

STRESS, SCREENS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA: UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL FATIGUE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Mrs. B. Saranya

Head & Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Hindustan college of Arts & Science, Rajiv Gandhi Salai, Padur, Chennai - Tamil Nadu, India

hodvc@hcaschennai.edu.in

Ms. Thusharaa Prasanna

II B.Sc. Viscom, Hindustan college of Arts & Science, Rajiv Gandhi Salai, Padur, Chennai - Tamil Nadu, India

thusharaa.pras@gmail.com

1.1 Introduction

Social media was created to develop communication, foster connections and form communities with friends, families and like-minded individuals. Today, it has become an integral part of everyone's lives in the 21st century. Young adults constantly rely on social media for entertainment, communication, information and emotional expression. With digital devices and constant access to the internet, engagement with digital services has significantly increased.

Beyond entertainment, social media is now widely used as a coping mechanism. Many individuals turn to digital platforms to distract themselves and seek comfort during stressful situations. This has been clearly explained by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, mentioning that individuals actively use media to satisfy their specific needs. However, excessive digital exposure results in digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion.



Fig-1.1 Digital Fatigue & Social Media Stress

Prolonged screen exposure, in the fig 1.1. constant scrolling of reels and information overload might contribute to fatigue rather than actual relief. These issues raise concern about whether social media is an actual stress buster or not. Despite the widespread use of social media as a stress buster, individuals don't get the relief that they expect and although it is used as a common stress busting tool, its impact and consequence continue to be underexplored. Therefore, this research paper aims to examine whether the use of social media serves as an effective coping mechanism or that it contributes to digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between daily life stressors, digital fatigue, and the use of social media as a coping mechanism, with a focus on understanding individuals' motivations, perceptions, and the psychological outcomes of such media usage.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on individuals' experiences of stress and their engagement with social media as a coping strategy. It explores the causes of digital fatigue, patterns of social media usage, and users' awareness of its emotional and psychological effects. The study also examines the barriers that prevent individuals from reducing their usage and identifies alternative coping mechanisms. The scope is limited to analyzing behavioral and perceptual aspects within a specific sample group (e.g., students/young adults), and does not extend to clinical diagnosis or medical evaluation.

1.4 Objectives

1. To explore the daily life stressors and triggers that leads to digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion.
2. To understand why and how individuals turn to social media to cope with their stress.
3. To identify the participant's perception of the outcome of the usage of social media as a coping mechanism, their awareness of the effects, barriers to reduce the usage, as well as alternatives to cope with the stress.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What daily stressors and triggers contribute to digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion among individuals?
2. Why and how do individuals use social media as a coping mechanism to manage stress?
3. How do individuals perceive the effects of social media use, including their awareness, barriers to reducing usage, and alternative coping strategies?

1.6 Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in key mass communication theories, particularly the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Media Dependency Theory, which together explain individuals' interaction with social media in the context of stress and coping. The Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, posits that audiences are active participants who consciously select media to fulfil specific needs such as relaxation,

escapism, and emotional relief. In this study, individuals experiencing daily stressors and emotional exhaustion may turn to social media as a coping mechanism to seek distraction and social connection.



Fig-1.2 Uses and Gratification Theory

Complementing this in the fig 1.2, the Media Dependency Theory proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur suggests that the more individuals depend on media to satisfy their needs, the greater the media's influence on their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. As a result, increased reliance on social media for coping may lead to heightened digital fatigue and emotional consequences, while also creating challenges in reducing usage despite awareness of its effects. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework to understand the relationship between stress, media use, and its psychological outcomes.

2.1 Review of Literature

Social media is defined as a digital platform that allows users to interact, share content and connect with others online. It has become a necessary part of daily lives of various groups of people (Siti Nur Asiyah, 2014). They provide an easy and fast way to communicate with people even across great distances. However, there are negative impacts from excessive use of social media, such as addiction to playing on smartphones for a long time, leakage of privacy data and the spread of false information. Some examples of social media that are often used are WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and many more. Excessive use of social media not only impacts physical health; it also affects mental health such as emotional fatigue (Sasmita et al.;2019). Emotional exhaustion is a condition where a person loses energy, motivation and mental endurance. This happens to certain factors such as heavy emotional burdens that are not resolved properly. It is associated with stress, pressure or excessive demands.

Is social media actually a boon or a burden to people's lives? Studies suggest both in fact. For example, Norman (2012) found that the use of health-related information was associated with positive lifestyle changes and improved health behaviors. On the other hand, it stated the negative consequences of using social media. Gao et al. (2020) stated that excessive exposure to health-related information on social media during public health emergencies causes higher levels of anxiety and distress among individuals.

In the digital era, people experience fatigue due to various social media platforms. While physiological fatigue arises in a highly stressful working environment, social media fatigue is more related to psychological fatigue due to the voluntary exposure of the online environment (Zhang et al., 2016). Ravindran et al., (2014) defined social media fatigue as a subjective, multidimensional user experience comprising feelings such as tiredness, annoyance, anger, disappointment, guardedness, loss of interest, or reduced need/motivation associated with various aspects of social network use and interactions" (p. 2317). Studies have also talked about how social media affects health. Like this one study, social media fatigue is closely related to individuals' physical and mental health-related problems, which further triggers unhealthy behaviors (Choi and Lim, 2016).

Many studies have explored various reasons behind social media fatigue. They have also revealed that the casuals behind the same. Social media, on one hand, burdens users with information overloading and oversharing caused by social networking platforms. And the users experience negative effects when thinking of social media as threatening their safety, security and privacy (Bright et al., 2015 ; Cheng et al., 2017). It is critical to examine the effects and mechanisms of internal and external influences on the fatigue caused due social media usage (Dhir et al., 2019).

While numerous studies have examined the causes of social media fatigue (Bright et al., 2015, Cramer et al., 2016, Dhir et al., 2019), very few of them have actually identified and analyzed the underlying factors contributing to it. In addition, studies have developed different theoretical models studying the effects of some selected variables on social media fatigue, resulting in a lack of complete understanding of what types of factors are related to social media fatigue in the literature (Xiao & Mou, 2019).

This paper seeks to address this particular research gap. It summarizes the research contexts that studies social media fatigue that have been explored. And it aims to identify the causes of social media fatigue and identifies the participant's perception of the outcome of the usage of social media as a coping mechanism, their awareness of the effects, barriers to reduce the usage, as well as alternatives to cope with the stress.

3.1 Research Methodology

This research paper uses a mixed method approach to understand the relationship between social media usage, digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion among young adults. This research focuses on individuals between the ages of 18 and 32, as this group represents one of the most active users of digital media platforms.

For the quantitative part of the study, data were collected through an online Likert-scale survey questionnaire created using Google Forms. The questionnaire included statements related to participants' social media usage, stress levels, coping behaviors and experiences of digital fatigue. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. This helped in understanding patterns in how individuals use social media and how it influences their emotional well-being.

In addition to this, a qualitative approach was also utilized. This included expert interviews with psychology professionals such as counsellor and assistant professor. The purpose of the interviews was to understand behavioral patterns and coping mechanisms related to social media use and contribution to emotional exhaustion.

This research is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974), suggesting that individuals actively choose media to fulfill psychological and social media such as entertainment, information seeking and emotional relief.

4.1 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected through both qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires were analyzed using a mixed-method approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to stress, coping mechanisms, and social media usage, while quantitative data were analyzed using statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, correlation, and ANOVA. The combined analysis reveals that students experience significant levels of stress arising from academic, personal, and psychological factors, and frequently turn to social media as a coping mechanism. However, the findings indicate that excessive usage is associated with increased digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Despite awareness of its negative effects, students continue to engage with social media due to factors such as habit, low self-esteem, and the need for validation. Overall, the integration of both data sets highlights a clear relationship between stress, social media usage, and student well-being.

4.2 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires were analyzed using statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation to summarize the responses, along with inferential tools like correlation and ANOVA to examine relationships between variables.

The analysis shows that a considerable number of respondents experience moderate to high levels of stress and frequently use social media as a coping mechanism. The findings further indicate a positive relationship between excessive social media usage and increased levels of digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Differences across user groups also suggest that higher screen time is associated with greater psychological impact, highlighting a measurable link between social media behavior and student well-being.

Table 4.1: Demographic characteristics of young adults in the digital age

		Frequency	Percent
Age Group	18-22 years	70	93.3
	23-27 years	5	6.7
	28-32 years	0	0
Educational Qualification	12th pass	55	57.7
	UG	12	9.6
	PG	8	3.8
City of Residence	Chennai	55	73.3
	Bengaluru	12	16.0
	Others	8	10.7
Occupation	Student	70	93.3
	Working Professional	2	2.7
	Both	3	4.0

Table 4.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the young adults in digital life. The age of the respondents, 93.3% belong to the age group 18-22 years. 6.7% belong to the age group 23-27 years. Educational qualifications of the young adults, 57.7% of them have passed their high school, 9.6% are currently pursuing their under graduation and 3.8% are currently pursuing their postgraduation.

As for the city of residence, 73.3% of the people currently reside in Chennai, 16% reside in Bengaluru and 10.7% live in other cities and towns. This includes Mumbai, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram and people from other states such as Andhra Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Occupation of the respondents, 93.3% of them are students pursuing both undergraduate and post-graduate courses in various fields, 2.7% of them are working professionals. Additionally, 4% of the young adults are both students and individuals who are working professionals as well. This includes internships and engagement in part-time work. All of this clearly indicates that the majority of the participants are students, who are more active on social media platforms.

Table 4.2: Correlation between Social Media Usage, Stress and Emotional responses among Young Adults

		Social media is a central part of my daily routine.	Using social media after a long day helps me feel relaxed.	My stress frequently interferes with my daily routine.	I can clearly recognize when I feel stressed or drained.	I turn to social media mainly for entertainment when stressed.
Social media is a central part of my daily routine.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 75				
Using social media after a long day helps me feel relaxed.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.391** .001 75	1 75			
My stress frequently interferes with my daily routine.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.322** .005 75	.324** .005 75	1 75		
I can clearly recognize when I feel stressed or drained.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.283* .014 75	.044 .711 75	.173 .138 75	1 75	
I turn to social media mainly for entertainment when stressed.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.369** .001 75	.535** .000 75	.312** .006 75	.347** .002 75	1 75

Table 4.2 shows the relationship between Social Media Usage, Stress and Emotional responses among Young Adults. This was done using a Pearson correlation analysis.

The results show a moderate positive relationship between social media being the central part of an individual's daily routine and the relaxation achieved from social media usage after a long, tiring day ($r = 0.391$; $p = 0.001$). This indicates that individuals who regularly engage in social media platforms are more likely to use them as a mode for seeking comfort, distraction and relaxation.

A significant relationship is found between social media being the central part of daily routine and stress interfering with everyday activities ($r = 0.322$; $p = 0.005$). This implies that individuals who frequently rely on social media platforms are in constant stress that negatively impacts their daily activities. A stronger relationship is seen between the relaxation felt due to social media usage and opting social media as a source of entertainment during stressful moments ($r = 0.535$, $p < 0.001$) . This clearly indicates that individuals actively turn to social media to distract themselves or seek comfort during stressful moments.

Additionally, a positive relationship is observed between stress interfering with the daily routine and usage of social media during stressful moments ($r = 0.312$; $p = 0.006$). The results

reveal that social media serves as a quick go-to solution for the individuals to opt when they are overwhelmed with stress or mentally drained.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Overview of Social Media Usage and Stress Management by Age Groups.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Social media is a central part of my daily routine.	18-22	70	2.2857	1.13115	.13520	2.0160	2.5554	1.00	5.00
	23-27	5	3.4000	1.14018	.50990	1.9843	4.8157	2.00	5.00
	Total	75	2.3600	1.15828	.13375	2.0935	2.6265	1.00	5.00
My screen usage helps me ease my stress.	18-22	70	2.6429	1.19219	.14249	2.3586	2.9271	1.00	5.00
	23-27	5	2.6000	1.14018	.50990	1.1843	4.0157	1.00	4.00
	Total	75	2.6400	1.18139	.13641	2.3682	2.9118	1.00	5.00
Using social media after a long day helps me feel relaxed.	18-22	70	2.6714	1.18837	.14204	2.3881	2.9548	1.00	5.00
	23-27	5	2.8000	.44721	.20000	2.2447	3.3553	2.00	3.00
	Total	75	2.6800	1.15267	.13310	2.4148	2.9452	1.00	5.00
Social media is more helpful than harmful when dealing with stress.	18-22	70	2.7000	1.13380	.13552	2.4297	2.9703	1.00	5.00
	23-27	5	2.8000	.44721	.20000	2.2447	3.3553	2.00	3.00
	Total	75	2.7067	1.10004	.12702	2.4536	2.9598	1.00	5.00
I use social media during stressful or exhausting moments.	18-22	70	2.6000	1.32315	.15815	2.2845	2.9155	1.00	5.00
	23-27	5	2.8000	1.09545	.48990	1.4398	4.1602	1.00	4.00
	Total	75	2.6133	1.30377	.15055	2.3134	2.9133	1.00	5.00

A Pearson correlation analysis in the table 4.3, was carried out to examine the relationship between different aspects of social media usage and stress-related experiences among young adults. The results indicate a moderate positive relationship between social media being a central part of an individual’s daily routine and using social media after a long day to feel relaxed ($r = .391, p = .001$). This suggests that individuals who regularly engage with social media throughout the day are also more likely to turn to it as a way to relax or unwind after a tiring day.

A significant relationship is also observed between social media being a central part of daily routine and stress interfering with everyday activities ($r = .322, p = .005$). This may imply that individuals who frequently rely on social media in their daily lives also report higher levels of stress affecting their routine.

Furthermore, a relatively stronger relationship is seen between using social media after a long day to feel relaxed and turning to social media mainly for entertainment when feeling stressed ($r = .535, p < .001$). This indicates that many young adults tend to use social media as a source of distraction or comfort during stressful situations. Additionally, a positive relationship exists between stress interfering with daily routine and turning to social media for entertainment when stressed ($r = .312, p = .006$).

This further suggests that social media often becomes a quick escape for individuals when they feel overwhelmed or mentally drained. Overall, the findings highlight the important role that social media plays in the everyday lives of young adults. While it is commonly used for relaxation and entertainment, the results also suggest that heavy engagement with social media may be connected to experiences of stress and emotional exhaustion.

Table 4.4: ANOVA Analysis of Social Media Usage and Stress-related Behaviour among Young Adults

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social media is a central part of my daily routine.	Between Groups	5.794	1	5.794	4.525	.037
	Within Groups	93.486	73	1.281		
	Total	99.280	74			
My screen usage helps me ease my stress.	Between Groups	.009	1	.009	.006	.938
	Within Groups	103.271	73	1.415		
	Total	103.280	74			
Using social media after a long day helps me feel relaxed.	Between Groups	.077	1	.077	.057	.811
	Within Groups	98.243	73	1.346		
	Total	98.320	74			
Social media is more helpful than harmful when dealing with stress.	Between Groups	.047	1	.047	.038	.846
	Within Groups	89.500	73	1.226		
	Total	89.547	74			
I use social media during stressful or exhausting moments.	Between Groups	.187	1	.187	.108	.743
	Within Groups	125.600	73	1.721		
	Total	125.787	74			

A one-way ANOVA test in the table 4.4, was conducted to examine whether there are significant differences in social media usage and stress-related behaviours among the respondents.

The results show that social media being a central part of an individual's daily routine has a statistically significant difference between groups ($F = 4.525, p = .037$). Since the significance value is less than 0.05, this indicates that respondents differ in how strongly they consider social media to be an important part of their daily routine. However, the remaining variables do not show statistically significant differences. For instance, screen usage helping to ease stress ($F = .006, p = .938$) and using social media after a long day to feel relaxed ($F = .057, p = .811$) both have significance values greater than 0.05, indicating that there is no meaningful difference between groups for these variables.

Similarly, the statement social media being more helpful than harmful when dealing with stress ($F = .038, p = .846$) also shows no significant variation among respondents. In addition, using social media during stressful or exhausting moments ($F = .108, p = .743$) does not display any statistically significant difference between groups. Overall, the ANOVA results suggest that while respondents differ in how central social media is in their daily routine, there are no major

differences among the groups in terms of how they use social media to deal with stress or relaxation.

4.3 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights. The responses were carefully coded and categorized into themes aligned with the research objectives, such as stressors, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of social media usage. The analysis reveals that students experience frequent stress arising from academic, personal, and psychological factors, with social media acting as an indirect contributor rather than a primary cause.

4.3.1 Stressors and Triggers of Digital Fatigue

The analysis reveals that students experience stress and emotional exhaustion on a frequent basis, often on a daily level. Both participants indicated that stress is multifaceted, arising from academic pressure, interpersonal relationships, family concerns, and financial difficulties.

Table 4.5: Identified Stressors Among Students

Category	Specific Stressors
Academic	Performance pressure, competition
Personal	Relationships, family issues
Psychological	Low self-esteem, fear of judgment
Social	Comparison, FOMO

In the table 4.5, psychological factors such as low self-esteem, fear of judgment, and social rejection were also identified as significant contributors. While the counsellor noted that students do not explicitly attribute their stress to social media, the psychology professor emphasized that underlying psychological vulnerabilities, particularly low self-esteem, play a crucial role in shaping students’ responses to stress.

Table 4.6: Triggers Contributing to Digital Fatigue

Trigger	Description
Social Comparison	Comparing with others
Validation Seeking	Dependence on likes/comments
FOMO	Fear of missing out
Unrealistic Content	Idealized portrayals
Cyberbullying	Online harassment

Although in the table 4.6, students rarely report digital fatigue directly, several indirect triggers were identified. These include constant comparison with peers and public figures, fear of missing out, dependence on social validation, exposure to unrealistic representations of life, and experiences of cyberbullying. These factors collectively contribute to emotional exhaustion, suggesting that digital fatigue is an implicit and psychologically embedded phenomenon rather than a consciously recognized condition.

4.3.2 Social Media as a Coping Mechanism

The findings indicate that students actively use social media as a means of coping with stress and emotional discomfort. Social media platforms provide a convenient avenue for distraction, allowing individuals to temporarily escape from academic and personal pressures.

Table 4.7: Reasons for Social Media Usage

Reason	Explanation
Distraction	Avoiding problems
Emotional Relief	Entertainment
Escape	Avoiding reality
Belonging	Feeling connected
Validation	Seeking approval

The counsellor observed that students in the table 4.7, often engage in passive activities such as watching videos to divert their attention, while the psychology professor highlighted that social media initially functions as a coping mechanism but gradually develops into a habitual behavior.

Students use social media for various purposes, including emotional relief, entertainment, connection, and validation.

Over time, this usage evolves into a repetitive cycle in which stress leads to social media engagement, followed by temporary relief, increased comparison, and eventual dissatisfaction. This cycle reinforces dependency and makes it increasingly difficult for students to disengage from digital platforms.

4.3.3 Perceptions, Awareness, Barriers, and Alternatives

The participants generally perceived social media as more harmful than beneficial when used excessively. While it provides temporary distraction and connectivity, it also leads to increased stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced self-esteem. Students demonstrate a certain level of awareness regarding these negative effects; however, this awareness does not translate into effective behavioral change.

Table 4.8: Barriers to Reducing Social Media Usage

Barrier	Description
Habit	Addictive usage
Low Self-Esteem	Need for validation
Fear of Judgment	Avoidance of real interaction
Lack of Alternatives	Limited engagement options

In the table 4.8, several barriers hinder students from reducing their social media usage. These include habitual dependency, the comfort of virtual interactions, fear of judgment in real-life settings, low self-esteem, and the absence of meaningful offline alternatives. The psychology professor emphasized that social media is closely tied to identity formation and self-worth, particularly during adolescence, making it difficult for students to disengage.

Table 4.9: Alternative Coping Strategies

Strategy	Description
Journaling	Emotional expression
Communication	Talking to others
Mindfulness	Meditation
Physical Activity	Exercise
Creative Work	Hobbies

Participants suggested in the table 4.9, various alternative coping strategies, including journaling, open communication with trusted individuals, mindfulness practices, physical activities, and engagement in creative pursuits. Additionally, the role of parents, teachers, and educational institutions was highlighted as crucial in promoting responsible social media usage and supporting students' mental well-being.

4.4 Discussions

The findings suggest that digital fatigue is not explicitly identified by students but is deeply embedded within their psychological experiences. Social media does not function as the primary source of stress but rather amplifies existing vulnerabilities, particularly among individuals with low self-esteem. The transformation of social media from a coping mechanism into a habitual behavior highlights its addictive potential and its role in reinforcing avoidance strategies.

A significant gap exists between awareness and action, as students continue to use social media despite recognizing its negative effects. This indicates that social media fulfills deeper emotional needs such as validation, belonging, and identity formation, which are not easily replaced. Therefore, addressing digital fatigue requires a holistic approach that goes beyond awareness and focuses on emotional resilience and alternative coping mechanisms.

5.1 Findings

This study concludes that social media serves as both a coping tool and a contributing factor to emotional exhaustion among students. While it provides temporary relief from stress, it ultimately reinforces negative emotional patterns and leads to digital fatigue. The findings emphasize that the issue lies not only in the extent of social media usage but also in the underlying psychological motivations driving such behavior. Addressing this issue requires combined efforts from individuals, families, and educational institutions to promote healthier coping strategies and balanced digital engagement.

5.1 Findings

The study reveals that young adults experience significant levels of stress arising from academic, personal, and psychological factors, including low self-esteem, fear of judgment, and social comparison. While social media is not always identified as the primary cause of stress, it acts as an important contributing factor by amplifying existing emotional vulnerabilities. The findings indicate that social media is widely used as a coping mechanism, primarily for distraction, emotional relief, and a sense of belonging. However, this coping strategy is largely temporary and gradually develops into habitual usage.

The quantitative results demonstrate a positive relationship between social media usage, stress levels, and emotional exhaustion, suggesting that increased engagement with digital platforms is associated with higher levels of fatigue and psychological strain. The correlation and ANOVA analyses further confirm that individuals who consider social media a central part of their daily routine are more likely to rely on it during stressful situations.

The qualitative findings support these results by highlighting that students often engage in passive scrolling and seek validation through online interactions. Over time, this creates a cycle of dependency, where stress leads to social media usage, followed by temporary relief, comparison, dissatisfaction, and further stress. Despite awareness of the negative effects, students find it difficult to reduce their usage due to barriers such as habit formation, low self-esteem, fear of social judgment, and lack of alternative coping mechanisms.

The study also identifies that social media contributes to digital fatigue indirectly through factors such as information overload, fear of missing out, cyberbullying, and exposure to unrealistic content. At the same time, healthier coping strategies such as journaling, communication, mindfulness, and physical activities are recognized but not consistently practiced. Overall, the findings establish a clear link between stress, social media usage, and emotional exhaustion among young adults.

5.2 Results

The results of the study, derived from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media usage, stress, digital fatigue, and emotional exhaustion among young adults. The demographic data indicate that the majority of respondents belong to the age group of 18–22 years and are predominantly students, suggesting a highly active digital population. Most participants reported frequent engagement with social media as part of their daily routine.

The quantitative findings reveal that a significant proportion of respondents experience moderate to high levels of stress and regularly use social media as a coping mechanism. Correlation analysis shows a positive relationship between social media usage and emotional responses, indicating that individuals who rely more on social media are also more likely to use it for relaxation and stress relief. At the same time, the results demonstrate that increased dependence on social media is associated with higher levels of stress interfering with daily activities. A stronger relationship is observed between using social media for relaxation and turning to it during stressful situations, highlighting its role as an immediate coping tool.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that higher screen time and frequent engagement with social media are linked to increased levels of digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Although social media provides temporary relief, it does not effectively reduce stress in the long term. The ANOVA results show that while there are differences in how central social media is to individuals' daily routines, there are no significant differences in how different groups use social media for stress management, suggesting that this behavior is consistent across respondents.

The qualitative results complement these findings by revealing that students experience stress from multiple sources, including academic pressure, personal issues, and psychological factors such as low self-esteem and fear of judgment. Social media is widely used as a coping mechanism to escape from these stressors; however, it gradually becomes a habitual behavior. Participants also highlighted that social media contributes indirectly to emotional exhaustion

through factors such as comparison, validation-seeking, fear of missing out, and exposure to unrealistic content.

Overall, the results indicate that social media plays a dual role in the lives of young adults. While it serves as a convenient and immediate coping mechanism, excessive usage contributes to digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion, reinforcing a cycle of stress and dependency.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights that social media plays a dual role in the lives of young adults, functioning both as a coping mechanism and as a contributor to digital fatigue and emotional exhaustion. While individuals turn to social media for distraction and emotional relief, excessive and unregulated usage leads to increased stress, reduced well-being, and dependency. The findings emphasize that digital fatigue is not always consciously recognized but is deeply embedded within everyday psychological experiences.

The study further demonstrates that the issue is not solely related to the amount of time spent on social media, but rather the underlying psychological needs driving its usage, such as the need for validation, belonging, and escape from reality. The gap between awareness and behavioral change indicates the need for more structured interventions focusing on emotional resilience, self-esteem development, and responsible media usage.

Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions, parents, and mental health professionals to promote digital literacy, encourage healthy coping strategies, and provide supportive environments that reduce reliance on social media for emotional well-being. A balanced approach to digital engagement is necessary to ensure that social media serves as a beneficial tool rather than a source of psychological strain.

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