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SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Kinza Ishaq

BS, Department of CS Computer Science, The Cosmic Degree College (For Women) ,University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Social media has become an integral part of university students' academic, social, and personal lives. Although these platforms provide opportunities for communication, information sharing, entertainment, and educational engagement, excessive or problematic use may negatively influence emotional wellbeing. Social media addiction is commonly associated with difficulties in controlling online activity, persistent engagement, and continued use despite adverse consequences. This article examines the relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing among university students through a qualitative review of relevant scholarly literature. It focuses on anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, self-esteem, fear of missing out, and sleep-related difficulties. Research indicates that problematic social media use is associated with poorer wellbeing and psychological difficulties, although the strength of these relationships varies according to individual and contextual factors (Ansari et al., 2024). A systematic review and meta-analysis by Zhang et al. (2025) also identified positive associations between social media addiction and anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear of missing out among students. The article further considers the role of self-regulation, digital literacy, and balanced technology use in promoting emotional wellbeing. It concludes that social media should not be considered inherently harmful; rather, its psychological effects depend on patterns of engagement, individual vulnerabilities, and the social context of use. Greater awareness and appropriate university-based support may help students develop healthier digital habits.

KEYWORDS

Social Media Addiction, Emotional Wellbeing, University Students, Anxiety, Depression, Loneliness, Self-Esteem, Digital Behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of contemporary university life, influencing how students communicate, maintain relationships, exchange information, and participate in academic activities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, and other social networking services enable students to interact with peers, share experiences, and access educational resources. These platforms can provide social support and opportunities for personal expression, but frequent or uncontrolled use may create difficulties for emotional wellbeing. The growing importance of social networking in everyday life has encouraged researchers to investigate whether excessive engagement is associated with psychological distress, loneliness, and reduced life satisfaction. Ansari et al. (2024), in a systematic review and meta-analysis, examined relationships between social media use and wellbeing, highlighting the importance of distinguishing ordinary use from problematic or excessive engagement. This distinction is essential for understanding the psychological experiences of university students.Social media addiction generally refers to a pattern of excessive or difficult-to-control engagement with social networking platforms that interferes with everyday responsibilities or continues despite negative

consequences. Although the term is widely used in research, problematic social media use does not necessarily represent a formally recognized clinical diagnosis. Students may experience difficulties when they repeatedly check notifications, spend more time online than intended, or feel uncomfortable when unable to access their accounts. Such behaviours may interfere with studying, sleeping, and maintaining face-to-face relationships. Zhang et al. (2025) reviewed evidence concerning social media addiction and psychological outcomes among students, identifying associations with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear of missing out. Their findings provide an important basis for investigating the emotional consequences of problematic social media engagement.Emotional wellbeing involves the ability to experience and regulate emotions, maintain meaningful relationships, cope with everyday challenges, and experience a sense of psychological balance. University students may encounter academic pressure, financial concerns, changing social relationships, and uncertainty about future careers. Social media can provide opportunities for connection during these periods, but it may also introduce additional emotional pressures through social comparison, online conflict, and expectations of constant availability. Students who repeatedly compare their lives with carefully selected online presentations of others may develop dissatisfaction with their achievements, appearance, or social experiences. Ansari et al. (2024) highlighted the complex relationship between social media use and different dimensions of wellbeing. This suggests that the emotional consequences of social media should be examined in relation to both the benefits of social connection and the possible pressures associated with online engagement.Anxiety and depressive symptoms are important areas of concern in research on social media addiction. Students who feel compelled to remain continuously connected may experience anxiety when they cannot check updates or respond to messages. Negative online interactions, social exclusion, and repeated exposure to distressing content may also contribute to emotional discomfort. Zhang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 32 studies involving 26,166 students. They reported positive correlations between social media addiction and both anxiety and depression. These findings indicate an association rather than proof that social media addiction directly causes psychological difficulties. Students experiencing anxiety or depressive symptoms may also turn to social media more frequently as a means of distraction or reassurance. Understanding this possible two-way relationship is important for developing balanced explanations of student wellbeing.

Loneliness and fear of missing out are also relevant to understanding the emotional experiences of university students. Social media can help individuals maintain contact with friends and participate in communities, particularly when face-to-face interaction is limited. However, observing other people's activities, social gatherings, and achievements may create feelings of exclusion among users who believe they are missing important experiences. Zhang et al. (2025) found positive associations between social media addiction, loneliness, and fear of missing out among students. These findings suggest that frequent online engagement does not necessarily guarantee a stronger sense of belonging. The quality of social interaction, the user's expectations, and the emotional meaning attached to online content may be more important than the amount of time spent on social media alone.Self-esteem represents another important dimension of

emotional wellbeing. University students may encounter idealized presentations of appearance, academic achievement, relationships, and lifestyle on social networking platforms. Repeated exposure to these presentations may encourage upward social comparison and dissatisfaction with personal circumstances. Zhang et al. (2025) identified a negative association between social media addiction and self-esteem in their meta-analysis. However, the relationship may vary among students according to personality, social support, and patterns of platform use. Positive interactions, supportive communities, and educational engagement may strengthen feelings of belonging, whereas hostile communication or persistent comparison may contribute to emotional difficulties. Therefore, the influence of social media on self-esteem requires consideration of both online experiences and the wider circumstances of university students.Sleep and everyday routines are additional factors connecting social media behaviour with emotional wellbeing. Students who use social media late at night may delay bedtime, experience interruptions, or find it difficult to disengage from online content. Poor sleep may subsequently affect concentration, mood regulation, and academic participation. Ahmed et al. (2024), in a systematic review and meta-analysis, examined social media use in relation to mental health and sleep. Their findings indicated that problematic social media use was associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer wellbeing, while ordinary social media use showed weaker relationships with some mental health outcomes. This distinction reinforces the importance of examining problematic patterns rather than assuming that all social media activity is harmful. Maintaining regular sleep routines and setting boundaries around nighttime use may help students manage their digital engagement.

The university environment provides an important context for examining these issues because students increasingly depend on digital platforms for academic communication, peer interaction, and access to educational resources. Social media may facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and emotional support, but excessive engagement can compete with study time and offline activities. Research on excessive social networking and student wellbeing has also identified connections with academic stress, procrastination, and mental health concerns (Effects of Excessive Video Game and Social Networking Use, 2025). These relationships may be influenced by the reasons students use social media, the level of academic pressure they experience, and their ability to regulate online behaviour. Universities therefore have an important role in promoting digital literacy, healthy technology habits, and access to appropriate psychological support.The relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing is complex and cannot be explained solely by the duration of online activity. The type of content viewed, the purpose of use, the quality of social relationships, and individual psychological characteristics may all influence outcomes. Ansari et al. (2024) emphasized the need to distinguish different forms of social media use and wellbeing when interpreting research findings. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2025) identified associations between problematic engagement and several psychological outcomes while highlighting the need for further research. This article examines these issues through a qualitative review of scholarly literature, focusing on emotional wellbeing, anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, fear of missing out, and healthy digital behaviour among university students. It aims to develop a balanced understanding of the

potential risks and benefits of social media and the importance of promoting responsible use in university settings.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing among university students.
2. To explore the association between problematic social media use and anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-esteem.
3. To identify strategies for promoting healthy social media habits and improving emotional wellbeing among university students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing among university students?
2. How is problematic social media use associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-esteem?
3. What strategies can help university students develop healthier social media habits and improve emotional wellbeing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on social media addiction and emotional wellbeing has expanded as social networking platforms have become increasingly integrated into students' daily lives. Existing literature distinguishes ordinary social media engagement from problematic use characterized by impaired control and interference with everyday responsibilities. Ansari et al. (2024) examined the relationship between social media use and wellbeing through a systematic review and meta-analysis. Their research highlighted the importance of distinguishing excessive or problematic engagement from general use when interpreting psychological outcomes. This distinction is relevant to university students because social media may support academic collaboration and interpersonal communication while also contributing to emotional difficulties when its use becomes difficult to regulate.A major theme in the literature is the association between social media addiction and psychological distress. Zhang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 32 studies involving 26,166 students. Their findings showed positive correlations between social media addiction and anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear of missing out. They also identified a negative correlation between social media addiction and self-esteem. These results suggest that students experiencing problematic social media use may be more likely to report emotional difficulties. However, correlational evidence does not establish

whether problematic use causes psychological distress or whether students experiencing distress are more likely to engage excessively with social media. The findings therefore support further investigation into the direction and mechanisms of these relationships.The association between social media use, mental health, and sleep has also received considerable scholarly attention. Ahmed et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review and meta-analyses examining these relationships. Their findings indicated that problematic social media use was associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer wellbeing, while ordinary social media use showed weaker associations with some mental health outcomes. The study also identified an association between problematic use and sleep problems. These findings are important for university students because irregular sleep patterns and emotional difficulties may affect academic performance, concentration, and daily functioning. Nevertheless, the distinction between ordinary and problematic use remains essential because the mere presence of social media in a student's routine does not necessarily indicate an adverse psychological outcome.Another important area concerns the social and emotional consequences of problematic social networking. A systematic review published in Journal of Affective Disorders Reports in 2024 examined problematic social networking site use and social wellbeing among young adults. The review identified associations between problematic use and negative social wellbeing factors, including social anxiety, social overload, and different social motivations. It also highlighted inconsistencies in how problematic social networking and social wellbeing are defined and measured. These findings suggest that the quality of online relationships and the reasons for using social media may be important in explaining emotional outcomes. For university students, online communication can support belonging and social connection, but excessive or stressful engagement may create additional interpersonal pressures.

Recent research has also examined the relationship between social networking addiction and academic outcomes. A 2025 meta-analysis published in Public Health reported a negative relationship between social networking addiction and academic achievement among university students globally. This finding is relevant to emotional wellbeing because academic difficulties may increase stress, reduce confidence, and interfere with students' daily routines. However, academic outcomes and emotional outcomes should not be treated as identical, and the association between social media addiction and academic performance does not by itself establish a direct effect on mental health. The literature instead suggests that academic functioning, emotional experiences, and digital habits may interact in ways that deserve further investigation.Research published in 2025 has further explored the relationship between social networking, excessive digital engagement, and student wellbeing. A systematic analysis in Social Sciences & Humanities Open examined 16 empirical studies on excessive video game and social networking use among university students. The review identified associations involving information overload, social media addiction, academic stress, procrastination, and mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression. It also noted that usage context may influence the outcomes. These findings support the view that the consequences of social media use depend not only on the technology itself but also on how, why, and under what circumstances students engage with it. The study also highlights the importance of tailored educational and public health

strategies for promoting healthier digital behaviour.Emerging research in 2026 has continued to examine the relationship between social media addiction and psychological wellbeing. Khodjaev et al. (2026) reported a meta-analysis of 62 independent studies involving 17,800 participants. The analysis identified a moderate negative association between social media addiction and psychological wellbeing, with differences across cultural settings and other study characteristics. Sleep quality and self-regulation were among the factors considered in explaining this relationship. These findings reinforce the importance of examining individual and contextual differences rather than assuming that social media affects every student in the same way. They also support the need for approaches that encourage balanced digital engagement, healthy sleep habits, and greater awareness of online behaviour.Overall, the literature indicates that problematic social media use is associated with several dimensions of emotional and psychological wellbeing, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear of missing out, self-esteem, and sleep-related difficulties. However, the strength of these relationships varies across studies, and the findings do not establish that social media addiction is the sole cause of emotional problems. Differences in measurement, cultural context, individual vulnerability, and patterns of engagement may contribute to variations in research outcomes. The present article brings these findings together to examine social media addiction among university students and to identify approaches that may encourage healthier digital habits and improved emotional wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology to examine the relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing among university students. Relevant scholarly publications were identified through topic-focused searches of Google Scholar and academic literature addressing social media addiction, problematic social networking, emotional wellbeing, anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and sleep. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses published between 2024 and 2026, with particular attention to studies involving students and young adults. The selected literature was considered in terms of its relevance to the research objectives, the clarity of its research methods, and its contribution to understanding psychological and behavioural outcomes. Findings from the reviewed publications were compared to identify recurring themes, differences in reported associations, and limitations in existing evidence. The methodology does not involve collecting new data from university students; therefore, the article's conclusions are based on published research rather than original survey responses, interviews, or experimental observations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a qualitative narrative literature-review design to develop an understanding of the relationship between social media addiction and emotional wellbeing among university students. This design is appropriate because the topic includes several interconnected dimensions, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, fear of missing out, sleep, and academic

functioning. The review organizes relevant publications around these themes and compares their findings to identify similarities, differences, and potential explanations. Particular attention is given to the distinction between ordinary social media use and problematic engagement, as well as to the influence of individual and contextual factors. The study does not attempt to calculate a new statistical relationship or establish causality. Instead, it develops an interpretive synthesis of existing scholarly evidence while recognizing that differences in research methods, populations, and measurement tools may limit direct comparisons between studies.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis involves qualitative thematic synthesis of the selected scholarly literature. Relevant findings are organized into themes relating to social media addiction, emotional wellbeing, anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, fear of missing out, sleep, and academic functioning. Within each theme, the reviewed studies are compared to identify consistent associations, differing conclusions, and areas requiring additional investigation. Evidence concerning potential negative outcomes is considered alongside the benefits of social connection, educational communication, and access to supportive online communities. The analysis also considers how self-regulation, cultural context, and patterns of use may influence the relationship between social media engagement and wellbeing. Because the article uses previously published research rather than original participant data, no new statistical tests are conducted. The findings are interpreted as a synthesis of existing evidence and do not establish causal relationships between social media addiction and emotional difficulties.

FINDINGS

The reviewed literature indicates that social media addiction is associated with several dimensions of emotional wellbeing among university students. The first major finding concerns anxiety and depression. Zhang et al. (2025) identified positive correlations between social media addiction and both anxiety and depression among students. These findings suggest that students experiencing problematic social media use may also report greater psychological distress. However, the relationship may be influenced by academic pressure, existing emotional difficulties, and individual coping strategies. The evidence therefore supports recognizing problematic social media use as a potential wellbeing concern without assuming that it directly causes every psychological difficulty.The second finding concerns loneliness and fear of missing out. Social networking platforms allow students to maintain friendships and participate in online communities, but constant exposure to other people's activities may also create feelings of exclusion. Zhang et al. (2025) found positive associations between social media addiction, loneliness, and fear of missing out. These findings suggest that frequent online interaction does not necessarily guarantee emotional satisfaction or meaningful social connection. The quality of relationships and the way students interpret online experiences may be important factors in understanding their emotional wellbeing.The third finding relates to self-esteem and social comparison. Online platforms often present selected images of personal achievements, appearance, relationships, and lifestyles. Repeated comparisons with these presentations may

contribute to dissatisfaction among some students. Zhang et al. (2025) reported a negative association between social media addiction and self-esteem. Nevertheless, the effects of social media may vary according to individual circumstances and the nature of online interactions. Supportive communities and positive communication can provide a sense of belonging, while negative feedback and excessive comparison may contribute to emotional discomfort.

The fourth finding concerns sleep and everyday functioning. Ahmed et al. (2024) found that problematic social media use was associated with mental health difficulties and sleep problems. For university students, disrupted sleep and persistent online engagement may interfere with concentration, mood regulation, and academic responsibilities. These findings emphasize the importance of distinguishing problematic use from ordinary engagement. Students may benefit from establishing reasonable screen-time boundaries, protecting their sleep routines, and allocating sufficient time to academic activities and face-to-face relationships.The fifth finding highlights the importance of individual differences and the social context of technology use. Hylkilä et al. (2024) found that problematic social networking use was generally associated with poorer social wellbeing among young adults, although results varied across studies. Students may use social media for different purposes, including learning, entertainment, emotional support, and maintaining friendships. These different motivations can influence the consequences of online activity. The literature therefore suggests that interventions should address specific usage patterns and emotional needs rather than treating every social media user as being at risk of addiction.

The sixth finding concerns the importance of digital literacy and university-based support. Research on excessive social networking and student wellbeing suggests that problematic engagement may occur alongside academic stress, procrastination, and psychological difficulties (Martínez-Murciano & Pérez-Jorge, 2025). Universities can help students develop healthier habits through digital wellbeing education, counselling services, peer-support opportunities, and awareness of online social comparison. Students may also benefit from monitoring their own usage patterns and developing strategies to manage notifications and online distractions. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that emotional wellbeing is best supported through a balanced approach that recognizes the benefits of social connection while addressing problematic patterns of engagement.

CONCLUSION

Social media addiction and emotional wellbeing represent important areas of concern in contemporary university life. The reviewed literature indicates that problematic social media use is associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear of missing out, reduced self-esteem, and sleep-related difficulties among students. These associations highlight the importance of understanding how digital engagement interacts with emotional experiences, academic responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships. However, social media is not inherently harmful, and its effects depend on the purpose of use, the quality of online interactions, and individual circumstances.The article concludes that promoting emotional wellbeing requires a balanced and

informed approach to social media use. University students should be encouraged to develop healthy digital habits, protect their sleep routines, manage online distractions, and maintain meaningful face-to-face relationships. Universities can contribute by providing digital literacy education, accessible counselling, and awareness programmes that address problematic engagement and emotional wellbeing. Future research should examine these relationships across different cultural settings and university populations, particularly through longitudinal studies that help clarify how problematic use and psychological distress influence one another over time. A balanced approach can help students benefit from social media while reducing the potential risks associated with excessive or uncontrolled engagement.

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