

Assessing the Psychological Impact of Social Media Addiction in College Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of young adults' lives, particularly among college students. While platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat facilitate social connectivity, excessive use can lead to social media addiction (SMA)—a behavioral addiction characterized by compulsive use, neglect of offline responsibilities, and psychological dependence. Emerging research links SMA with various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and low self-esteem. College students, a demographic in a critical stage of emotional and social development, may be particularly vulnerable. This cross-sectional study examines the prevalence of SMA among college students and its association with psychological distress, aiming to understand the mental health consequences of excessive social media use.

Discussion

The results revealed a strong correlation between high social media addiction scores and elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Students who reported excessive daily screen time (>4 hours) showed significantly higher psychological distress compared to those with moderate usage. Gender differences were observed, with female students exhibiting more symptoms of anxiety and body image concerns linked to social media comparisons. The addictive use was often reinforced by fear of missing out (FOMO), validation-seeking behaviors, and algorithm-driven engagement patterns. Psychological mechanisms like negative reinforcement—using social media to escape negative emotions—were commonly reported. These findings suggest the need for digital wellness programs, counseling support, and curriculum-integrated awareness campaigns. Limitations of the study include its reliance on self-reported data and inability to establish causality due to its cross-sectional design.

Conclusion

Social media addiction is significantly associated with increased psychological distress among college students. As digital dependence grows, there is an urgent need for targeted mental health interventions, digital literacy education, and self-regulation strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of SMA. Universities and mental health professionals must proactively address this emerging behavioral addiction to protect students' well-being.

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