

Echoes of the Feed: A Cross-Sectional Exploration of Social Media Behavioural Patterns and Their Psychological Imprint on Anxiety Subtypes among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

The growing incorporation of social media into emerging adults' daily routines has sparked concern about its psychological consequences. The purpose of this study was to look at social media use habits and their relationship with anxiety subtypes in people aged 18 to 25. A cross-sectional research design was used, and data were collected from 130 participants using a structured questionnaire that included demographic questions, behavioural indicators of social media use, the 6-item Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), the Mini-Social Phobia Inventory (Mini-SPIN), and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2). The study sought to establish whether problematic social media use had quantitative links with generalised anxiety and social anxiety symptoms. Descriptive analysis revealed that 59.2% of respondents showed signs of anxiety, 44.6% showed signs of social anxiety, and 18.5% matched the criteria for problematic social media use. Normality testing using the Shapiro-Wilk test revealed a non-normal distribution ($W = 0.9618$, $p = 0.001$), hence a non-parametric technique was employed. Spearman correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between social media addiction scores and generalised anxiety levels ($r = 0.2592$, $p = 0.0029$). Participants with higher BSMAS scores reported considerably higher social anxiety based on Mini-SPIN scores ($r_s = 0.2345$, 95% CI [0.0598–0.3953], $p = 0.0072$). These data indicate that higher social media participation, particularly frequent checking and emotionally motivated usage habits, is connected with increased anxiety symptoms in emerging adults. This study found that problematic social media use had a quantifiable psychological impact on both generalised and social anxiety in young adults. The association, albeit slight, is significant and confirms the rising body of data relating digital behaviours to emotional well-being. Further study with long-term follow-up and additional psychological factors is necessary. The study's main finding is that social media activity patterns correlate to greater anxiety symptoms among emerging adults.

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Keywords: *Social Media Addiction, Anxiety, Emerging Adults, BSMAS, GAD-2, Social Anxiety*

The fast growth of social media has altered the way developing people communicate, learn, express themselves, and see their larger social world. Individuals aged 18 to 25 today rely on digital platforms for more than just pleasure, including social interaction, academic updates, emotional control, and self-presentation. Although these platforms have many positives, there is mounting evidence that extensive and persistent social media usage can have a major impact on psychological functioning, particularly anxiety symptoms. This worry has grown since emerging adults constitute one of the most active user groups and are in a developmental stage marked by identity construction, emotional fragility, and increased sensitivity to social input.

Anxiety among young adults is on the rise worldwide, and academics are increasingly investigating whether social media practices such as late-night use, frequent checking, passive scrolling, comparison-based viewing, and validation seeking contribute to this trend. Many users feel pressured to maintain an online image, follow their friends' life, or keep continually updated, which can lead to overstimulation and mental stress. Behavioural patterns such as excessive monitoring, difficulties disengaging, and using social media to avoid bad feelings have been linked to problematic usage. These behaviours mirror addictive tendencies and may affect mood, sleep, attention, and perceived social appropriateness.

Emerging adults may also be more subject to feelings of social comparison and dread of unfavourable assessment, both of which are fundamental components of social anxiety. The regulated and idealised nature of internet material can exacerbate self-comparison, whilst continual exposure to others' accomplishments or lives can cause feelings of inadequacy or anxiety. Furthermore, generalised anxiety may be exacerbated by excessive information availability, overstimulation, and the cognitive overload associated with continuous connectedness. The notion that social media use contributes to or exacerbates social and generalised anxiety warrants more exploration, particularly in cultural contexts where digital participation is fast rising.

Despite extensive worldwide study, there has been little empirical work on these linkages among Indian emerging adults, a demographic whose digital habits are rapidly growing. Understanding the psychological impact of social media usage in this group is critical for detecting early behavioural indicators, guiding educational interventions, and encouraging healthy patterns of interaction. Examining how different anxiety subtypes connect to various usage habits can also help determine whether problematic social media use is widely related with anxiety or has a greater link with specific forms such as social or generalised anxiety.

Given these considerations, the current study aims to investigate the behavioural aspects of social media usage and their relationship with anxiety subtypes in emerging adults. The study also highlights the prevalence of anxiety indicators and problematic social media usage in this cohort, providing a better understanding of the psychological processes that influence their everyday digital interactions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objectives

The present study was conducted with the following objectives:

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1. To examine the behavioural patterns of social media use among emerging adults aged 18–25 years.
2. To assess the levels of generalised anxiety, social anxiety, and problematic social media use using validated psychological tools.
3. To determine the prevalence of anxiety indicators, social anxiety features, and problematic social media use within the study population.
4. To analyse the association between social media addiction scores (BSMAS) and anxiety subtypes (GAD-2 and Mini-SPIN).
5. To identify whether specific behavioural features of social media use are linked to increased anxiety symptoms in emerging adults.

Hypotheses

Based on the study's aims and current theoretical understanding, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. There is a substantial link between problematic social media use (BSMAS scores) and generalised anxiety levels (GAD-2 scores) among emerging adults.
2. Problematic social media use (BSMAS scores) is significantly associated with social anxiety symptoms (Mini-SPIN scores).
3. Higher levels of participation in particular social media behavioural patterns, such as frequent checking, late-night use, and passive scrolling, are linked to higher levels of anxiety.
4. A significant number of emerging adults have quantifiable levels of anxiety, social anxiety, and problematic social media use.

Participants

The research comprised 130 emerging adults aged 18 to 25 years. Participants were recruited using an online survey distributed to college-aged students. Participation was voluntary, and responses were gathered anonymously. The final analysis comprised individuals who completed all of the questionnaire's mandatory components.

Materials / Psychological Tools

The following validated psychological tools were used to measure social media addiction and anxiety subtypes:

1. **Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS – 6 items):** Used to assess symptoms of problematic or addictive social media use. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point scale reflecting their engagement and emotional involvement in social media.
2. **Mini Social Phobia Inventory (Mini-SPIN – 3 items):** A brief screening tool used to assess social anxiety symptoms. Items were rated on a 5-point severity scale.
3. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2 – 2 items):** A short screening tool used to evaluate generalised anxiety symptoms over the previous two weeks.
4. **Behavioural and usage items:** Additional questions assessed daily social media use, preferred platforms, reasons for use, late-night usage, passive scrolling, checking behaviour, and self-comparison tendencies.

Data Collection

Data were obtained using a structured online questionnaire produced with Google Forms. The form contained demographic information, social media behavioural questions, and all psychological measures. The survey link was given online, and participants gave their

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informed consent before answering. All things indicated as necessary have to be completed before submission.

Scoring

- **BSMAS:** Each of the 6 items was scored from 1 (“very rarely”) to 5 (“very often”), producing a total score ranging from 6 to 30. Higher scores indicated greater levels of problematic social media use.
- **Mini-SPIN:** Items were scored from 0 (“not at all”) to 4 (“extremely”). Total scores ranged from 0 to 12 and reflected intensity of social anxiety symptoms.
- **GAD-2:** Items were scored from 0 (“not at all”) to 3 (“nearly every day”), giving scores from 0 to 6. Higher scores indicated greater generalised anxiety.
- **Behavioural items:** These were scored using categorical responses and 1–5 Likert scales, depending on the format.

Variables

Independent Variables

- Social media behavioural patterns
- Daily duration of social media use
- Late-night usage frequency
- Passive vs. interactive use patterns
- Self-comparison behaviour
- Checking frequency

Dependent Variables

- Social media addiction score (BSMAS)
- Social anxiety score (Mini-SPIN)
- Generalised anxiety score (GAD-2)

Additional Measures

- Prevalence of anxiety indicators
- Prevalence of social anxiety
- Prevalence of problematic social media use

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study looked at how 130 emerging adults' social media usage habits related to social anxiety, generalised anxiety, and problematic use. The findings give insight into the psychological impact of digital conduct on emotional functioning. This section discusses the findings in depth and combines them with previous literature to contextualise their importance.

Descriptive Statistics and Prevalence

Descriptive findings revealed significant variance in anxiety symptoms and social media participation across subjects. The average Mini-SPIN score of 5.32 ± 3.17 indicates that a significant number of people exhibited social anxiety symptoms. The distribution varied from 0 to 12, showing that some participants had extremely low levels of social dread or avoidance, while others surpassed screening criteria indicative of clinically meaningful symptoms.

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The mean GAD-2 scores of 3.59 ± 2.82 indicates that generalised anxiety symptoms were present in a significant proportion of the cohort. According to research, GAD-2 scores over specific thresholds anticipate larger anxiety problems in young people [1], indicating that the emotional tension described here may be the result of underlying or emergent psychological difficulties.

The BSMAS assessed problematic social media use and found a mean score of 14.58 ± 4.53 , with values ranging from 4 to 25. This range is typical of developing adult groups, which frequently exhibit a combination of moderate and high involvement levels [2]. Importantly, 18.5% of the participants fit the criterion for problematic or addictive use, indicating that almost one in every five people may have difficulty managing their online conduct.

According to prevalence estimates, 59.2% of people reported significant anxiety symptoms, while 44.6% exhibited signs of social anxiety. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating increased anxiety among college-aged persons in digital contexts where social expectations, academic demands, and online social comparison combine [3].

Normality and Suitability for Non-Parametric Analysis

The Shapiro-Wilk test found non-normal distributions for main variables ($W = 0.9618$, $p = 0.001$). This is common in psychological and behavioural datasets, where answers frequently cluster around moderate or higher levels and involve non-linear connections. Based on this finding, non-parametric methods such as Spearman correlations were employed to investigate relationships between variables.

Correlation Between Social Media Addiction and Anxiety

A significant positive correlation was observed between social media addiction (BSMAS) and generalized anxiety (GAD-2) scores (Spearman $r = 0.2592$, $p = 0.0029$), indicating that increased social media use is associated with higher anxiety. Although the association is small, it is statistically significant and consistent with previous research showing that problematic social media usage might aggravate anxiety through mechanisms such as cognitive overload, emotional reliance, and sleep disturbance [4].

The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that data were not normally distributed ($W = 0.9618$, $p = 0.001$). Therefore, a non-parametric Spearman correlation was performed to examine the relationship between social-media addiction (BSMAS) and anxiety (GAD-2). Results revealed a significant weak positive correlation ($r_s = 0.2345$, 95% CI [0.0598–0.3953], $p = 0.0072$), suggesting that higher social-media use is associated with higher anxiety scores.

Participants with higher BSMAS ratings had substantially higher Mini-SPIN scores ($p = 0.01$), suggesting a relationship between problematic social media usage and social anxiety. According to research, social comparison, self-presentational pressure, fear of missing out (FOMO), and fear of unfavourable assessment all increase in digital settings, particularly on platforms that encourage self-curation and visibility [5]. These data support the notion that internet contacts might increase self-awareness, social judgement worries, and avoidance habits.

Interpretation of Scatter Plots

Figure 1 depicts the association between Mini-SPIN and BSMAS scores. It displays a dispersed distribution with a clear clustering in the mid- to high-range scores. The lack of a

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strong linear pattern is characteristic of psychological studies, but the increasing trend clearly indicates the positive correlation: those with higher social media addiction scores exhibit higher social anxiety markers. The data also shows that even minor increases in BSMAS scores result in significant increases in Mini-SPIN scores for certain users, demonstrating vulnerability.

Figure 2 depicts the association between BSMAS and GAD-2 scores, which indicates a wide range but a consistent rising trend. Several persons with high GAD-2 scores are in the upper BSMAS range, suggesting that emotional instability, uncontrolled concern, and physiological arousal may be more frequent in those with problematic digital habits. These visual patterns confirm the quantitative findings and show that, while not deterministic, the link is constant and relevant.

Role of Behavioural Patterns

Behavioural items revealed several patterns associated with anxiety symptoms. Many participants reported:

- Late-night social media use,
- Checking social media immediately upon waking,
- Passive scrolling,
- Frequent checking without purpose,
- Monitoring engagement metrics (likes/comments),
- Social comparison tendencies.

These behaviours are identified psychological risk factors. Late-night usage disturbs sleep cycles, lowers melatonin levels, and enhances emotional reactivity the next day [6]. Passive scrolling, especially on visually orientated platforms, has been associated to rumination, feelings of inadequacy, and a decline in mood [7]. Constant checking actions may be a maladaptive coping technique for anxiety, resulting in a reinforcing cycle in which transient relief from checking reinforces the habit while long-term emotional discomfort rises.

Participants who utilised social media to deal with stress or escape negative emotions exhibited patterns linked with emotion-focused coping and avoidance-based actions. Such tendencies can be problematic when they inhibit adaptive coping or good emotional processing, raising overall anxiety [8].

Comparisons with Existing Literature

The link between problematic social media usage and anxiety discovered in this study is consistent with worldwide literature demonstrating that excessive participation, particularly when compulsive or emotionally driven, predicts higher anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms [2,4]. Emerging adults are more vulnerable due to developmental processes such as identity formation, higher sensitivity to social appraisal, and a dependence on peer acceptance [9].

According to studies in India, academic pressure, peer competitiveness, and a cultural emphasis on accomplishment are all contributing to increased anxiety and digital reliance among university students [10]. The prevalence rates in this study are similar to those seen in modern Indian and Southeast Asian populations, where digital consumption has quickly expanded in both urban and semi-urban settings.

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The modest but substantial associations revealed indicate that social media use is not the primary cause of anxiety, but rather a contributing element, particularly when patterns move towards obsessive activities. This is consistent with recent ideas that argue that digital surroundings serve as amplifiers of pre-existing emotional vulnerabilities rather than main triggers [11].

Broader Psychological Interpretation

From a psychological perspective, the results can be understood through three interacting mechanisms:

- 1. Cognitive Mechanisms:** Continuous exposure to curated content encourages upward social comparison, triggering internal evaluations related to appearance, success and social belonging.
- 2. Behavioural Mechanisms:** Reinforcement schedules embedded within platforms—such as intermittent likes and notifications—encourage compulsive checking and heightened anticipation cycles linked to anxiety.
- 3. Emotional Mechanisms:** Emotional dependence on online validation may weaken self-regulation and coping ability, increasing susceptibility to stress and worry.

These mechanisms are well-supported in behavioural addiction literature and align with the associations observed in this study.

Implications

The findings underline the need for educational initiatives that promote digital well-being, particularly in college settings. Universities might implement training programs that focus on good internet behaviours, sleep hygiene, emotional management, and balanced digital engagement. When evaluating anxiety problems in young people, mental health providers may find it beneficial to screen for problematic social media usage.

CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of this study show that social media has a considerable psychological impact on emerging adults, notably on anxiety subtypes. Problematic social media usage, defined by obsessive monitoring, emotionally charged participation, and difficulties disengaging from online activities, is associated with both generalised anxiety and social anxiety. Individuals with higher BSMAS scores continually demonstrated increased anxiety indicators, suggesting that harmful digital behaviours may operate as a reinforcing element in psychological discomfort.

The findings also show that a significant number of emerging adults suffer anxiety and social anxiety, which reflects the greater sociocultural and developmental constraints that this age group faces in digital contexts. Social comparison, fear of unfavourable judgement, excessive exposure to curated information, and the obligation to maintain an online presence all seem to contribute to emotional imbalance. These processes are likely to enhance pre-existing vulnerabilities, resulting in a loop in which social media serves as both a coping technique and a cause of worry.

The study emphasises the need of awareness initiatives, digital wellness education, and preventative interventions for supporting emotionally healthy social media use. Interventions that promote psychological well-being include organised digital breaks, restricting late-night usage, minimising passive scrolling, and boosting deliberate interaction. Furthermore,

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including mental health screening for problematic social media usage may help identify at-risk persons sooner. Overall, the study finds that social media behavioural patterns have a significant impact on anxiety experiences among emerging adults and should receive more attention from educators, therapists, and legislators.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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TABLES

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Measures

| Measure | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Median | Range |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------------------------|--------|-------|
| Mini-SPIN (Social Anxiety) | 5.32 | 3.17 | 5 | 0–12 |
| GAD-2 (Generalised Anxiety) | 3.59 | 2.82 | 3 | 0–9 |
| BSMAS (Social Media Addiction) | 14.58 | 4.53 | 15 | 4–25 |

Table 2. Prevalence of Anxiety and Problematic Social Media Use

| Psychological Indicator | Prevalence (%) | Interpretation |
|------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------|
| General Anxiety Symptoms | 59.2% | Above clinical screening threshold |
| Social Anxiety Indicators | 44.6% | Mini-SPIN-based prevalence |
| Problematic Social Media Use | 18.5% | BSMAS-based criteria |

FIGURES

Figure 1. Scatter plot showing the relationship between BSMAS scores and Mini-SPIN scores among emerging adults.

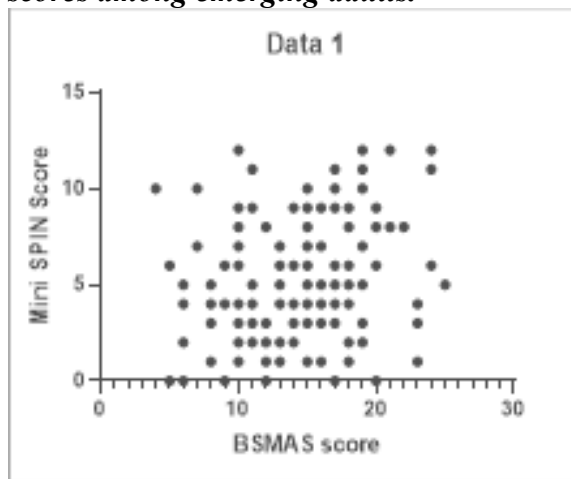


Figure 2. Scatter plot showing the relationship between BSMAS scores and GAD-2 scores among emerging adults.

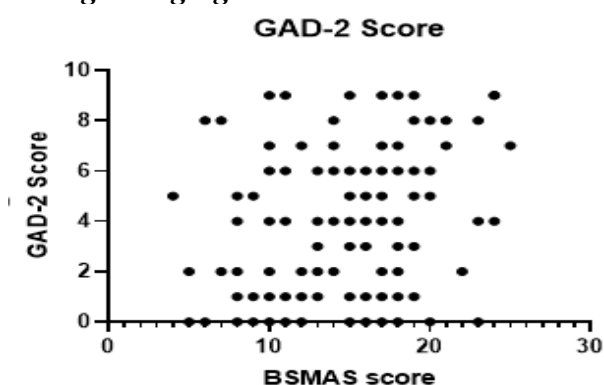


Figure 3. Normality QQ Plot of GAD-2 score.

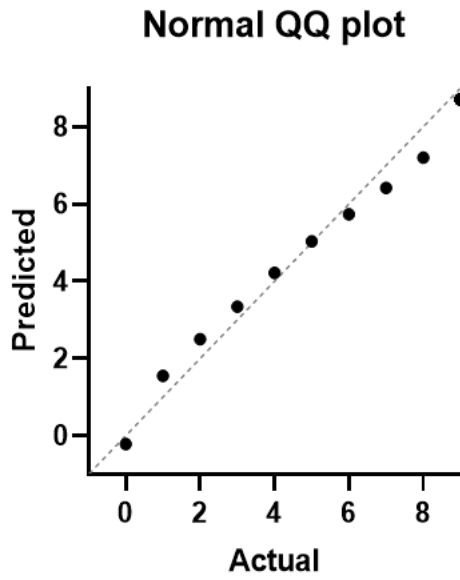


Figure 4. Normality QQ Plot of Mini-Spin Score.

