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SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND BODY IMAGE DISTRESS AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

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Abstract

This research investigated the relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among 386 Pakistani university students through a cross-sectional, correlational survey. The findings demonstrated that female respondents and the ones falling in the age group of 18–24 years were significantly inclined towards both higher level of social media addiction and the body image distress, whereas the academic qualification did not show any significant influence. Moreover, Pearson's correlation followed by the regression analysis revealed moderate positive relationship between the two study variables, with social media addiction positively predicting body image distress among study participants. The study has contributed culturally-specific literature to the mental health discourse, highlighting the need for digital literacy programs.

Background *The exponential growth of smartphones and social media has changed the dynamics of modern societies across the globe, influencing almost every walk of life ranging from social connectivity to business and education to healthcare (Ahmed et al., 2023; Ahmed, Hassan, et al., 2025; Ahmed & Yousaf, 2023; Khan & Ahmed, 2024; Sultan et al., 2023; Sultan & Ahmed, 2022; Younis & Ahmed, 2024). Besides many benefits, it has dramatically changed the psychosocial environment for users of digital device and platforms, particularly the young individuals. The youth make up the largest segment among the social media and smartphone users and come across curated online content that often promotes unrealistic beauty standards (Nisa et al., 2024). The constant digital connectivity, often described as social media addiction, fosters adverse mental health dilemmas such as depression, anxiety, and compromised self-esteem (Ahmed et al., 2025; Nisa et al., 2025). Instantaneously, the body image distress has been a pressing concern among young people that is often linked to compulsive behaviours of social media and smartphone users.*

INTRODUCTION

The addictive use of social media has been a global concern relating to mental health, especially among the youth, who are exposed to tailored content, use appearance-focused platforms, and draw peer comparisons (Mohamed & Idrees, 2023). It significantly influences their mental health. The growing body of literature links addiction to social media and smartphones with body image distress

among young adults. Use of smartphones and social media platforms in Pakistan has also alarmingly increased over the last few years. However, there remains scarcity of empirical studies investigating the psychosocial impact of social media addiction in local sociocultural context (Nisa et al., 2024). Social media platforms across the globe portray appearance-oriented content. Meta-analytic study by suggests that comparison in terms of social status, self-objectification, and thin-ideal acceptance and appreciation are some of the strongest ways that link social media usage to body dissatisfaction among the youth(Wang et al., 2025). Likewise, appearance-focussed social media behaviors including editing and filtering have been linked to reduced self-esteem and increased body image distress among young adults, especially the girls (Xie, 2024).

Bilal et al. (2021) investigated youth in Southern Punjab region of Pakistan to reveal that social media addiction was a significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction among women. Farooq et al. (2025) estimated a negative, non-significant relationship between social media addiction and body image among the female students, with a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and body distress. The results underscored the intricacy of the study constructs and need for more research on social media addiction and body image distress among youth. Batool and Quratulain (2023) also found that lower self-efficacy arbitrated the relationship between social media addiction, consciousness about appearance, and body image anxiety among those young adults who proactively used social media. Akhtar et al. (2024) investigated personality traits including extraversion and neuroticism as predictors of problematic use of social media among the female university students. They observed that neuroticism meaningfully predicted higher levels of social media addiction, even when the body image was not the central focus. Nisa et al. (2024) qualitatively explored the perceptions of young Pakistani women in context of fake social media standards of body image along with peer comparison, cultural ideals, and religious modesty that influenced body image distress among young women. However, Tufail et al. (2022) documented responses of 500 university students to find out a significantly negative relationship between social media use and body image satisfaction among them, with male students showing higher inclination towards social media use and body dissatisfaction as compared to their female counterparts, an interesting finding compared to many global studies suggesting otherwise.

Problem Statement

The inescapable social media and smartphone use has given rise to the growing concerns among clinicians, researchers, and social activists about the psychological impacts these digital platforms and devices have on youth. In countries like Pakistan, where the digital engagement among youth has rapidly increased over the past few years, the excessive, problematic or addictive social media use has started contributing to negative behaviours that ultimately result in depression, anxiety and distress among the smartphone and social media users. Despite the global evidence that indicates a strong linkage between social media addiction and distress, a little effort has been made in Pakistan to explore the phenomenon local sociocultural context of Pakistan. In view of this, the current research has investigated the relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among Pakistani university students though a cross-sectional, correlational survey.

Objective of the Study

The addictive use of social media and smartphones has been alarming for the societies across the globe, particularly in view of accelerated youth engagement. Along with many other drawbacks, social media addiction has been inducing various form of depression, anxiety and distress among digital natives. In view of this, the study has been designed to assess the relationship of social media addiction on body image distress among Pakistani university students. This research also considered gender, age, and academic qualification as demographic factor to check their influence on the relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among the study population.

Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by the precepts of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) that posit a robust conceptual framework to understand the addictive use of social media, peer comparison and body image distress among the university students. Individuals use social media to gratify their cognitive, social interactive, personal integrative, affective, or/and escapist needs. With more and more engaging content available on social media platforms, the youth find it more convenient to engage themselves on digital platform, turning into addicts. They start drawing comparison in terms of digital media appearance of their peers and other social circles during this process. They ultimately get into body image distress and start using filters and appearance related filters due to consciousness of looking better than others. In their daily life, they often, start comparing themselves with people around them, using unhealthy dieting habits, use cosmetics, and start unsupervised body exercises to look good. All these activities induce body image distress or anxiety among them.

Methodology

This quantitative research employed a cross-sectional correlational survey to estimate the relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among Pakistani university students. The targeted population were the Islamabad-based university students of public and private-sector universities. Through convenience sampling, the responses of 386 study participants were collected after dissemination of questionnaire links through Google Docx to around 650 students based on researchers' personal acquaintance. While collecting data, the researchers were cognizant of the ethical concerns. They first approached the targeted audience for informed consent. The study participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and assured for data confidentiality and fair use only for research purposes.

The research employed two valid questionnaires for both variables; Social Media Addiction, and Body Image Distress. They adopted Social Media Addiction Scale–Student Form (Şahin, 2018) for independent variable and the Body-Image Questionnaire: An Extension (Koleck et al., 2002) for the dependent variable. The researchers considered Gender (Male and Female), Age (18-24 Years, and 25-30 Years), and Academic Qualification (Undergraduate and Graduate) as demographic factors (groups) to measure different aspects of social media addiction and body image distress among the study participants. The responses were recorded on five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Uncertain=3, Agree=4, Strongly Agree=5).

The researchers carried out reliability analysis of the scales used by them for this study as under;

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Scales (N = 386)

Scales	No. of items	α
Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form (Şahin, 2018)	29	.92
Body-Image Questionnaire: An Extension (Koleck et al., 2002)	19	.83

Table 1 demonstrates the statistical values measured for Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (***α***) for a 29-item Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form (Şahin, 2018) and a 19-item Body-Image Questionnaire (Koleck et al., 2002). The results revealed excellent reliability (internal consistency between items) for Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form having *α=.92, and good reliability for* Body-Image Questionnaire having *α=.83* respectively.

Hypotheses of the Study:

The study was undertaken in view of the following hypotheses:

H1. Higher level of social media addiction leads to greater body image distress among Pakistani university students.
H2. Pakistani female university students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than their male counterparts.
H3. Younger Pakistani university students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than old age students.
H4. Pakistani undergraduate students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than graduate students.

Datta Analysis and Hypotheses Testing:
The researchers examined data through SPSS, applying the tests including Pearson's Product Moment Correlation, Linear Regression, and the Independent Samples t-test to test the hypotheses of the study.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=386)

Variables	Categories	*F*	%
Gender	Male	176	50.14
	Female	175	49.86
Academic Qualification	Undergraduate	209	59.54
	Graduate	142	40.46
Age	18-24 Years	230	65.53
	25-30 Years	121	34.47

Table 2 highlighted the demographic profile of the sample *(N = 386)*. The statistics revealed that female respondents comprised 53.11% *(n = 205)* as compared to their male counterparts who made up to 46.89% *(n = 181)* of the total sample. With respect to the academic qualification, the undergraduate respondents *(n = 268, 69.43%)* outnumbered graduate students who comprised 30.57% *(n = 118) of the sample*. Moreover, the younger age group (18–24 years) were dominant *(n = 278, 72.02%)*, as against the 25–30-year age group *(n = 108, 27.98%)*.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N-386)

			Range			
Variables	M	*SD*	Actual	Potential	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social Media Addiction	104.62	15.93	61–139	29–145	–0.62	–0.35
Body Image Distress	50.78	11.21	28–76	21–84	–0.30	–0.18

Table 3 above reflected descriptive statistics for the study variables, suggesting the mean score for Social Media Addiction, the independent variable as 104.62 (SD = 15.93) that indicated a higher tendency of social media addiction among the respondents. On the other hand, the mean score for Body Image Distress was recorded at 50.78 (SD = 11.21), revealing a moderate level of distress. The skewness values were noted as slightly negative for both study variables, demonstrating tendency towards higher scores, whereas kurtosis values indicated distributions without any significant peaks. The score interpretation suggested frequent social media usage that may also be termed as problematic use. However, body image distress was recorded at a moderate level among the respondents.

Table 4: Estimation of Relationship between Social Media Addiction and Body Image Distress among Pakistani University Students (N=386)

Variables	1	2
Social Media Addiction	-	.46**
Body Image Distress	.46**	-

To determine the nature and strength of the relationship between Social Media Addiction, the independent variable and Body Image Distress, the dependent variable, the researchers measured Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (*r*). The findings indicated a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables (*r=.46, p < .001)*, revealing that that higher social media addiction level among Pakistani university students were significantly (positively) associated with greater body image distress. It suggested that those Pakistani university students with an inclination towards higher social media addiction were more dissatisfied about their body image.

Table 5: Regression Coefficient of Social Media Addiction on Body Image Distress among Pakistani University Students (N=386)

Variable	*B*	*β*	*SE*	*F*
Constant	24.78		1.62	88.56***
Social Media Addiction	0.65	.46	0.07	
R^2	.21			

Note: N=386, ***p< .001

The regression analysis at Table 5 suggested that social media addiction among Pakistani university students positively predicted body image distress with R^2= .21 among Pakistani university students. It means that the independent variable caused 21% variance in the dependent variable, indicating higher level of social media addiction leading to increased body image distress among the respondents.

Table 6: Independent Samples t-test for Social Media Addiction and Body Image Distress for Demographic Groups of Gender, Age and Academic Qualification among Pakistani University Students (N = 386)

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	T	df	p	Cohen's d
Social Media Addiction	Male	186	31.42	6.87	-4.63	384	< .001***	0.48
	Female	200	35.26	7.01				
Body Image Distress	Male	186	47.89	8.25	-3.72	384	< .001***	0.38
	Female	200	51.08	7.94				
Social Media Addiction	18–24 Years	258	34.91	6.95	3.87	384	< .001***	0.41
	25–30 Years	128	31.17	6.78				
Body Image Distress	18–24 Years	258	50.72	8.11	3.26	384	.001**	0.34
	25–30 Years	128	47.36	8.06				
Social Media Addiction	Undergraduate	266	34.12	7.12	1.41	384	.159	0.15
	Graduate	120	32.88	6.74				
Body Image Distress	Undergraduate	266	49.62	8.18	1.22	384	.224	0.13
	Graduate	120	48.70	8.09				

*Note: ***p < .001, **p < .01*

The Independent samples t-test as demonstrated at Table 6 showed female respondents scoring higher on the variables of social media addiction (M = 35.26, SD = 7.01) and body image distress (M = 51.08, SD = 7.94) than their male counterparts. Similarly, the table also suggested younger age (18–24 years) participants demonstrating greater inclination towards social media addiction (M = 34.91, SD = 6.95) and body image distress (M = 50.72, SD = 8.11) than the older age group (25–30 years) of respondents**.** However, the researchers could not find any significant differences with reference to academic qualification, indicating that academic qualification did not impact tendency towards social media addiction or level of body image distress among the respondents.

Findings of the Study:

There exists a positive relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among Pakistani university students, with the former (significantly and) positively predicting body image distress among them. This finding supports the study hypothesis 1 that proposed higher level of social media addiction leads to greater body image distress among Pakistani university students.

The independent Samples t-test revealed that female university students were more inclined towards social media addiction and also suffered body image distress as compared to male students who showed lesser tendency towards social media addiction as well as were lesser concerned about their body image. This finding supports the study hypothesis 2 that suggested that Pakistani female university students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than their male counterparts.

The independent Samples t-test also demonstrated that Pakistani university student falling in the age group of 18-24 years showed greater tendency towards social media addiction and body image distress and the ones who fell between the age bracket of 25-30 years. This finding supported hypothesis 3, proposing that the younger Pakistani university students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than old age students.

However, the findings of Independent Samples t-test also revealed statistically no significant differences between the undergraduate and graduate students on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress. Hence hypothesis 4 of the study, that proposed that Pakistani undergraduate students score higher on the variables of social media addiction and body image distress than graduate students, was not supported.

Discussion:

Social media usage has exponentially grown to additive levels across the globe, particularly among the youth. Although, these digital applications and social connectivity platforms have facilitated people with global interactivity, helped people in businesses and given voices to the marginalized communities, the critics have shown concerns about the negative impacts of social media addiction on mental and physical health among the users. Fear of being offline (FOBO), Nomophobia, perseverative thinking, body dysmorphic disorder, finger paralysis other than common anxiety and depression, social alienation, and problematic relationships have been widely reported concerns by the researchers in the filed of media psychology. The current study has investigated the impact of social media addiction on the body image distress among Pakistani university students through a cross-sectional, correlational survey.

This research estimated the relationship between social media addiction and body image distress among Pakistani university students, considering the conveniently available sample (N = 386), taking into account the demographic characteristics of gender, age, and the level of academic qualification. The findings revealed statistically significant differences across gender and age groups of the study participants. Female students and younger-age group (aged 18–24) of the study participants scored significantly higher on the both variables of social media addiction and body image distress, which the researchers measured by adopting Social Media Addiction Scale – Student Form (Şahin, 2018), and Body-Image Questionnaire: An Extension (Koleck et al., 2002) respectively. The demographic groups based on academic qualification did not significantly impact the outcome.

Gender Differences:

The higher social media addiction level and greater body image distress among the female respondents

fall in conformity of the available literature based on various global studies that suggest that female can be more prone and are more vulnerable to mounting social comparison in terms of appearance-focused digital environments. Similar trends have also been documented by Bilal et al. (2021) and Nisa et al. (2024) in Pakistan where women report higher level of vulnerability towards body image distress because of enhanced social media exposure and sociocultural pressures. The statistically (significant) positive correlation between addiction to social media platforms and body image distress with $R^2 = .21$ reveals a moderate predictive power falls in conformity of the existing body of literature (Salman Khan, 2024). Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2025) documented that female journalists were more inclined towards social media addiction as well as (eco)anxiety/distress than their male counterparts, backing up gender vulnerability towards digital addictive behaviours and psychological distress. Likewise, the qualitative evidence by Nisa et al. (2024) also contextualizes the statistical results, describing female students adopting idealized body images promoted on social media. Moreover, Akhtar et al. (2024) also identified the impact of gender on online behaviour, identifying the personality traits like neuroticism as intensifiers in problematic use of social media among Pakistani female university students. Another study by Ahmed et al. (2025) revealed increased trend of social media usage and vulnerability to cybercrimes, and distress among the female suers. However, another study by Nisa et al. (2025) highlighted the males suffered more from social media addiction and cognitive failures as compared to their female counterparts.

1. Age Effects:

With respect to age of the respondents, the younger students (18–24 years) demonstrated increased social media addiction and greater body image distress than their older peers. It also mirrors the global trends that state that the digital natives plunge more intensively into the social media platforms. In Pakistan, the studies including that of Mushtaq et al. (2023), Sultan et al. (2023), Ahmed et al. (2023) and Ahmed and Yousaf (2023) studied age as a demographic aspect in studies involving psychological impacts of social media and smartphones. Social media addiction appears to be at its extreme among young adults, and correlates with disordered eating behaviour (Mushtaq et al., 2023). The developmental psychology claims that individuals in their youth are highly sensitive to their identity explorations and peer validation that sensitizes them more about their body image. Modern-day adults spend a lot of time using social media for social connectivity and strengthening their social status. In view of this, they may seek validation from their digital peers. Body image trolling or not meeting the digital standards of body image may induce stress among young adults.

2. Academic Qualification:

However, contrary to the findings on gender and age, the academic qualification including undergraduate and graduate studies did not predict any differences with respect to the variables of social media addiction and body image distress among Pakistani youth. It might be due to the homogeneous exposure to social media platforms across diverse educational levels as individuals belong to 18-30 years age bracket may have an access to digital platforms and smartphones equally and also experience same societal standards about body image. Akhtar et al. (2024) also found no significant differences in the levels of social media addiction among Pakistani youth.

Contributions of the Study

By focusing on the Islamabad-based university students in Pakistan, this study has filled a research gap in socio-cultural and demographic context, and added noteworthy evidence to the existing body of literature. It may help in targeted interventions for gender and age groups in case of psychological treatment for individuals who suffer body image distress. The findings of the study have also contributed to theoretical perspectives of personality drivers, gendered body ideals, and social comparison theory (Akhtar et al., 2024; Nisa et al., 2024). Moreover, the adapted scales of Social Media Addiction—Student Form (Şahin, 2018) and Body-Image Questionnaire: An Extension (Koleck et al., 2002) have helped in quality data collection, ensuring authentic results.

Limitations of the Study

Besides noteworthy contributions to the body of literature, the research acknowledge some limitation of the current research study. Since the study was cross-sectional in nature, this design hinders causal inference about the direction between independent and dependent variables. Furthermore, the data was self-reported that be prejudiced due to social desirability. Moreover, the sample of the study was limited only to one city that may limit the generalizability of the study, keeping in view the cultural and geographic diversity of Pakistan.

Recommendations for Future Research

In view of the findings of the study, the future researcher should work on mixed methods studies to explore qualitative insights of the students along with statistically supported (quantitative) data. Quasi-experimental or longitudinal research may also yield sustained trends to help clinicians introduce positivity interventions to reduce body image distress among individuals.

Practical Implications

Pakistani universities should launch social media literacy trainings and workshops that may also include gender-sensitive content on body image perceptions and detrimental comparison habits.

Clinical psychologists should integrate digital wellness with body positivity interventions to effectively treat youth suffering from body image distress.

Policy makers, regulators, and educationists should collaborate with each other to advocate for social media literacy and digital regulation.

Conclusion

This research has established that female and younger age individuals are significantly inclined towards higher social media addiction and greater body image distress. The findings have highlighted media influence, gender vulnerability, and youth's helplessness in context of Pakistani digital landscape. The study insights demonstrate and advocate for culturally-appropriate interventions to promote digital wellness among youth.

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