevant to the research question. In this case, the study will focus on college students aged 18 to 22, as this age group is not only highly active on social media but also at a critical stage of social and emotional development. The purposive sampling method ensures that the selected participants are well-suited for investigating the relationships between social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness. By targeting students from different educational backgrounds (undergraduate and postgraduate), the study will encompass a diverse range of experiences while maintaining focus on the key population of interest.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Before any data collection begins, participants will be asked to provide informed consent, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study, the nature of the questionnaires, and their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal. Participants will be made aware that their responses will be anonymous and that their data will be securely stored and used solely for research purposes. This process helps build trust and guarantees that participants are voluntarily engaging in the study.

Data Collection

The study will use structured questionnaires to gather data on the variables of interest: social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness. These questionnaires will be administered either online or in person, depending on participants' availability and preferences. The goal is to ensure maximum participation and to gather comprehensive data that reflects the experiences of the target population.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Once data collection is complete, the responses will be coded and prepared for statistical analysis. Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, the study will assess the strength and direction of the relationships between social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness. This approach is suitable for evaluating the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the variables. Descriptive statistics will also be calculated to provide a clear overview of the sample's socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and education level. The correlations will be interpreted based on previous research findings to determine whether social media addiction is significantly linked to increased levels of social anxiety and loneliness among college students. The study's results will be carefully interpreted within the broader context of existing literature.

Presentation and Publication

The findings of the study will be compiled into a detailed research report, including a clear presentation of results, a discussion of key findings, and an analysis of the implications for mental health and social behaviour. After a thorough review process, the final report will be submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal specializing in psychology, mental health, or social media research. The publication will contribute to ongoing debates and research

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

efforts aimed at understanding the role of social media in shaping mental health, particularly among young adults.

RESULTS

Table 4.1 shows the frequency and percentage of sociodemographic variables (N = 150)

Socio Demographic Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18	14	9.33
	19	20	13.33
	20	14	9.33
	21	21	14
	22	81	54
Gender	Male	63	42
	Female	87	58
Education	Undergraduate	74	49.33
	Postgraduate	76	50.67
Domicile	Urban	122	81.33
	Rural	28	18.66

The socio-demographic analysis of the sample, consisting of 150 participants, reveals key insights into age, gender, education, and domicile. The majority of the participants (54%) are aged 22, with smaller proportions aged 21 (14%), 19 (13.33%), 18 (9.33%), and 20 (9.33%). This suggests that the sample is predominantly composed of older students, likely in the final stages of their studies. In terms of gender, there is a slight female predominance, with 58% of the sample being female and 42% male, indicating a balanced yet skewed gender representation. The educational background is almost evenly split, with 50.67% of participants being postgraduate students and 49.33% undergraduates, reflecting a diverse range of academic experience. The domicile distribution reveals that a significant portion of the participants (81.33%) reside in urban areas, with only 18.66% from rural backgrounds, suggesting that the study predominantly reflects urban perspectives. Overall, the data indicates a sample that is primarily composed of urban, older students, with a balanced gender and educational level distribution.

Table 4.2 shows the correlation between social media addiction, social anxiety and loneliness of the sample (N = 150)

Variables	Social Media Addiction	Social Anxiety	Loneliness
Social Media Addiction	1	0.209	0.322
Social Anxiety	0.209	1	0.313
Loneliness	0.322	0.313	1

(2 – tailed)

Table 4.2 offers insightful data regarding the relationships between social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness. The Pearson correlation coefficient between social media addiction and social anxiety is 0.209 ($p = 0.010$), indicating a weak but statistically significant positive relationship. This finding suggests that individuals who exhibit higher levels of social media addiction are also more likely to experience social anxiety. The correlation between social media addiction and loneliness is 0.322 ($p = 0.000$), reflecting a weak positive relationship. This suggests that individuals who are more addicted to social

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

media tend to report higher levels of loneliness. The Pearson correlation between social anxiety and loneliness is 0.313 ($p = 0.000$), indicating a weak and statistically significant positive relationship. This correlation suggests that individuals who experience higher levels of social anxiety are also more likely to feel lonely.

DISCUSSION

Table 4.1 The socio-demographic analysis of the sample reveals several important insights. The majority of participants are aged 22, representing 54% of the sample. This suggests a significant portion consists of older students, likely in the final stages of their studies, which may affect their experiences and perspectives related to social anxiety, loneliness, and social media addiction. The smaller groups of participants aged 18, 19, 20, and 21 may provide some diversity but do not dominate the sample. In terms of gender, the slight female predominance (58%) suggests that the findings may lean toward female experiences, though the 42% male representation provides a degree of balance. The nearly equal division between postgraduate (50.67%) and undergraduate (49.33%) students ensures a range of academic experiences, which could enrich the study's insights. The domicile distribution, with 81.33% of participants from urban areas, points to a predominantly urban perspective, potentially limiting the relevance of the findings to rural populations. Overall, the data suggests a sample skewed toward urban, older students, with a balanced yet slightly skewed gender and education distribution.

Table 4.2 This study examines the intricate relationships between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety, and Loneliness among college students, focusing on how excessive use of social media can impact mental health and well-being. By exploring these variables, this research adds to the growing body of literature on the psychological effects of social media use, particularly in the context of emerging adulthood, when students are navigating complex social and emotional landscapes.

Social media addiction is defined as an excessive preoccupation with social networking platforms, characterized by compulsive use that interferes with daily activities and well-being (Griffiths et al., 2014). Social media offers instant gratification through likes, comments, and online interactions, fostering a dependency that can lead to negative psychological outcomes. This study found a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between social media addiction and social anxiety ($r = 0.209$, $p = 0.010$), suggesting that individuals who are more addicted to social media are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety in social situations.

This relationship can be understood through the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a phenomenon where individuals feel anxious about being left out of important social events or not being part of the conversation online (Oberst et al., 2017). As individuals become more dependent on social media for social validation, they may experience heightened anxiety when they perceive themselves as not being part of the social scene. Oberst et al. (2017) also emphasize that social media platforms create an environment of constant comparison, where users are bombarded with curated, idealized versions of others' lives, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and lead to increased anxiety.

Further, Yang et al. (2020) suggest that social media users who seek validation through online interactions—such as receiving likes and comments—often experience heightened anxiety, especially when they do not receive the expected social feedback. This can lead to a

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

cycle of dependency where individuals become more addicted to these platforms in search of validation, thus reinforcing their anxiety. Social media addiction, therefore, acts as a double-edged sword: while it offers immediate social gratification, it also heightens users' sensitivity to social evaluation, increasing anxiety.

Interestingly, Elhai et al. (2017) suggest that socially anxious individuals may turn to social media as a way to cope with their discomfort in face-to-face interactions. However, excessive online engagement can further deepen social anxiety by reinforcing avoidance behaviors. Social media allows these individuals to interact without the immediate pressures of real-world social situations, but this avoidance may prevent them from developing the social skills needed for face-to-face interactions, ultimately exacerbating their social fears.

Social anxiety is characterized by an intense fear of being judged, embarrassed, or humiliated in social situations, leading to avoidance behaviors and impaired social functioning (Leigh & Clark, 2018). Individuals with social anxiety often struggle with forming and maintaining close relationships, as their fear of negative evaluation inhibits their ability to engage in meaningful social interactions. This study found a weak positive correlation between social anxiety and loneliness ($r = 0.313$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety are more likely to experience feelings of loneliness.

This connection can be explained through the social avoidance model, where socially anxious individuals tend to withdraw from social situations due to their fears of being judged or rejected. This avoidance leads to reduced opportunities for social interaction, which in turn increases feelings of loneliness (Beutel et al., 2017). Over time, the lack of social engagement perpetuates a cycle of isolation, where socially anxious individuals become increasingly lonely as they avoid interactions that could potentially alleviate their loneliness.

Lim et al. (2016) highlight that social anxiety and loneliness often exist in a reinforcing cycle, where socially anxious individuals' avoidance of social situations leads to increased loneliness, which further exacerbates their social fears. This feedback loop can have long-term negative effects on mental health, as socially anxious individuals may find it increasingly difficult to break out of the cycle of isolation and fear. Moreover, the avoidance behaviors associated with social anxiety prevent individuals from developing the social skills necessary to form meaningful relationships, further contributing to their sense of loneliness.

The correlation between social anxiety and loneliness is supported by Hoffman et al. (2020), who found that socially anxious individuals often report feelings of loneliness due to their inability to form close, supportive relationships. This aligns with the current study's findings, which suggest that social anxiety not only impairs individuals' ability to engage with others but also leads to increased feelings of isolation. The findings underscore the importance of addressing both social anxiety and loneliness in therapeutic interventions, as these variables are closely intertwined and contribute to each other's persistence.

Loneliness is the subjective experience of feeling socially disconnected or lacking meaningful interpersonal relationships, regardless of the actual amount of social interaction (Nowland et al., 2018). The study found a weak positive correlation between social media

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

addiction and loneliness ($r = 0.322$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that individuals who are more dependent on social media are also more likely to report feelings of loneliness. Despite the potential for social media to facilitate connection, its overuse can paradoxically lead to greater feelings of isolation.

The social displacement hypothesis provides a framework for understanding this relationship. According to this hypothesis, excessive time spent on social media displaces real-life interactions, which are typically more emotionally fulfilling (Nowland et al., 2018). While social media allows users to maintain a broad network of acquaintances, these online interactions are often superficial and lack the emotional depth needed to satisfy users' need for meaningful connections. Twenge et al. (2019) observed that despite the increased opportunities for online connection, adolescents and young adults who spend excessive time on social media report feeling more isolated than ever before.

In addition, Hunt et al. (2018) found that passive use of social media—such as scrolling through feeds without meaningful engagement—can increase feelings of loneliness. Passive consumption of content, such as liking posts or watching stories without deeper social interaction, fails to provide the emotional support that comes from genuine, reciprocal relationships. This can leave users feeling disconnected, even though they are technically more "connected" online.

The current findings are also congruent with research by Primack et al. (2017), researchers found that heavy use of social media is linked to increased feelings of perceived social isolation. While social media may offer temporary relief from feelings of loneliness, its overuse can exacerbate the problem by displacing face-to-face interactions, which are more effective at fulfilling emotional and social needs. This paradox highlights the importance of encouraging balanced social media use, particularly among college students, who may be vulnerable to the negative effects of overreliance on digital interactions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex relationships between social media addiction, social anxiety, and loneliness among college students, informed by socio-demographic data. The sample predominantly consisted of older students (54% aged 22), with a balanced gender distribution (58% female and 42% male) and a near-even split between undergraduate (49.33%) and postgraduate students (50.67%). Additionally, 81.33% of participants resided in urban areas, reflecting a primarily urban population in the study.

The findings suggest that while social media platforms may provide temporary relief from social isolation, their excessive use can exacerbate social anxiety and loneliness. The weak but statistically significant correlation between social media addiction and social anxiety ($r = 0.209$, $p = 0.010$) is consistent with literature indicating that social media's emphasis on social comparison and validation-seeking may heighten anxiety, particularly in socially insecure individuals (Oberst et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2020). Similarly, the weak positive correlation between social media addiction and loneliness ($r = 0.322$, $p = 0.000$) reflects the "social displacement hypothesis," which posits that excessive virtual interaction detracts from emotionally fulfilling real-life relationships (Nowland et al., 2018; Hunt et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the weak correlation between social anxiety and loneliness ($r = 0.313$, $p = 0.000$) underscores the cyclical relationship between these variables. Socially anxious

Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

individuals may avoid face-to-face interactions due to fear of judgment, leading to further isolation and increased loneliness (Leigh & Clark, 2018; Beutel et al., 2017). These insights suggest that interventions should focus on both regulating social media use and addressing emotional well-being by encouraging healthy online behaviors and fostering meaningful social connections, particularly for urban, older students who may be more susceptible to these issues.

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Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

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Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

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Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students

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Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Christina, G., Deebiga, S., Lavanya, U., Madhumitha, L.R., Nithyasri, M. & Sowmya, S. (2024). Relationship between Social Media Addiction, Social Anxiety and Loneliness among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4), 1704-1716. DIP:18.01.161.20241204, DOI:10.25215/1204.161