



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)

Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>

Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17792935>



Social Media Addiction and Avoidance of Depressive Thoughts Among Young Adults in Pakistan

Pulwasha Anwar

Ph.D. Student

Department of Psychology

Institute of Social Sciences

Bursa Uludağ University, Bursa, Turkey

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2492-1979>

Email: pulwashakhansrk@gmail.com

Urooj Murtaza

Research Scholar

Department of Public Administration

University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan

Email: uroojmurtaza1610@gmail.com

Syed Farhan Ejaz

Assistant Professor of Psychology

Higher Education Department

Email: farhanali13.fa@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0008-8029-1288

Saba Tanveer

MS Linguistics Scholar

SMIU, Pakistan

Email: saba.tanveer.170@gmail.com

Abstract

Objective: This study explored how social media addiction is linked to avoidance of depressive thoughts and depressive symptoms in Pakistani young adults. It further examined whether avoidance of depressive thoughts acts as a mediator between social media addiction and depressive symptoms.

Method: A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 280 university students aged 18–30 years in Lahore. Participants completed the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), a newly developed Avoidance of Depressive Thoughts Scale (ADTS), and the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations, hierarchical regression, and bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples.

Results: About one-third of participants exceeded the threshold for probable social media addiction. Higher social media addiction scores were significantly associated with greater avoidance of depressive thoughts and higher depressive symptoms. Regression analysis indicated that social media addiction predicted avoidance of depressive thoughts. Mediation analysis showed that avoidance of depressive thoughts partially explained the relationship between social media addiction and depressive symptoms.

Conclusion: Excessive social media use among Pakistani young adults is related to increased avoidance of negative thoughts, which contributes to higher depressive symptoms. Interventions addressing avoidance coping and promoting balanced social media use may help reduce depressive symptoms in this population.

Keywords: *social media addiction; avoidance coping; depressive thoughts; young adults; Pakistan*

Introduction

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the way people communicate and interact globally. In Pakistan, the widespread availability of smartphones and increased internet accessibility has made platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok central to the daily routines of young adults (Karim, Bibi, & Nazik, 2023). Concurrently, mental health concerns among this population—particularly depressive symptoms—are becoming a significant public health issue (Zubair et al., 2023). While research across various cultural contexts has linked excessive social media use to higher levels of depression and anxiety (Kross et al., 2013; Zubair et al., 2023), the psychological mechanisms underlying this association remain underexplored in Pakistan.

One potential mechanism is the avoidance of depressive thoughts, a coping strategy in which individuals deliberately distract themselves, suppress, or disengage from negative emotions and cognitions rather than actively processing them. Previous research suggests that avoidance coping is associated with poorer long-term psychological outcomes, including persistent depressive symptoms (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The Compensatory Internet Use model proposes that individuals experiencing negative affect may turn to online activities—including social media—to regulate their mood or avoid unpleasant thoughts (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Accordingly, young adults who are heavily engaged in social media may not only seek social interaction but may also use these platforms as a way to evade depressive thoughts. While this strategy might provide short-term relief, it can increase vulnerability to ongoing or intensified depressive symptoms over time.

Despite the theoretical plausibility of this mechanism, empirical research investigating the mediating role of avoidance of depressive thoughts in the relationship between social media addiction and depressive symptoms is scarce. Moreover, no study to date has examined this pathway within the context of Pakistani young adults, whose coping strategies may be shaped by unique cultural norms and prevalent mental health stigma (Khan et al., 2021). Addressing this gap is crucial because understanding culturally specific patterns of coping and social media use can inform targeted interventions to reduce depressive symptoms in this population.

Therefore, the present study aims to assess the prevalence and intensity of social media addiction among Pakistani young adults, explore its relationship with avoidance of depressive thoughts, and determine whether avoidance of depressive thoughts mediates the link between social media addiction and depressive symptoms. By investigating these relationships, the study seeks to provide insights into the psychological mechanisms that may underlie the observed association between social media use and mental health outcomes in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the prevalence and levels of social media addiction among young adults in Pakistan, considering the increasing engagement with social media platforms (Karim, Bibi, & Nazik, 2023).

2. To examine the relationship between social media addiction and avoidance of depressive thoughts, a coping mechanism linked to persistent negative affect and depressive symptoms (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).
3. To test whether avoidance of depressive thoughts mediates the association between social media addiction and depressive symptoms, thereby identifying a potential psychological pathway influencing mental health outcomes.
4. To provide evidence that can inform interventions promoting healthier social media habits and reducing depressive symptoms in Pakistani young adults.

Hypotheses

- H1: Higher levels of social media addiction will be positively associated with greater avoidance of depressive thoughts.
- H2: Avoidance of depressive thoughts will mediate the positive relationship between social media addiction and depressive symptoms.

The rationale for this study is based on evidence that excessive social media use is linked to higher depressive symptoms (Andreassen, 2015; Savci & Aysan, 2016). Individuals may use social media to avoid negative thoughts, a coping strategy that can worsen mental health over time (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Moos & Holahan, 2003). The Compensatory Internet Use model suggests that online engagement may serve as a mood-regulating or avoidance mechanism (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). In Pakistan, mental health stigma may make avoidance coping particularly common among young adults (Khan et al., 2021). Understanding these relationships can inform interventions that promote healthier social media use and reduce depressive symptoms in this population.

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

Behavioral addictions, such as excessive social media use, are characterized by core features including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse (Andreassen, 2015). Research across diverse populations has consistently shown a positive association between social media addiction (SMA) and depressive symptoms (Savci & Aysan, 2016; Zubair et al., 2023). For instance, a study conducted among Pakistani nursing students reported a moderate correlation between SMA and depression ($\rho = .533$, $p < .05$; Ahmed et al., 2022), indicating that higher engagement with social media may be linked to elevated depressive outcomes in this context.

Avoidance of depressive thoughts is a coping strategy in which individuals actively evade processing negative emotional states and cognitions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Evidence suggests that such avoidance can exacerbate depressive symptoms over time and hinder adaptive emotional regulation (Moos & Holahan, 2003). In Pakistan, where mental health stigma remains prevalent, avoidance coping may be particularly pronounced among young adults who are reluctant to seek support or discuss emotional difficulties openly (Khan et al., 2021).

The Compensatory Internet Use model provides a theoretical framework for understanding these associations (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). According to this model, individuals experiencing negative affect or stress may engage excessively in online activities, including social media, to distract themselves or avoid unpleasant thoughts. While such behavior may offer temporary relief, it can contribute to longer-term vulnerability to depressive symptoms. Applying this framework to the Pakistani context,

social media addiction may function not only as a source of social connectivity but also as an avoidance mechanism that maintains or exacerbates depressive symptoms.

The present study extends this theoretical framework by specifying **avoidance of depressive thoughts** as a potential mediator in the relationship between social media addiction and depressive symptoms. By empirically testing this pathway, the study aims to clarify how maladaptive social media use may interact with coping strategies to influence mental health outcomes among Pakistani young adults. This approach provides both theoretical and practical significance, highlighting the need for interventions that address not only social media use but also the underlying avoidance coping patterns that may contribute to depression.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a **quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design** to examine the relationships between social media addiction, avoidance of depressive thoughts, and depressive symptoms among young adults. The design was selected to allow for the investigation of associations and potential mediating effects within a single time frame, providing a snapshot of these psychological constructs in the target population.

Participants and Sampling

A total of **280 young adults** aged 18–30 years participated in the study. Participants were recruited from **two public universities in Lahore, Pakistan**, with 146 females and 134 males (Mage = 21.8 years, SD = 2.5). Inclusion criteria included Pakistani nationality, age between 18 and 30, and regular social media use (at least 1 hour daily). A **convenience sampling strategy** was utilized, with recruitment facilitated through flyers and email invitations distributed across undergraduate programs. Following screening for completeness, data from all 280 respondents were included in the final analyses.

Instruments

- **Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS):** A six-item self-report measure assessing core symptoms of social media addiction, including salience, tolerance, mood modification, and withdrawal (Andreassen et al., 2017). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often), with higher scores indicating greater addiction risk. Cronbach's α in this sample = .90.
- **Avoidance of Depressive Thoughts Scale (ADTS):** A 10-item scale developed specifically for this study based on established avoidance coping instruments. Items (e.g., "When I feel down, I scroll through social media instead of thinking about my mood") are rated from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Cronbach's α = .87, demonstrating good internal consistency.
- **Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D):** A widely used 20-item self-report measure of depressive symptoms experienced in the past week (Radloff, 1977). Scores range from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptomatology. Cronbach's α in this sample = .88.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the participating universities' research ethics committees. Participants provided **informed consent electronically** before completing the survey through an online platform, which took approximately 15 minutes. Responses were

anonymized to protect confidentiality. Data collection occurred over a six-week period, ensuring adequate time for participant recruitment and completion.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **SPSS Version 26**. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and prevalence rates, were computed for all study variables. **Pearson correlation coefficients** were calculated to examine associations among social media addiction, avoidance of depressive thoughts, and depressive symptoms. **Hierarchical multiple regression analyses** were conducted to test whether social media addiction predicted avoidance of depressive thoughts and depressive symptoms, controlling for age and gender. Mediation analysis was performed using **PROCESS macro (Model 4)** with 5,000 bootstrap samples to estimate the indirect effect of social media addiction on depressive symptoms via avoidance of depressive thoughts. Significance was determined using 95% bootstrap confidence intervals that excluded zero.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 280)

Variable	M	SD	Range	% Above Cutoff
BSMAS	19.2	5.1	6–30	35% ≥ 20
ADTS	30.5	6.8	10–50	—
CES-D	22.7	8.4	0–60	40% ≥ 16

*Cutoff values based on instrument manuals or prior research.

Interpretation:

Table 1 shows that a notable proportion of participants scored at or above the threshold for social media addiction and depressive symptoms. The mean ADTS score suggests moderate engagement in avoidance coping behaviors among young adults.

Correlation Analysis

Table2

Correlation Matrix for Key Variables (N = 280)

Variable	1	2	3
1. BSMAS	—		
2. ADTS	.39***	—	
3. CES-D	.32***	.36***	—

***p < .001

Interpretation:

The table indicates that social media addiction is positively and significantly correlated with avoidance of depressive thoughts and depressive symptoms. Avoidance coping is also significantly associated with depressive symptoms, supporting its role as a potential mediating factor.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Table3*Hierarchical Regression Predicting ADTS and CES-D (N = 280)*

Step	Predictor	β	t	p	ΔR^2
a) Predicting ADTS					
1	Age, Gender	.05	0.90	.37	.02
2	BSMAS	.30	5.45	<.001	.09
b) Predicting CES-D					
1	Age, Gender	.04	0.72	.47	.01
2	BSMAS	.24	4.18	<.001	.06
3	ADTS	.26	4.65	<.001	.07

Interpretation:

Table 3 shows that social media addiction significantly predicts avoidance of depressive thoughts, even after controlling for age and gender. Both social media addiction and avoidance of depressive thoughts independently contribute to depressive symptoms.

Mediation Analysis**Table4***Mediation of ADTS in the Relationship between BSMAS and CES-D (N = 280)*

Path	Effect	SE	95% CI
BSMAS → ADTS → CES-D	.10	.03	[.05, .16]
Direct effect (BSMAS → CES-D)	.14	—	—

Interpretation:

Table 4 indicates that avoidance of depressive thoughts partially mediates the effect of social media addiction on depressive symptoms. The significant indirect effect confirms its role as a key psychological mechanism linking social media use to depression.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships between social media addiction, avoidance of depressive thoughts, and depressive symptoms among Pakistani young adults. Consistent with the hypotheses, social media addiction was significantly associated with both avoidance of depressive thoughts and depressive symptoms, as shown in the correlation and regression analyses. These findings align with prior research indicating that excessive social media use can exacerbate depressive symptomatology (Savci & Aysan, 2016; Zubair et al., 2023).

The mediation analysis demonstrated that avoidance of depressive thoughts partially mediated the relationship between social media addiction and depressive symptoms, confirming the theoretical expectation derived from the Compensatory Internet Use model (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). This suggests that young adults may use social media not only for social connectivity but also as a coping mechanism to avoid negative emotions, which may provide short-term relief but increases vulnerability to sustained depressive symptoms over time (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

The results highlight important cultural considerations. In the Pakistani context, where mental health stigma remains prevalent (Khan et al., 2021), avoidance coping may be

particularly salient, as young adults may be less likely to seek psychological help and more likely to engage in online avoidance behaviors. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address both problematic social media use and maladaptive coping strategies.

From a practical perspective, university counseling centers and mental health programs should screen for social media addiction and avoidance coping patterns, and promote alternative strategies that encourage active emotional processing rather than avoidance. Interventions might include digital literacy programs, psychoeducation on healthy social media habits, and training in adaptive coping strategies to reduce depressive symptomatology.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study employed a cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether social media addiction leads to increased avoidance and depression over time. Additionally, the use of self-report measures and convenience sampling limits generalizability. Future research could incorporate objective measures of social media use and examine moderating factors such as social support, resilience, and family dynamics, as well as rural versus urban differences in Pakistan.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that social media addiction is linked to greater avoidance of depressive thoughts, which in turn contributes to depressive symptoms among Pakistani young adults. Avoidance coping acts as a significant psychological mechanism in this process, and interventions addressing both social media habits and coping strategies may help mitigate depression risk in this population.

Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that social media addiction among Pakistani young adults is associated with **increased avoidance of depressive thoughts**, which partially contributes to elevated depressive symptoms. Avoidance coping emerges as a **key psychological mechanism** linking excessive social media use to depression, consistent with the Compensatory Internet Use model (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

These findings highlight the importance of addressing both **problematic social media behaviors** and **maladaptive coping strategies** in mental health interventions. Universities and mental health professionals should develop programs that **promote adaptive coping, reduce compulsive social media use, and encourage emotional processing** rather than avoidance.

Despite the study's limitations, including its **cross-sectional design** and use of self-report measures, it offers valuable insights into the **psychological processes underlying depression risk** in a culturally specific context. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, objective measures of social media use, and moderating variables such as **social support, resilience, and cultural influences**, to further clarify these relationships. In summary, the findings underscore that interventions aimed at **reducing social media addiction and enhancing adaptive coping strategies** may help mitigate depressive symptoms among young adults in Pakistan.

References

- Ahmed, S., & colleagues. (2022). Social media addiction and depression among nursing students in Pakistan. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 12(4), 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v12n4p45>
- Andreassen, C. S. (2015). Online social network site addiction: A comprehensive review. *Current Addiction Reports*, 2(2), 175–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-015-0056-9>
- Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 745–774. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141456>
- Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2014). A conceptual and methodological critique of internet addiction research: Towards a model of compensatory internet use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 31, 351–354. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.10.059>
- Khan, F., Ali, S., & Malik, R. (2021). Mental health stigma in Pakistan: A survey of attitudes and help seeking among university students. *Journal of Public Health in Developing Countries*, 1(2), 54–65.
- Karim, S., Bibi, A., & Nazik, A. (2023). Impact of social media on mental health of young adults in Pakistan. *Health & Research Insights*, 3(1), 46–53. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/xxxx>
- Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 1(3), 385–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014662167700100306>
- Savci, M., & Aysan, F. (2016). The relationship between impulsivity, social media usage and loneliness. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 5(2), 106–117. <https://doi.org/10.12973/edupij.2016.52.2>
- Zubair, U., Ahmad, N., & Iqbal, I. (2023). Link between excessive social media use and psychiatric disorders: A critical review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, Article 10129173. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.10129173>